



Seduced By the Billionaire

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: The one woman he wants is the witness he can't touch. Ready to see what a detective can uncover... between the sheets? He falls first in this secret billionaire romance for fans of Meghan March, Juliette N. Banks, and Ana Huang.

Protecting her is his duty. Falling for her might be his downfall.

Juliette Graves has been living in the shadows for years, hiding from a ruthless husband who never plays by the rules. Now bartending at a strip club, she's a master at blending in. But when a first date ends with a dead body, Juliette fears her past has finally caught up with her.

Detective Ronan Duffy, the illegitimate son of billionaire Charles O'Connor, has been a silent guardian at the Velvet Cage for nearly a year, all while keeping his badge hidden. He's never been quite sure what the club's enigmatic bartender is hiding, but the fear in her eyes tells him all he needs to know. When a murder rocks the club, Ronan's instincts scream that "Jenny" is more than just a frightened bystander—she's a woman with secrets as dark as his own.

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Chapter 1

Ronan

The throbbing bass pulsed in his blood, making his fingers tingle, his head aching with the neon intensity of the lights. But Ronan Duffy didn't mind. There were few things that got his blood pumping these days.

And nothing got him going like she did.

The woman in front of him bent at the waist and laid her hands on his knees, the heavy pendulums of her breasts swinging near his face. She tossed her hair back, split ends brushing his chin. She reeked of strawberries and desperation, the musk of cigarettes and sweat and body spray.

She smiled, revealing wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. Late twenties, maybe thirty—but a hard-lived thirty. “I’m Desire. Do you want a dance, baby?”

She was pretty enough, with a narrow waist and thick hips, but Ronan shook his head. “No thanks. I’ve had all the excitement I can handle tonight.”

He tucked a bill into her G-string anyway, carefully keeping his eyes away from the bar. He didn't need to look at her—the one he was here for. He could picture every plane of her face, the sultry curve of her hips, the way her long, toned legs flexed just-so, when she walked across the club.

That was why he always chose this seat. The light caught her best from this angle.

Sometimes, he imagined she was watching him, too, peeking from behind those thick lashes, hazel eyes glittering when she caught sight of him.

Keyword: imagined.

But even if it wasn't imaginary, he'd never do anything about it. No woman wanted a stalker. And that might be precisely what he was.

The woman—Desire—glanced down at the fifty in her thong, smiled at him again, then trailed her fingers over the stubble on his jaw. “If you change your mind...” Then she was off to the next table, the next sticky chair, the next leering asshole.

Ronan leaned back, fingers laced behind his head. The Velvet Cage contained neither velvet nor cages, just pink vinyl seating surrounding an open stage, a long bar area to the right, a door at the far back that led to a dressing room and the owner's office.

Sometimes, the owner leaned against the jamb just outside the swinging door, watching the main room with beady, snakelike eyes. One day, Ronan would give that man what was coming to him. But Waylon Pierce was a paranoid fuck who never did anything illegal while the public was watching. Even the women who worked here seemed unaware of his criminal activities.

But Ronan felt the man's guilt in his blood. The man had a criminal history: statutory rape as a younger man, two arrests for sex with underage prostitutes in his thirties. In Ronan's experience, men like Waylon abused more than they were ever arrested for. He couldn't prove it—yet—but his gut was rarely wrong.

He reached for the particleboard table and pulled his glass to his lips—whiskey. Nothing like the Macallan M his brother drank, but cheap liquor made him feel more connected to those he'd vowed to protect.

No one here knew that, of course. People in clubs like this stayed away from cops.

His brother turned up his nose at the mere idea of Ronan having a blue-collar job. The Duffys were part-owners of a multi-billion-dollar media conglomerate, but that wasn't work, no matter what his brother said. "Children of a now-dead billionaire mogul" or "The bastard heirs to O'Connor Media" were closer to the truth.

They didn't even share the O'Connor name—Duffy, after their mother. When the press ran stories about the "Billionaire Brothers," they weren't talking about his father's second family with his stripper mistress.

Ronan took another slow sip, gazing at the stage. Three women twirled around the poles, all of them topless, one with tassels like bullseyes in the center of each breast, one with glitter on her chest. All of legal age, two in their later twenties.

But one of them was right on the cusp—nineteen? Though it wasn't illegal, he didn't like that one bit. He also didn't like that he could gauge their desperation by how hard they tweaked their nipples for the crowd.

Lots of desperation tonight. Good thing he'd hit the ATM. If his mother had had help, she might not have ended up with his father. Sure, he and his siblings wouldn't exist without Charles O'Connor... but there were worse things than non-existence.

Ronan and his siblings were never even allowed to engage with his father's rich-ass society until his father's legitimate children turned on him. Suddenly, their side of the family had become useful—dear old Dad had thought it beneficial to stack the Duffy voting shares in his favor.

The other men around the stage shifted, shouted, reached out their hands, their sweaty dollar bills, skin flashing in the neon lights—pink, then green, then pink again. Hungry eyes—greedy. As if any of these women thought that the man of their dreams

might be the one shoving singles between her ass cheeks.

He knew better. The men who frequented these establishments were losers. That wasn't self-deprecation—some things were just true, and Ronan knew he was as fucked up as any of them.

The dark-haired woman on the stage gyrated around the silver pole, her blue panties glittering. She caught his eye and touched the tip of her tongue to her top lip, then dropped to her knees. Crawling toward his chair.

She knew he belonged here in the sweaty trenches. No posh ballrooms. No tuxedos. No ten-thousand-dollar bottles of whiskey. Just glistening flesh, choking on too-sweet perfume and acrid smoke, the burn of alcohol heating his blood.

The woman stretched herself across the stage before him like a buffet of skin and glitter. Ronan leaned forward and tucked two tightly folded bills into her G-string. The woman blew him a kiss, then made a move to slide off the front of the stage—presumably into his lap—but Ronan waved her away. She was new, like the woman who'd just propositioned him. The others were well aware that he never bought lap dances.

But none of these women knew he was the one who snuck thousands of dollars into their lockers. They also didn't know that three women in the last six months had left with him after their shifts, never to return.

Some things were better off kept secret.

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The dancer's eyes tightened. She slunk back and crawled off toward the bearded man at the end.

Ronan watched her go, then dropped his eyes to the whiskey. Almost empty—it was time.

He raised the glass, downed it, then finally turned to the bar, his heart hammering against his breastbone. The woman working behind it had long blonde hair that ended in blue tips, an aqua hue that curled seductively over her tank top straps. Deliciously curvy in a way that always made his mouth go dry, made his cock stiffen despite his best efforts to control himself.

She didn't take her clothes off for money—never walked around in less than that tank top and the short silver skirt that completed her uniform. But, oh, how he wanted to know what she looked like beneath her shimmery outfit.

Jenny lifted a glass from the bar, her slender fingers grabbing a towel to dry it. Graceful. Like a ballerina—everything a dance. She probably fucked like a ballerina, too, smooth and limber and agile.

Ronan swallowed hard. Though he was definitely an asshole for thinking it, those physical attributes were not the things that had drawn him to her. It was the darkly suspicious glint in her eyes, similar to the one he saw in the mirror. It was the way her full lips stayed tight when she was trying to figure out whether to trust you—and she never trusted anyone. It was the scar, deep and angry, that started at her shoulder and sliced down over her heart as if someone had tried to cut it out of her.

The latter was probably why she was a bartender instead of a dancer: Men didn't like strippers with scars. It made them feel too real, like actual humans with pain and pasts and dreams.

In contrast, billionaires appeared more real when they were knocked down a peg or two. The public would love to see his scars—would love to see him in a place like this, two drinks deep, pretending not to be too interested in a bartender he'd never have.

She had shown no interest in him—he wasn't an idiot, even if coming here week after week might make him a masochist. But whether he'd ever have her, Ronan's gut was certain that she needed him. He just didn't know exactly why.

Jenny froze, her fingertips unmoving on the rim of the glass. She turned her face his way, slowly, tensely. The light hit her high cheekbones, her large, hooded eyes.

Ronan's breath caught. For a moment, he imagined what it would be like to close the distance between them, to press his lips to hers, to trace the curve of her waist with his palm. He leaned back instead, masking the heat in his gaze with a lazy, practiced smirk as he raised his glass and tipped it her way—I'll take one more. Just another smarmy customer, though more attractive than the rest of this brood.

Muscular and broad-shouldered, and though not as tall as his brothers, he had inherited his father's strong jawline and his mother's piercing blue eyes and straight aquiline nose. He spent an hour every morning in the gym sweating out last night's booze so he could function on the measly four hours he usually slept.

Jenny turned to the back wall, where they kept the whiskey. He took full advantage of her divided attention, watching her pour his drink. But in his mind, she was looking right at him, lips slightly parted as he traced his fingers over her hip to the softness between her legs.

She stiffened, glancing over her shoulder toward his chair, but he turned away.

Ronan licked his dry lips, keeping his gaze on the stage, avoiding the bar. Avoiding her eyes. Pretending he was a good man.

His brother Charles was certain that the world was created for men like them—that power came with wealth, that they were above consequences. Ronan had never subscribed to that, which was probably why he'd ended up in this line of work.

His brother was half-right, though: the world was created for the rich. But it was also created for monsters. And a lot of people were both.

Ronan knew that better than anyone.

Chapter 2

Juliette

He's here again.

Juliette's lungs were too small, a fury she had no right to feel burning in her chest. Her throat had stayed tight until he'd waved Desire aside, but the pressure around her rib cage remained.

Desire was everything Juliette would never be again—confident, for one. Beautiful. Unblemished, her creamy skin shimmering in the pastel lights of the club. To think that she'd thought working here might help her build her self-esteem back up. What a fucking joke.

Juliette kept her gaze on the bar, the glass she was drying. She'd already dried it twice, but no one else could tell below the counter—he couldn't tell.

But he was watching. He was always watching. Unlike the others here, he didn't so much leer as glance, and every time he did it, her chest felt warm... warm in her lower belly, too, a subtle but insistent throb between her legs. That alone was a shock. She'd never felt anything close to desire for the men in here. Usually she just felt icky—skeeved out.

Or afraid.

He'd been no exception at first. The first month, she'd imagined he was there for her, marching in with way too much confidence, glowering at the room like he owned them all. But he hadn't approached her once, had never so much as talked to her.

Three times a week, he was just... here. Never touching, never accepting a lap dance. Just watching.

While some of the girls here felt threatened by lecherous eyeballs alone, voyeurs never made a move to actually brush their fingers over your skin, never grabbed your ass. A voyeur had never tried to lift her skirt. The men who got enough out of watching didn't hurt you. Their imaginations were enough to satisfy them.

But the hairs on her neck were prickling. That man... there was something dark about him—a brooding kind of intensity that felt as dangerous as it was magnetic. He was subtle about it, or at least he thought he was being subtle, but she knew when she was being studied. She'd spent a lifetime being examined.

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What did he do for a living? He had that rich-man's swagger, so something lucrative. Probably a computer geek—someone who spent all day squinting at tiny pieces of code. Or maybe a stockbroker... but he didn't look like a stockbroker. He was wearing a suit, but there was something in the set of his shoulders that looked less Wall Street and more back-alley Fight Club. A... CEO of... something?

She raised her eyes. He lifted his glass, gaze locked on hers. Juliette's heart stopped, but then he tipped the cup—one more, please—and turned away. The breath rushed back into her lungs.

Look at me, she thought at him. Watch me. Remind me that I'm worth watching. But he remained stoic, staring straight ahead as if she weren't even there.

She suppressed a sigh. What had she expected might happen? Absolutely nothing. This was all just a game she played with herself, a fantasy to sustain her.

The fantasy that he wanted her. That he came in here just to see her. That she wasn't just useful but worth loving. And not being able to have him, the unrequited nature of it, the inherent danger... that was part of the fantasy too.

Her eyes burned, but she took a breath and blinked to clear her vision. Fantasy was all she had until she found a way out of this mess. But one day, she would. One day, her mother wouldn't be in danger, and she could go back home. One day, she'd have proof that would put a sadist behind bars where he belonged—or under the ground, where he belonged more.

One day, she'd be doing something she loved instead of withering away in jobs like

this one, her scar shivering against her chest as if to remind her of the things she'd left behind. The people she might never see again.

Daniel still had her mom under his thumb—had tricked her mother into signing over guardianship and power of attorney. Told the demented woman that Juliette didn't love her, said she was a burden until Mom had begged him to take care of her instead. He'd put her in a nursing home in Ravenbrook. But she was alive, unscarred—Mom's okay, she's okay, she's okay. For now, that had to be enough.

Abuse didn't arrive all at once, a neat package full of red flags. It was a slow slide, one you barely noticed until you hit the bottom. Daniel had started by picking away at her self-esteem until he was the only one who made her feel worthy. Then he'd turned her mother, her colleagues, her only friend against her. By the time she'd recognized the abuse for what it was...

The scar on her chest prickled. Daniel had punished her severely for trying to leave. And though she worked in a strip club, though she was covered in ugly scars, she felt stronger now than she ever had with him. She was clawing her way out of the gutter he'd thrown her into—working on it, anyway. The fact that she spent half of her time staring at some handsome stranger, hoping he'd look her way, was proof she still had a long way to go.

The bottle clinked against the glass, loud enough to be heard over the music. Juliette winced. The last thing she needed was to get chewed out by her boss, but Waylon Pierce was not standing in his usual spot by the swinging door. Good. She hated the way the old man looked at her—like he was repulsed. Waylon even forced her to wear a shirt instead of the bikini tops the other girls wore.

Juliette set the bottle aside. It wasn't that she wanted to bare her breasts to the masses, didn't even want to dance, though she used to be good at it. It was that the masses didn't want her to. She used to love being the prettiest girl in the room, and now, men

wincing when they registered the healed wound.

But... he didn't wince. Those subtle glances made her remember what it was like to be pretty. Desired more than Desire herself, who was now writhing in the lap of a bearded man who looked like an out-of-work lumberjack.

The scar above her heart twitched again as she made her way around the bar, eyes on the floor. She'd never get used to walking in platform heels, and she couldn't afford to pay for a lost whiskey, let alone a tumbler.

Another pair of platforms stepped in front of her own, toe-to-toe. Juliette looked up.

Brittany grinned, a bubble-gum chewing brunette with bright pink eyeshadow straight out of the nineties. Juliette forced a smile in return.

"Want me to take that?"

No, Juliette's brain whispered. But she handed the glass over, and Brittany winked. "I'll see if I can talk him into a dance while I'm at it."

"He never gets dances."

Brittany cocked an eyebrow. "A couple weeks ago, Shonda said she wanted to give him a free one—did you hear that he grabbed some douchebag's hand when he tried to get fresh with her? He's like... our unofficial bouncer."

"Yeah, I guess."

Shonda had left after that night—hadn't been back since. Girls left here all the time, but the fact that she hadn't returned to get her share of the tips definitely felt wrong. Waylon took all of their cash at the end of the night, divvied it up once he took his

cut. No girl who worked here could afford to forgo that money.

Brittany bit her lip, glanced over her shoulder, then back to Juliette. “He seems... nice.”

Uh-oh. Juliette knew that look. Sometimes new girls imagined a patron might sweep them off their feet. After they’d worked here a few months, they realized these men were all the same: assholes with something twisted up wrong in their DNA. Nice men didn’t come to strip clubs, and they certainly didn’t date those in the sex trade.

Then why did you get so angry when Desire was dancing for him? her brain whispered. Why do you wait patiently until he looks at you? Why do you sometimes imagine it’s him touching you when you go home to your shitty motel room?

For these questions, she had no answers other than that Brittany was right—he did seem nice.

Juliette glanced past Brittany’s shoulder at the man in the chair. Dark hair, vibrant blue eyes still aimed at the stage, a square, stubbled jaw. Muscular—thick through the chest. And so damn confident, the way he always swaggered in like he owned the place...

It wasn’t a good look on most men. He was the exception.

His eyes flicked to hers as if he’d heard her thoughts. Juliette’s heart ratcheted into her throat. How long had she been staring at him?

“Jenny?”

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She blinked. “What?”

“I’ve been calling your name.”

I doubt that. “Sorry, it’s been a long night. And I have no idea if he’s nice. Most nights, he just hits the buffet.”

Brittney nodded. “The shrimp here are really good.”

“Yeah, I guess.” If you like rubber.

“Anyway, someone’s here for you. They’re in the locker room.”

Juliette’s windpipe clamped shut, but she managed a hissed, “Who?”

“No idea. He’s handsome, though—blond. Said he’d been trying to call you all day.”

He’s a liar. Juliette didn’t have a phone—she was completely off-grid, and for good reason.

She cut her eyes at the front door, where a curtain of beads sparkled in the neons, her thigh muscles aching with the urge to run. She could make a break for it, but if she did that, she couldn’t come back here. And she needed the money. It had taken far too long to find a place that would hire her this time—three weeks after leaving the last state, sleeping in a bus station bathroom, starving.

She wasn’t ready to do that again. And at least in this club, unlike that bus station

bathroom, she wasn't alone.

Brittany, mistaking her hesitation for devotion to this shit job, said, "Jesus Christ, Jenny, Waylon will never know. I'll cover for you."

Juliette swallowed hard and glanced over Brittany's shoulder. The man sitting in front of the stage was turned their way now, head cocked as if worried. A man who had no problem correcting touchy-feely scumbags and liked his whiskey neat. A voyeur.

She felt safer when he was here. But she shouldn't. Trusting a man—any man—was dangerous. Deadly.

She wouldn't make that mistake again.

Chapter 3

Ronan

He watched Jenny ball her fists and head for the back room, his jaw so tight his molars squeaked together. The door swung shut at her back. But he could still picture her standing there, shoulders tensing at whatever the woman in pink had said to her, face shifting from a curious kind of nervous to real fear.

Should he ask the other woman what had happened? She was approaching him now, his drink in her hand. Too-pink lips, too-pink thong, too-dark nipples, a shade of rose that wasn't natural. Did she paint them with lipstick?

Ronan drew his gaze to her face as she stopped beside the table. "Is Jenny okay?" he asked, raising his voice to be heard above the throbbing music.

Her eyes widened, pink shadow disappearing into the crease. Then she winked. “Do you know all of our names, handsome?”

No. He didn’t know most of their names, didn’t care about their names, not unless they needed his help—he really was a creepy bastard. But that wasn’t the right thing to say.

Instead, he shrugged. “It pays to know the person in charge of the whiskey.”

She grinned. Crooked front teeth, one of them stained with a smear of lipstick. “I guess it’s my lucky day.” She held out the glass—his drink. “I’m Brittany.”

He took the cup and settled it onto the tiny table that held remnants of the terrible shrimp he’d eaten earlier, the limp-as-fuck salad. Strip clubs: Come for the butts, stay for the buffet.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

Brittany’s face fell. “Jenny’s fine,” she said, more curtly than before. “She’s taking her break.”

A break? Most women here didn’t look upset when they walked away from the sweat-infused stage zone. Had he imagined her unease? It was possible.

The stories his mother had told him about her club days were horrific. He sometimes felt those stories had imprinted on his brain—carved a piece of goodness from his soul to make room for that particular brand of vileness.

Brittany was still watching as if waiting for him to respond to her news about Jenny.

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“How old are you, honey?” he asked instead.

Brittany looked young, but was she too young to be allowed in here?

Brittany’s eyes sparkled. She bit her lip. “How old do you want me to be?”

He stifled a sigh. This was always the hard part. If she was of-age, she’d role-play. If she was under eighteen, she’d never tell him. And he’d bet his left nut that almost every girl in here was using a name that wasn’t listed on her birth certificate. Sure, Jenny sounded less “stripper” than Brittany, but if Desire was actually on that poor girl’s social security card, her parents had set her up for the pole.

“I want you to be exactly who you are, Brittany.” When she frowned, he amended, “I worry about you ladies. This can be a rough business. Lots of assholes.”

He wanted to ask about Jenny again, but that might raise red flags. The chief wouldn’t let another stalking complaint slide.

“I think you mean lots of asses.” She giggled and dragged her fingers over the bristly stubble on his cheek—what was it with these women and his five-o’clock shadow? “Can I give you a dance, baby?”

Unlike Desire, his gut told him that Brittany actually wanted to writhe around in his lap for reasons that had nothing to do with the job, but he shook his head. “No thanks. I might have a heart attack if you get too close.”

She dropped her hand and bit her lip again—a trained behavior, not a natural one.

Trying to be sexy. To Ronan, it just made her look nervous, and no woman should be nervous if they wanted you. Ronan had had enough enthusiastic participants in his bed to know the difference.

“Word is, you’re more into the food than the girls.” Brittany leaned closer, her voice a sultry whisper. “Is that true or just...”

She snapped back to standing, eyes wide as she turned away from him. Ronan blinked. The dancers on the stage stopped moving, too, their faces swiveling in an almost cartoonish choreographed display. Then he heard it—screaming.

Jenny?

Ronan was out of his seat before he registered his intent to move, the whiskey hitting the floor. Brittany squealed and stumbled backward as Ronan flew across the room, drawing his weapon, scanning his surroundings for bad guys, for guns, for danger. Nothing but the flashing neon lights. Even the screaming had stopped, unless it was being drowned out by the relentless bass line.

He almost hoped it was the music—a lack of screaming could be a very bad sign. What was he going to find beyond that swinging door? A robbery in progress? Waylon on the prowl? Had someone attacked Jenny or one of the dancers?

Ronan shoved his way through, gun drawn, alert for threat. But he saw no burglar. Nor did he see some handsy scumbag with his fingers up Jenny’s skirt—that might have made him lose his shit. No, just a small room, the off-white walls tobacco-stained, black mold darkening the top left corner.

To the right, an open door led to a small office. On his left stood an open archway, a row of rusted lockers beyond. Straight ahead was the exit to the back alley, the door wide open, streetlights glinting off the oily cobblestones.

Ronan lowered his gun.

Jenny stood in the left corner near the locker-room archway, her arms crossed as if she were cold. An older man stood in the doorway to the office, eyes narrow, jowly neck sagging like his face was melting, the top button on his pants undone—zipper halfway down. Ronan might have guessed that he and Jenny had been together in the office if not for her bloody hands, a stark contrast to Waylon's unstained physique.

Ronan finally drew his gaze to the floor.

The man was tall with a blond crew cut, muscled shoulders more swimmer than bodybuilder. A tattoo of a snake slithered from his left wrist up beneath the sleeve of his yellow AC/DC T-shirt.

But the yellow stopped at the shoulders; the back of the shirt was soaked in crimson. Jagged slashes tore through the fabric, revealing gaping wounds in his flesh. Beneath him, a puddle of blood pooled, inching across the linoleum like a sluggish amoeba. It was spreading too slowly—far too slowly. And the wound on his back, positioned precisely where his heart should be...

Ronan stepped around the puddle and crouched at the man's side. He pressed his finger beneath his jawline. No movement. No breath.

No heartbeat.

Ronan pushed himself to standing and edged to the open back door, hand on his weapon. The alley was empty.

He turned back to the others, glancing first at the club's sleazy owner, a man he was certain belonged behind bars. "What happened here, Waylon?" He didn't respect the man enough to use his last name.

The old man blinked, grabbed his zipper, and fastened the button on his jeans. “I came out ’cause I heard screaming. He was like this when I got here.”

Ronan turned to Jenny, but she didn’t seem to notice. Her eyes were locked on the corpse. Though she was pale, her breathing remained steady—she didn’t appear to be in shock. Instead, she almost looked to be examining the body. Fascinated instead of repulsed—unbothered by the blood on her hands, the crimson streaks on her thighs where she’d tried to wipe evidence from her fingertips.

Ronan’s hackles rose, his pulse throbbing in his temples, the acrid taste of dread hot in his throat. The blood on Jenny’s hands told one story, but her eyes... He could not for the life of him determine what they were saying.

And he couldn’t afford to be wrong.

Not again.

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Chapter 4

Juliette

His blue eyes appeared darker in the yellowed lights. He was more domineering, too, shoulders broader—authoritarian, though he had no more power here than anyone else.

Though, to be fair, he certainly had more power than Jason.

Her eyes drifted to the sticky tile. The man's head was turned to the side, eyes wide and staring, blood reddening a slimy path from his lips to the floor—the flow had stopped. No defensive wounds that she could see. His knuckles were free from gore, and though his hands weren't exactly clean, he didn't appear to have blood beneath his fingernails.

Blindsided, then. Six stab wounds. The first must have been the kill shot, the others for the sake of pure rage. He hadn't had time to fight back.

“Don't move,” the man snapped, and she glanced over as he stepped through the swinging door into the main room, yanking his cell from his pocket. Calling the police from the way he was rapid-firing their address. Within seconds, he was barking orders at her coworkers, or maybe at the other patrons—“You, sit down. You, hit the lights”—voice low and gruff like he had gravel in his throat.

Strange. He was acting as if he was the owner of this place and not Waylon, who was still standing by the open door to his office, upper lip set in a trembling sneer. The

lights in the main room snapped on.

The hairs on her neck prickled. She turned back to see Waylon glaring at her. It wasn't just a look—it was a warning.

“You remember what I said,” Waylon hissed, deep-set eyes tight.

“I remember,” she fired back.

He pushed himself off the doorframe but did not step toward her—avoiding the body.

But Juliette wasn't avoiding it. She couldn't afford to.

She tried to keep her face even, but her mind was racing, eyes scanning the room. No bloody footprints, no obvious dirt from a boot heel, but anything subtle would be hard to see. Waylon owned a mop for the front room, but no one ever cleaned back here. And they should.

Especially Waylon's nasty office.

Her hackles rose, but she pushed those thoughts aside. What was she supposed to do now? The fact that she knew Jason would be a problem if the police put her into the system. And if they realized her license was fake, snapped her photo, and ran it through facial recognition software... fuck.

She glanced at the swinging door—no more music, just that man barking orders. The back door was still wide open, the night breeze hissing over the tiles and ruffling Jason's short, blond hair. Smears of ruby on the door itself—transfer stains about the height to be from a jacket sleeve. Nothing on the handle.

Another chilly gust blew into the room, and Juliette had to restrain herself to keep

from racing through the exit. The potential for escape was inviting... which was probably the point. Should she risk it? Would she fare better out in the dark alley? Or was it a trap?

“I’m serious,” Waylon said, bringing her back. “You didn’t see shit, Jenny. I know enough about you that?—”

“I said I remember,” she repeated. “And you didn’t see anything either, right? Now be quiet, he’s coming.”

As if on cue, the man stepped back through the door, eyes grazing her face, then Waylon’s before locking on Jason. With the music off, the silence was deafening. She could hear her heartbeat in her ears, the disgusting whoosh of air through her nose.

“How did you know the deceased?” he said. Far too calm. Far too... used to this.

Juliette’s shoulders stiffened, her spine a steel rod. The deceased? Who talked like that? Only one group she could think of. People who dealt with dead bodies. With victims.

Oh no. Juliette lowered her head, avoiding his piercing gaze. Of all the dangerous bullies in the world, cops were the absolute worst. How the hell had she missed this? Because he had money? She’d caught him sneaking around the locker rooms once but hadn’t said a word because Waylon had found thousands of dollars stuffed into their cubbies—money surely meant for them.

But cops didn’t have that kind of money to throw around. Not unless they were dirty.

“Ma’am?”

She raised her head. “I didn’t know him.”

His eyes narrowed. “Do you often kiss people that you don’t know?”

“Excuse me? Who are you to?—”

“I’m Ronan Duffy.” He reached into his pocket and flashed a badge—not just any cop. A detective. “And your lipstick is on his mouth.”

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Juliette cut her gaze to the body, squinted at Jason's face. Blood had never bothered her, but she winced because it should bother her. And Detective Ronan Duffy was right. The dark shade she wore—a reddish-maroon that changed the shape of her mouth—was smeared across Jason's lips beneath the thin ruby lines of gore. She hadn't even noticed with the blood.

"He kissed me," she said. "I pushed him away, told him to get out, then went into the locker room. I heard a thud, and when I came back, he was on the floor. I touched him to see if he was..."

She shook her head and raised her hands, showing him her fingertips. If she was guilty, there would be more blood. There would certainly be a murder weapon. And he'd not find that here.

"Did he say anything before he kissed you?"

"He..." She swallowed hard. "He said that he liked me." But he hadn't. She'd seen only disgust on his face when his eyes had lit on her scars.

The detective blinked. "What about you?" he asked Waylon.

"Same." But he had a smug look on his face, almost like he was daring the detective to ask him more. He probably was.

They'd all heard the rumor a few months back. Shonda said they'd passed a law that made it illegal for cops to enter adult venues. It was nonsense—at least Juliette thought so—but it was possible that the precincts were cracking down. Detective

Duffy might be in trouble just for being here.

He cocked an eyebrow at Waylon. “You were also in the locker room after kissing the deceased?”

Waylon frowned. “No, I mean, I was in my office, I heard them talking”—he gestured vaguely at Juliette and the body—“then a few minutes later, I heard a scuffle, came out, and he was on the ground.”

“He’s right about the scuffle,” Juliette said. “I heard him arguing with someone right before that thud.” The lie slipped from her lips so cleanly that even she heard it as truth.

The detective’s eyes narrowed. “Is that a fact?”

No, that was definitely not a fact. But she needed him to believe it. Sirens wailed in the distance.

“I heard that too,” Waylon cut in. “Someone with a low voice.”

Juliette nodded. “Yes, definitely—a low voice like yours, Detective.”

There had been no argument. No low voice. But she and Waylon had good reason to protect the other, even if she didn’t know exactly what it was she was protecting Waylon from. What the fuck had he been doing in his office? From the state of his unbuttoned pants, she could guess.

The sirens were a constant wail now just outside the building. Lights flashed down the alleyway, and then they were right outside the door, painting the corpse in sickly shades of blue as if he’d been dead far longer than five minutes.

“Let’s get you two out into the main room,” Detective Duffy said. “The crime techs will be here soon. And we’ll need to question everyone separately.”

Waylon’s nostrils flared—angry. “I can’t afford to keep this place closed all night! I’m losing money right now! Can’t you just load this asshole into an ambulance and?—”

The detective raised a hand. “In the main room now, or I’ll take all of you to the station and question you there. Would you prefer that?” His voice remained low but not aggressive. Confident. Because he knew Waylon had no choice.

Her heart launched into her throat, choking her, but she forced out, “I’m happy to answer your questions here, Detective. Anything I can do to help.”

Please believe me. Please don’t take me to the station. Please.

Waylon’s nostrils flared like an angry bull, but he did as asked and pushed into the main room. Juliette followed at his heels, careful to avoid Detective Ronan Duffy’s piercing gaze on the way past.

A cop. A fucking cop.

Her heart was beating far too quickly, her chest on fire with panic. But what more could she do? It was too late to make a run out the back door. She certainly couldn’t go to the station. Jenny wasn’t her real name—Waylon knew it. And if the cop figured out that the name she used here was fake...

None of them would get out of this alive.

Chapter 5

Ronan

Ronan dragged his gaze from Jenny's back when his cell beeped with a text: Out back, dickhead. Then a loud booming voice called out from the alley, "Fancy meeting you here."

Ronan almost smiled—might have under other circumstances. But Jenny's tight eyes had burned their way into his brain.

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It wasn't the trauma of seeing a corpse that had affected her—she hadn't seemed fazed by the body on the floor. But her eyes kept flicking to the alley as if she expected that someone might come running in to murder the rest of them.

Had she seen more than she was letting on? Jenny clearly knew the dead man. She'd come back here to see him, hadn't she? He'd been sitting in the stage area when Brittany had come to collect her. No one had followed Jenny from the main room.

Ronan's thoughts shifted as his partner ducked inside the building. Five-five, with a broad, flat face, dark eyes, and brilliant red hair, he looked more like a grown-up Chucky doll than a detective.

Patrick Kearny had been Ronan's best friend for the last eight years. Besides the chief, he was the only person that knew who Ronan really was. And though Paddy didn't understand why anyone in their right mind would walk away from billions and a cushy desk job, he accepted Ronan's passion for the work. And protected him more than he should.

"Detective Kearny," Ronan said. "How kind of you to stop by. Got another pair of booties?" He gestured to the blue plastic sleeves his partner was slipping over his shoes. His partner's name was Patrick, but Ronan had always called him Paddy at the man's request—the Irishman had a strong brogue that vibrated your eardrums.

Paddy passed him a pair, then kneeled beside the body. "Aw, shit. Jason Mercer," he said. "Handsome devil, isn't he?"

Ronan blinked. "If you like tall and blond and... with a penis."

Paddy snorted. “Nah, that’s what the chief called him the last time I brought him in—Handsome Devil. I arrested him for petty theft. Last I heard, he’d turned informant, but I can neither confirm nor deny that off the top of my head.”

Ronan drew his eyes back to the body. Six stab wounds—six. “If that’s the case, this might be payback—that many wounds is overkill. Anyone know he turned rat?”

“We’ll look into it,” Paddy said. But he didn’t sound convinced.

“Why else would an informant wind up stabbed to death in a strip joint?” That wasn’t really the question Ronan wanted an answer to. He wanted a reason to give the bartender a pass. Wanted a reason to believe that she wasn’t involved in this—any other explanation. As it was... she’d likely been kissing the man when someone had snuck up behind him and shoved a blade into his heart.

Paddy righted himself and stepped nearer to Ronan. “He was a thief first and foremost, so my guess is that he intended to rob the joint. It’s a Wednesday night, so not the highest cash day, but it’s also less crowded. Fewer witnesses.”

“The witnesses I have, the owner and the bartender, didn’t say anything about robbery—no one asked them for money. They say they heard him arguing with another man, but by the time they came out, Jason was dead, and anyone else was gone.”

“Maybe he was arguing with... a partner?” Paddy shrugged, but his dark eyes remained skeptical. “I’ll run him through the system, see who pops as a recent associate.”

“Either way, it’d be damn weird to kill him here, disagreement or not.” Ronan narrowed his eyes at the bloodstains on the floor, the tacky crimson glinting dully in the jaundiced overheads.

“I was thinking the same,” Paddy agreed. “They had to be here for something besides stabbing the shit out of each other.”

Paddy clearly hadn’t noticed the lipstick. He would—it would be in the forensic reports. But whatever had happened in this room, Ronan didn’t believe Jenny had killed Mercer in cold blood. She didn’t have enough blood on her to have done the deed herself. Same with her asshole boss—if Waylon had done it, he’d be covered head to toe in evidence.

Yet their demeanors were suspicious. Both had refused to meet his eyes—they looked guilty as hell. And there was no way things had gone down exactly as they’d said. Either those two were somehow complicit, accomplices in the murder itself, or they were protecting someone.

“You think the boss has his girls too scared to talk?” Paddy asked, reading his mind.

Ronan shrugged. “Maybe.”

Paddy didn’t know it, but Ronan was well aware that Waylon bullied his girls into holding back information from the police. That was one of the reasons Ronan had never been able to pull a search warrant—no women willing to go on record. Waylon held onto their tips each night and refused to pay any dancer who displeased him.

“It’s also possible that they really didn’t see the guy. The back door was open when I got here. Mercer didn’t put up much of a fight, so the assailant could have been in and out within a minute.”

“Maybe the bartender was blowing her boss in the office, and they don’t want anyone to know,” Paddy said, gesturing to the office door, and Ronan’s hackles rose.

No. Not her.

“Why would they hide that?” Ronan said instead. “She’s not underage. And I doubt he cares about an HR violation for getting a blow job from a bartender.”

Paddy’s eyes darkened, serious. “How did you get here so fast, anyway?” he asked, voice softer now. This time, his eyes held no hint of the joviality he usually wore like a mask, especially at horrific crime scenes. “Were you...” He glanced at the door to the main room, his meaning clear: Were you watching the women on the poles? Are you stalking someone... again?

Paddy leaned his face nearer to Ronan’s and whispered, “You know this shit gets you into trouble. You get caught up again?—”

“This isn’t like last time.”

But it was. A different club, sure, but not a dissimilar series of events. Nearly a year ago now, he’d seen a girl with sad eyes and a scar on her left arm that tattooed flowers did not completely cover. A man had grabbed her in the parking lot and pressed her against a truck. Ronan had beaten the shit out of him.

It turned out that the man was her boyfriend—the encounter had been fully consensual. Anyone might have made the same mistake, but Ronan was still considered a loose cannon. He wasn’t even sure why he still had a job. Because he was a Duffy? Maybe. Which wasn’t really fair.

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Ronan swallowed hard. Paddy's point was valid. Being in this club was a risk, but he'd known that from day one. And he'd kept coming, anyway. Because of her.

Paddy was still watching him. "If it's not like the last time... what is it like?"

"Let it go," Ronan said, turning to the entry to the main room.

"I'm just trying to understand, brother. You can have any woman you want. I don't know why you come to these?—"

"We have witnesses to interview," Ronan fired back, stepping through the swinging door, hoping that would be enough to shut his partner up.

But when he glanced back, Paddy's brow remained furrowed. Suspicious. "You'll need a better story than that when this gets kicked up to the chief. He ain't going to let the fact that you were here slide, and?—"

"He was walking by," a female voice said from their right, and they both turned.

Jenny blinked; her cheeks flushed. She'd reapplied her lipstick—flawless now, not a smudge. Her hands were clean, too.

Shit. How had he let her do that? He should have followed protocol. Bagged her hands. Kept her exactly where she was. What was wrong with him?

You're obsessed with a woman who works in a strip club, Ronan, a voice whispered in his head. You're just like your father.

His ribs constricted, heat stabbing at his throat.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt,” she said, stepping closer, her eyes on his. “I just wanted to say thank you—for coming in when you heard me screaming. To think what might have happened if you hadn’t been walking down that alley...”

“What might have happened?” Paddy shifted around Ronan, positioning himself between them, his head cocked.

Uh-oh.

“If Detective Duffy scared the killer off, does that mean the killer passed him on the way out?” He glanced over his shoulder at Ronan, a look that said, I know you’re lying—you need to talk to her, get your fucking stories straight.

She swallowed hard. “I... maybe he went out the front? I mean, I didn’t see him,” she amended. “I just heard footsteps—scuffling, a thud, someone running off. I came out and started screaming. Suddenly, the detective was there.” Jenny shrugged. “It’s all a little fuzzy, but... I’m grateful.” She reached out and gently squeezed Ronan’s arm, then turned on her heel and headed back to the clique of dancers huddled near the stage.

Ronan stared after her, his arm tingling where she’d touched him despite the circumstances.

Insane, Ronan. You’re insane. A horny stalker, that’s all you are.

But what the hell was she doing? Was she trying to... protect him from having to admit that he was already here at the strip club? His gut said yes, and his instincts were usually right, but...

Huh. She was perceptive. The chief wouldn't love it that one of their own had been drinking whiskey and stuffing bills into G-strings while their killer slid a blade between Jason Mercer's ribs six times. And the chief definitely wouldn't appreciate that Ronan had broken protocol, letting the woman who'd been kissing the victim just moments before—or maybe even during—the attack wash away potential evidence.

He was a real piece of work. Paddy was right—he needed to get his shit together.

He couldn't afford to be this stupid. Couldn't afford to be blind to everything except a woman he couldn't have. Couldn't afford to protect her either, not when she might have conspired to kill a man.

No matter how much he wanted to.

Chapter 6

Juliette

The streetlights painted the detective's face in streaks of white, shadows sharpening his cheekbones. Handsome... or was he just dangerous?

Juliette knew herself well enough to know the answer. He wasn't handsome despite the danger; he was handsome because of it. She'd known it for months in that club, and it felt all the more true now. Even after everything she'd been through, her pulse quickened at the sharp angles of his jawline, the cool detachment in his eyes. Her mother used to call it the family curse. Her own father had been the walking definition of a red flag, a motorcycle-riding bad boy who'd ridden off into the sunset when she was ten.

Detective Duffy stopped at a red light, the glow spilling into the car like blood, a hue far too close to the gore on Jason's face. The memory should bother her... but it

didn't. She'd seen worse—far worse. Nothing compared to the first time you held a man's organs in your hands, even if you were safely surrounded by the cool sterility of the morgue.

How surreal to think that used to be her life. How absurd to think she'd spent years wearing nothing but sensible orthotics. Her arches, still pressed against her cheap heels, throbbed at the thought, a dull ache that faded almost as quickly as it came.

“Tell me about the kiss,” Detective Duffy said, voice low—gruff. Almost... jealous? But that was ridiculous.

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She drew her gaze to the windshield, the pavement stretching out like a road to nowhere. “I already told you. He kissed me, I pushed him off, then I went into the locker room.”

“You’d never met him before?”

“No, he was just some creep. There are lots of them at the club.”

“Shots fired,” he said.

Her chest tightened, but the upturned corner of his lip told her that he wasn’t offended. Maybe he should be, even if she didn’t lump him in with the other creeps. Still, there were moments when she thought she saw a flicker of arousal in his gaze—or the faint stretch of fabric over his groin.

Her lower belly tightened, and she pushed the thought aside. It’s just a dumb bad-boy crush. And now that she knew he was a cop, it was in her best interests to forget about him entirely.

How had she let herself get talked into this car?

When the detective had asked if she needed a ride home, she could have said no. Even his partner had frowned, like he was suspicious about Detective Duffy’s intentions. But turning down a ride home in the middle of the night might seem suspicious, and a ride to her motel felt less threatening than a ride to the precinct.

Plus, he’d already shown some hints that he wanted to help her. He hadn’t said a

word about her washing the blood from her hands—he should have. He hadn't refuted her story about him walking past in the alley either, though it was clear his partner didn't believe it. Could she convince him—subtly—that they could help one another?

That's why she was really here. She needed to assess the situation, buy herself enough time to vanish. And she couldn't do it walking home alone, guessing at his motivations. If she was right about who had murdered Jason, she didn't have much time to?—

"Maybe you'd seen him around the club?" he asked, and she paused, dragging her focus back to the conversation.

"Not that I remember. But you can ask the other girls. I just work behind the bar, so I don't interact much with the... patrons."

"You interact with me."

Interact? Is that what he called watching her when he thought she wasn't looking, turning away when she looked back?

"I pour your drinks," she said. "But I didn't know your name until today."

"I knew yours."

She frowned. Did he? And why did that make her feel warm and fuzzy inside? Just because a man wanted to know a half-naked woman's name didn't mean he was on the up-and-up, and it certainly didn't mean he respected her.

Be logical, Juliette—you can't afford to be an idiot.

She tugged her sparkly silver skirt down, glad she'd been able to get most of the blood off the sequins, and said, "I don't remember telling you my name."

"I heard one of your coworkers address you."

"One of the strippers, you mean."

He cocked an eyebrow, but she went on, "Exotic performers, dancers, they don't take offense when referred to by those terms. It's the moralists and puritanical jackoffs who feel compelled to use euphemisms. It's a legitimate and respectable job. Fuck the negative connotations."

This time, the pause was longer. "Well, I'm very sorry for being such a judgmental prick, Ms. Crandall. I'll remember that for the future."

She swallowed hard. Oops. That's what she called lying low? "Sorry, Detective. It's been a long night. I'm sure you understand that."

"You didn't do anything wrong. And call me Ronan."

She nodded mutely, dragging a shaky breath into her lungs. She'd never been good at demure, but she wasn't usually so dumb.

Just keep your mouth shut, Juliette. The club would be closed while the police investigated, but then Waylon would be back, and she could pop in and get the money he owed her. As it was, she didn't even have enough for a bus ticket. There were few places that let you work for cash without a social security number, and all she had was a shitty fake ID: Jennifer Crandall. Who would cease to exist within the week.

But she could only run if she got the police to cross her off their suspect list.

If she was a suspect and she ran, they'd come after her—they'd send her photo out to other precincts, put out APBs. Jennifer Crandall wasn't in danger. But Juliette Graves definitely was if anyone found out she was still alive. And if they caught her, locked her away so Daniel couldn't play his game... her mother was as good as dead.

And they'd definitely lock her up. If not for this murder, for another one.

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She took another deep breath and let it out slowly. She's okay, she thought to herself. Mom's okay, she's okay, she's okay. Right now, she's safe—unlike me.

“Are you sure you heard a man's voice?” he said, the car purring as he maneuvered up the road. “I mean, is it possible that the killer is a woman?”

“Well, I mean, the voice I heard was really low.” She covered the lie by leaning the back of her head against the seat. Her insides felt like they were melting into the heated chair. “If the killer was female, she'd be more likely to use a blunt force object or poison, but the latter wasn't exactly convenient in this circumstance...” She trailed off at the shrewd look in his eye.

Juliette clamped her lips shut. The way he was asking her questions in that silky voice felt more like a conversation than an interrogation, but that was exactly what this was. She'd been interrogated enough times to know that he was baiting her—and she was falling for it.

“I agree with you,” he said. “In theory. But if she knew the victim, saw him kissing you, reacted in a jealous rage... maybe it was the woman in the office with your boss.”

Fuck. Was he suggesting that she'd seen this woman stab Jason and had let her get away? Or that the woman had snuck up on Jason after Juliette left? She couldn't exactly ask, and Waylon's words were ringing in her brain—You didn't see shit, Jenny.

“There was no one in the office with Waylon. Not that I saw.”

“Does he usually take his dick out when he’s in there alone?”

There was no accusation in his voice—just curiosity. “Yeah, I think jerking his gherkin is probably his biggest pastime. Thank god I’ve never walked in on that tiny pickle party.”

Ronan snorted. A half smile. “One of your... stripper friends said that she heard Waylon arguing with the victim. Do you think that might have been the argument you heard?”

What? There had been no argument at all—dead silence until Jason hit the ground.

But she shrugged. “I don’t think so, but I can’t be positive.”

Ronan shifted in the seat. His elbow didn’t quite brush hers, but she felt the heat of his skin through his suit jacket, little tingles of electricity running up through her shoulder. It seemed that being starved for affection was making her body react insanely to any hint of kindness.

She needed to get control of herself. She didn’t know that he was kind. She was sure that he was a cop, probably a dirty cop with the way he tossed that money into their lockers. And Shonda... the last time anyone had seen her was with him.

Juliette shifted against the window, away from his heat. Her lungs expanded. Her heart settled. Paranoid. She was being paranoid.

“I also hear that your boss gambles—a lot. That bookies are often hanging around. Do you think the victim might have been there in that capacity?”

What the hell? Where was he getting this information? But if that was true... could the altercation really have been over a gambling debt? Was it possible that this wasn’t

about her at all?

“I honestly have no idea. I’m not sure I’d be able to tell a bookie from some other lecherous asshole.”

Ronan hit the blinker, his jaw tightening. “None of the pieces of this story make sense together. No money was taken. I think our victim was there for you, and I know he didn’t follow you to the back. Your lipstick was on his mouth, which is damning. But the other women say the vic had nothing to do with you, that he was arguing with Waylon. And neither you nor your boss saw anyone else in that room or the alley, but the back door was wide open. We have no murder weapon. And why would anyone wait to enter a club packed with witnesses to stab a man?”

Her heart locked in her chest. Brittany hadn’t told them that Jason asked for her. But Ronan was right about the lipstick.

“When you put it like that... it does seem stupid to kill him there. Even the alley would have been better.” She should feel something for Jason—feel sad or even sorry that he was dead.

But all she felt when she imagined his body was concern about what his presence in the club meant. For her own well-being.

“Perhaps the killer chose the location for another reason.” He glanced over. “Does anyone have it out for you, Jenny?”

She blinked. “What?”

“I’m just thinking aloud here, but if you had nothing to do with the murder, if you didn’t kiss him as a distraction?”

Her heart launched into her throat. “No, I’d never?—”

“Then someone waited until after he was covered in your lipstick to plunge a knife into his heart. I’m just wondering if anyone out there hates you enough to cause you trouble. To make you look guilty. Maybe a jealous ex?”

Fuck, fuck, fuck. “No,” she said. A blatant lie.

“What about Waylon?”

“He didn’t kill anyone. He didn’t have a drop of blood on him—you saw him right after.”

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“Fair enough. But I don’t think either of you is being completely honest with me. So... does your boss have something on you that would make you want to protect him? Or whoever was in that office with him? I can’t imagine that dickhead earned your loyalty without blackmail.”

She leveled her gaze at him. “What do you think he might have? The knowledge that I work in a strip club? You think he’ll tell my mother?” She forced a smile.

Ronan shrugged. “What would Mommy and Daddy say about that?”

She laughed, as she assumed was expected. He didn’t. His gaze darkened, then he glanced at her chest.

The scar pulsed, pulsed, pulsed—bright and sharp. The scar that had ruined her for anyone else. Which had been exactly the point.

But she didn’t see disgust in Ronan’s gaze. Something warmer—something she’d thought was desire in the club.

“Do you... like scars?” The moment the words were out of her mouth, she regretted them. Why the fuck had she asked him that?

“I don’t like the pain that caused them,” he said, his eyes carefully focused on the road. “But a scar doesn’t detract from someone’s desirability if that’s what you mean. What matters most is in here.” He tapped his temple. “Some of us have scars in there, too, in places that don’t heal over.”

Her chest was wrapped in a vise—she could barely breathe.

He pulled to a stop at a red light and turned to face her. “Are you in danger, Ms. Crandall?”

Yes. But she said, “I don’t think so.” And she hoped it was true. Because though Ronan might believe that his badge would protect him, the man she was afraid of had murdered officers in the past. If provoked, she had no doubt that he’d do it again.

She really hadn’t seen what had happened to Jason—she’d told Ronan the truth about that. She hadn’t even seen whoever Waylon was with. As of now, there was no way to tell whether this was about her.

But if it was... she couldn’t let them catch the killer. If they found him, he’d beat the charges—he always did. But they’d also find her.

Hopefully, Jason had died over a gambling debt or just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. A gang initiation, maybe. The senseless crimes, the ones without motive, were always the hardest to solve—she’d seen that before.

But the pit in her belly was telling her this wasn’t some random act of violence. She’d met Jason the night before—and she’d had a reason for walking away. She’d been suspicious then that he might have approached her at Daniel’s behest. And now... he was dead.

Earlier today, Brittany had accused her of being paranoid—she’d thought it herself just minutes ago.

But just because she was paranoid didn’t mean someone wasn’t after her.

Chapter 7

Ronan

Five things he'd learned about Jennifer Crandall on the way back to her house. One, she was well-read with a broad vocabulary—she'd at least started college at some point, maybe a psychology major. Two, she hated her boss, which meant she was hiding whatever she'd seen for another reason. Three, her parents were dead—that glint of sorrow in her eyes when he'd mentioned them, without the anger he always saw in estrangement, was indicative of loss. Four, the woman was terrified of someone—no matter what she said, she did not believe Mercer's death was some isolated incident or related to Waylon. And finally...

Every word out of her mouth was a lie.

No one had mentioned gambling—he'd used that to see what her face did when she was actually surprised. The woman was better than most at hiding her tells, as if she'd been doing it her whole life. He imagined she had. Pain recognized pain... well, usually. Sometimes, you beat an innocent man in a parking lot for making out with his girlfriend, who happened to like it rough.

Bubble-gum Brittany had, in fact, told him that she'd heard Waylon arguing with the victim. But her eye had been twitching so hard he'd almost asked if she had a history of seizures. Waylon was a prick, but Brittany hadn't thought the consequences of that lie through—at best, Waylon would figure out who'd said it, and she'd lose her job. Though he had confirmed that she was of legal age, she was barely so—eighteen as of three days ago. She was naïve, but he couldn't blame her for trying.

Brittany was protecting Jenny. Jenny was protecting Waylon, but more likely herself. Both could be true if Waylon had something incriminating on her. And he did—he had to. But what could she be more worried about than a murder investigation?

“Turn left here,” she said.

All she'd told him when she'd gotten into the car was "head for the east side," but in the half an hour since, she'd directed them around a big square. They were only a few blocks from the club now.

Ronan hit the signal and eased onto the next road. "You weren't sure whether you'd tell me where you lived, huh?"

She blinked at the windshield. "You're pretty good at figuring stuff out," she said quietly, but she didn't sound impressed. She sounded worried.

He cut his eyes at her, trying not to stare. She was even more beautiful up close, which was a completely inappropriate thought. He was here to protect her. To make sure she got home safe.

But he could not help the way his heart beat faster when he watched her thick lashes flutter closed for a beat longer than a blink, the way her breasts rose in the pale glare of the streetlights as he assessed her breathing. The latter was a trick to determine whether someone was lying—respiration changes were a reliable indicator of untruth—but never before had such a thing turned him on.

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“I promise not to try to figure you out too much,” he said, but it came out hoarse.

“Yeah, right. If there’s one thing detectives hate, it’s figuring stuff out.”

He paused, waiting for her to go on—hoping she’d keep talking. He loved the sound of her voice. A low alto, sexy as fuck.

Ronan shoved the thought aside. Stop it, Ronan. Stop it.

He really was an asshole. A stalker—Paddy had known that from the moment he realized Ronan had been inside the club. He should have told his partner that Waylon was the reason he’d started frequenting The Velvet Cage.

The brass had refused a search warrant, refused Ronan’s request for cameras. The chief had told him to leave it alone. But Ronan didn’t trust Waylon with the vulnerable woman in his charge—Waylon sniffed out weakness like a wolf hunting prey. Paddy would have understood that.

But Ronan also had a more selfish reason for going to the club: When he didn’t, he dreamed about Jenny. If he was lucky, her legs were wrapped around him, his dick buried deep inside her while she moaned his name. But it was the dreams where he saw her running from some unnamed assailant, her eyes wide with terror, that drove him back to The Velvet Cage. Could Mercer’s death be a part of what his gut had been trying to tell him for months?

Maybe. But good intentions weren’t enough to make you a good man. He’d do well to remember that.

“Why did you protect me?” he asked. “You told my partner that I wasn’t in the club. I assume you did that because you thought I might get into trouble for being there.”

“Turn left here,” she said, and he obliged. Was she avoiding the question? But then she said, “I mean... you protected me too. You didn’t say anything about the blood on my hands. I hope that means you believe me—I only touched him to see if he was alive.”

“I do believe you,” he said. But only about not being the one to stab that blade between his ribs. Whether she was an accomplice or just lying to protect someone else, she knew who had done this—he could feel it in his bones. She just didn’t trust him enough to tell him.

“I’m sorry if I overstepped,” she said quietly. “I just didn’t want you to get into trouble. I... like you. I mean, more than the other men at the club.”

“You like me, huh?” He chuckled, but the words heated his chest. “Is that why you didn’t know my name?”

“As you can probably imagine, talking to customers, let alone asking their names, is frowned upon. It can be dangerous.”

“Do you think I’m dangerous?”

Jenny blinked. Swallowed hard. Then averted her gaze, which was answer enough.

“Thank you for trying to help me,” he said. “Sincerely. And just so you know, I’m not a monster like the other men you probably deal with. I just want to help.”

But they all said that. His father had told his mother the same thing, but he didn’t care about her one bit so long as she kept quiet and did as she was told. If she got mouthy,

he sent a courier to supply her with heroin. She hadn't been safe until someone had murdered the man.

Jenny straightened, then pointed to a rambling building on the left side of the road. "This is it. Just take the path around. Room 314."

He blinked at the sign—Broadway Lodge—then pulled in and followed the path to the lot, a crumbling square of pavement surrounded by a U-shaped building on three sides and a thatch of pine trees on the fourth. Nowhere near Broadway. Not even close to a proper lodge.

"You live in a motel?"

She shrugged. "It's safer."

Safer? Ronan scanned the building, the flimsy glass that wouldn't withstand a fist, the doors that would burst open at the first kick. Dark back here, too—only a single streetlamp which stuck from the center of the lot like a needle.

He stopped in front of room 314 and slid the car into park, then turned to meet her eyes. "Who are you running from, Ms. Crandall?"

He probably should have asked her directly six months ago. Maybe then Jason Mercer would still be alive.

Her gaze locked on his, unwavering and unreadable. That was disconcerting. His entire career hinged on reading the thoughts of others, but with Jennifer Crandall, he was completely in the dark. And there was a part of him that... liked that.

The silence stretched. He opened his mouth to say something else, ask again what she was running from, or perhaps to ask how he might help.

But she raised her hand to his shoulder and squeezed. “Thanks for the ride, Detective.”

Ronan finally found his voice. “You have my card. Call if you remember anything pertinent.” He wanted to tack on or if you need help...

But she was already gone.

Chapter 8

Juliette

Juliette's mouth felt stuffed in cotton as she unlocked her room. Cheap and smelling vaguely of damp plaster, the U-shaped motel made her feel safer than multi-floor hotels, where any room had enough soundproofing that no one could hear you scream.

Here, she knew when her neighbors were watching television, knew when they were getting laid, or when they sobbed themselves to sleep. They could likely hear her police scanner—a fixture beside the bed and her most prized possession. She was quite sure that if she shouted, someone would hear it.

But would they react to such a cry? Or would they ignore it? Juliette wasn't certain. But at least if she screamed Daniel's name with her last breath, someone would know. She just wanted someone to... know. To believe her.

She kicked the door closed at her back and lifted the plaid curtain to peer into the lot.

The asphalt glittered beneath the circular white glare of the streetlight, but shadows encroached around the edges. The detective's car was still there, but he'd moved it since dropping her at the door—parked at the far back of the lot. In the dark.

But she could see the glint of his watch where his hands rested on the wheel. A watch too expensive for most cops, but not fancy enough to draw significant attention—a cop on the take. Had to be. And what his partner had said, those whispered words that

others weren't supposed to overhear... You get caught up again? This isn't like last time?

What the hell had happened last time?

Did it even matter? He was obviously dangerous. Despite his quiet demeanor, the way he protected the women in the club from other patrons, he had an agenda. And now, here he was, parked in the shadows at the back of the lot, eyes locked on her room. Watching her, just like he always did inside the club.

Why did that relax her shoulders? Why did his presence make her feel so much safer? She was beginning to think it didn't have anything to do with her so-called family curse.

To beat a dangerous monster, you needed a dangerous monster on your side. And she sure as hell hadn't gotten anywhere by playing by the rules.

Once, she would've called herself insane for thinking this way—before she'd married a psychopath. But the mafia didn't defeat their enemies through negotiations; cartel leaders didn't smile and nod and play diplomat. They didn't rely on a justice system that rarely meted out actual justice. They inked news of their triumphs in blood.

Juliette dropped the curtain and leaned back against the wall, absentmindedly tracing the scar on her chest. The healed wound brightened, itched—throbbing before settling back into ugly stillness.

Juliette reached into the back of her skirt and slipped Jason's cell from her underwear—his stolen cell phone. Should she wait until the detective left? What if he sauntered up to the door, busted it down for the thrill of it? He didn't seem like the type, but he had every reason to, even if he didn't know it yet.

Juliette turned the cell over in her palm, frowning at the password screen. Shit. She needed to know who he'd called this week—needed to know whether anyone else knew she was here, who she really was. She needed to know why he'd died.

If it was because of her.

Had someone really told the detective that Waylon had gambling debts? Did they think Jason was his bookie? He could be, she supposed. What did she really know about him?

Not much. He liked chicken wings and draft beer and hole-in-the-wall bars that he wrongly considered to be restaurants. She'd always been bad at small talk—she'd been decidedly unpopular in her old life. Mostly because of the “dead people” thing.

Embalmers got a bad rap. But she'd rather be draining bodies than bartending in a strip club, barely making enough to cover this shitty motel room. Most of her money went to leafy greens and vegetables—she'd seen what junk food did to the arteries. But every employee gave half of their tips to Waylon. You got caught counting up cash on your own, so much as glancing at how many bills someone stuck in your G-string, and you were out on your ass. And it had been made clear to her time and time again, in this club and in others, that the scar across her chest made her particularly expendable.

No, not expendable. Ugly. Disgusting. Just like Daniel had always told her she was.

Her eyes burned.

Juliette tugged the tank top over her head and tossed it to the ground. She undid the thin straps on the bikini top. And then she was tearing the rest of the skimpy, demeaning outfit from her body, kicking off the high heels. Shedding Jennifer Crandall's skin as she did every night the second she walked into this room.

Massaging the tender, raw places where the strings had dug into her flesh.

Why had she gone out with Jason to begin with? Because he was super good-looking in a Ken-doll kind of way? Sure, fine. Because she'd felt pretty in a sweater that covered her chest? Yeah. Because she was lonely? God, yes. Maybe she'd just wanted to feel normal for an hour—she hadn't gone out with anyone since she'd run away from Daniel six years ago.

It had been a stupid, impulsive idea—she'd met him in the grocery store, and they'd walked to the bar up the road. He'd talked about baseball the whole time, hadn't once asked what she liked to do. But towards the end of the “date,” he'd invited her back to his place. When she'd declined, he started asking where she lived. Where her family lived. If she had friends here.

He was interrogating her, pressing her for information as if he were doing research for someone else. She knew that pattern well from experience. Never the same face, but always the same desperate questions. That was usually when she knew it was time to run again.

She'd faked illness and left him at the bar last night. Tonight, he'd shown up at her work. But she'd never told him where she worked.

Juliette lowered herself to the bed, staring at the cell. What would your password be, Jason? He was a fan of baseball—Babe Ruth, especially—but how would that translate into a passcode? It was probably something like “80085” for BOOBS.

If only she could get to his body, use facial recognition to open the cell, then copy the numbers down—even call to see if Daniel answered. It wasn't like Daniel would use his regular cell. A burner was more his style, and there were precious few ways to get that number.

Juliette dropped the phone to the comforter. Maybe she could... go to the morgue?
With her expertise, she'd fit in, tell them what they needed to hear.

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No, that was too risky. Besides, when they'd left the club, Jason was still on the floor, and... huh. Was he still there? Was going back to The Velvet Cage a viable option? She could pretend she'd left something in her locker. She just needed two seconds to flash the phone at his face.

Juliette made her way to the window and tugged the edge of the curtain aside again, just enough to peek out into the lot. The detective was still there. Standing outside his car now, hip leaned against the driver's side door, shoulders even broader in the deep shadows, his cheekbones sharper, his jaw all the more defined. Strong—so fucking strong.

Her heart stuttered. An achy throb pulsed between her legs.

She had not felt this with Jason. Hadn't felt this with any man in a decade—she'd been dead from the waist down since the second year of her marriage to Daniel. But this man, this dirty-cop detective...

He'd never once tried to touch her. He'd never tried to touch any of the girls at the club—he protected them, went after someone on Shonda's behalf without asking for anything in return. He'd protected her tonight, too, kept her bloody fingers to himself.

I just want to help.

He cocked his head. Then he raised his hand in a one-second wave that was half salute.

She dropped the curtain and jerked back. He'd caught her looking at him—just her

eyeball between the fabric panels, but how long had she been staring? Shit.

Either way, she could not return to the crime scene tonight—that had been a dumb idea, far too suspicious. She wasn't in the right frame of mind to guess at the code, either. All she wanted was to go out into the lot, invite Ronan in. Which was absurd.

She leaned her head against the wall, her heart vibrating in her lower belly. Butterflies in her stomach, in her chest—fluttering their gauzy wings against the hot, wet center of her body. She could feel him, too, the way his hand had chastely brushed the back of her elbow as he guided her from the club and into the parking lot. How he'd stood so close to her—comforting, not possessive.

He'd made her feel safe despite the fact that someone she knew had just been murdered mere feet from her. She had barely studied the shadows at all as he drove her home.

But it was more than that. It was the way he'd been looking at her for months. As if she was a person—a real person worth caring about. As if he wanted to be... close to her.

Juliette swallowed hard. She grabbed the cell and shoved it beneath the mattress. Then she stepped in front of the curtains before she could second-guess herself, the chill air brushing her bare flesh. And drew them wide.

He pushed himself off the car, eyes trained on her—on her body.

What are you doing? one side of her brain screamed at her. Was she seducing him to keep an edge in this investigation—hedging her bets? Was she losing her grip after watching a man bleed out on the tile—a man she knew? Was she just lonely, desperate for some kind of physical touch? Was she literally insane? Did she need a release or even a distraction after the intense stress of Jason's murder? Maybe she

was in shock.

But the other side of her brain didn't care about the reasons. Come in and fuck me. Come in and keep the monsters away by being just as dangerous.

But she didn't expect him to. The man was a voyeur. Always had been.

Ronan remained standing beside the car, stock-still in the shadows at the back of the lot. No one else around. There was no one else in the entire universe, just this gorgeous man, with his gaze locked on her.

She drew her left fingertips over each nipple, in turn, the way she'd seen the dancers do a million times—teasing them into hard points. She slipped her right hand between her legs, her hips just above the windowsill.

Was this... sexy? Or was she making a fool of herself?

Please let it be sexy. Please don't let him reject me.

But he should reject her—she was a witness. Maybe an accomplice. There were police department rules against that. The mere fact that he was ignoring them, risking his job for her—that she was worth the risk—made her skin shimmer with tingling heat.

Ronan took a step nearer, and her chest locked up. Was he actually coming inside? Maybe he was coming to arrest her. But then he dragged his gaze around the lot—the mostly empty lot—peering extra hard at the other motel windows. He stopped at the hood of his car and eased himself down against the grill. Giving her his full attention.

The look on his face shot electricity through her veins. She spread her pussy with her fingers, her other hand tugging at her nipples. Already so wet. She slipped two

fingers inside, then drew them to her mouth, sucking her juices from her skin.

Ronan's fists clenched against his knees. But his face remained stoic, watching her as if she were the most gorgeous creature that ever existed. The desire in his eyes—his desire for her—was the sexiest thing she'd ever seen.

She was sure that was what it was now: desire. It wasn't wishful thinking. And he was no actor. This dangerous man, the one who'd let her wash her bloody hands, who had taken care of her after a murder... he wanted her. Badly.

She swung her hips, left then right, in a sultry dance, the way Desire had earlier. A moan hissed from between her lips when she brushed the tender nub at her center. Circling her clit exactly the way she liked, the way no one else had done for her—around and around until every nerve ending was buzzing.

Do you like that, Detective?

Ronan licked his lips but otherwise remained perfectly still, watching as she flicked that sensitive pearl, faster, faster, faster, rolling her nipple between her thumb and forefinger. Liquid heat surged through her veins, her breath a hissed staccato pant.

She could feel what it might be like to straddle him—to take him into her, to let him thrust his cock deep inside her cunt, her pussy stretching to accommodate him. She could feel his fingers gripping her ass. Hear his low grumbled moans as he fucked her.

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Her legs were shaking, his fixed gaze making her skin feel feverish. She released her breast and slipped her palm between her legs, edged a finger inside, the other hand still flicking her clit.

Ronan cocked his head—entranced—and this alone almost drove her over the edge. She slipped a second finger into her pussy, massaging her G-spot. Then she pressed her ring finger against her backdoor. She didn't think he could see the latter—that was just for her. And she didn't need to see his dick to know it was pulsing, throbbing, aching to be inside her and?—

The orgasm ripped through her suddenly, violently, waves crashing against each other in a frenzied attempt to meet the shore. There was no crest, no pulsing to ease her back down, just euphoric spasming that smashed the breath from her lungs.

She came to with her head thrown back, her gaze fixed on the stained ceiling, her fingers gripping the windowpane so hard her knuckles ached. The metallic tang of blood lingered on her tongue—she'd bitten her lip. Her entire body was trembling. Her legs felt like rubber.

Juliette lowered her gaze, forcing her focus back to the lot.

Detective Ronan Duffy hadn't moved from his place against the front grill. He clearly had no intention to approach, to thrust himself inside her—to fuck her properly. But she would have let him—heaven help her, she would have.

He smiled, his entire face lighting up with satisfaction. But not for himself—thrilled with her pleasure. He looked downright elated that she'd gotten off, even if he

hadn't—as though her release was all he'd wanted.

Beautiful, he mouthed.

Her heart stopped.

Juliette righted herself, wiping the sweat from her brow. Then she mouthed back the only thing she could think of—Thank you—before drawing the curtains closed. She could still see his gorgeous mouth, could hear his voice in her head.

Beautiful. Beautiful, Beautiful.

Her eyes stung. It was stupid, and she knew it—but she believed him.

Chapter 9

Ronan

A jangling like that of clattering plates jolted Ronan out of a fitful sleep. His head cracked against something hard, teeth jamming together. Blinding light everywhere—everywhere.

Ronan kept his eyes screwed shut, hand on his throbbing head, cursing under his breath.

The sound came again, slicing through his brain like a knife.

He moaned and finally forced his eyes open, squinting.

The motel was even uglier in the dawn, the dirty pea-green doors looking more like piss than paint when the sun hit them. The single streetlamp that did little to protect

against unsavory characters at night was a rusted mess, one strong gust of wind from keeling over. He'd stayed to make sure she was safe last night, that no killer was lying in wait... but he'd gotten far more than he'd bargained for.

Ronan snatched the cell from the console before it could ring again, fumbling it to his ear. "I'm on my way."

"Where the hell are you? I'm outside your house, you dick."

"What, are you stalking me now?"

"I'm not stalking you," Paddy said, emphasis on the you.

But the question was clear: Who are you stalking, Ronan? Are you watching some unsuspecting woman right now?

But Jenny certainly hadn't seemed to mind him watching. Quite the contrary.

His lip twitched into a grin at the thought—his dick twitched, too. That had been a lovely, sexy surprise, and it had felt so right to watch her touch herself, his cock so hard it felt like a strong breeze might make him come. And he'd never been a two-pump chump.

But in the light of day, her actions seemed more unsettling, if not suspicious. He'd been propositioned by other women after they'd committed crimes. Once, a man had grabbed his dick, offered him the blow job of his life if he'd just look the other way—pretend not to see the cocaine he had stashed in his backseat.

Ronan's eyes locked on the window—on Jennifer's room. No shifting curtains, no movement from inside. But what had he expected? Another deliciously dirty show, her nipples puckering at the touch of her fingers, head thrown back as she?—

“Ronan?” Paddy’s voice pulled him from his reverie.

He cleared his throat and pushed the thoughts aside, but his dick was still hard, aching against his zipper. “I’m just getting coffee. I’ll bring you one.”

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“Bring me a lap dance, too.”

“Fuck off, Paddy.”

Ronan shoved the key into the ignition and glanced around the motel as the engine growled to life. All was still. With a final look at Jenny’s window, he cut the wheel and drove through the lot and onto the main road.

He’d barely gone three miles when the cell jangled again. Ronan jerked it to his ear without glancing at it. “Paddy, you nosy bastard, I’ll be there in five?—”

“I don’t know who Patty is, but I hope she’s hot. Sounds kinda like a schoolmarm, but I guess if she’s polishing your knob right...” A sniff.

Ronan blinked. Not his partner. Charles.

“We need to talk,” his brother barked.

“I read that you’re getting married,” Ronan replied instead or responding to Charles’s dickish tone.

At least his own dick had gone soft since he’d left the motel. Since he’d distanced himself from her.

Charles quieted. “Misprint.”

“Ah. Lots of those going around.” There were always rumors when you had this

much money. Charles was usually the one spreading them, trying to fuck the O'Connor children out of their stake in O'Connor Media. "Fine. I'll return your wedding present. Spoiler, it was a do-it-yourself divorce kit and?—"

"I'm worried about you, Ronan."

"That makes one of us." A lie—there was always a good reason to worry about Ronan Duffy, whiskey lover, crime fighter, frequenter of establishments of debauchery. Stalker.

"I'm serious. You missed the gala last night."

"I wouldn't say that I missed it."

A pause. "Ronan, it's important for us to keep up a united front with the company. Even if you don't care what happens to O'Connor Media, I'd hope you'd at least care about me and Caroline. Where were you that was so important?"

"Home."

"Liar."

"You got your guys following me?"

"Our guys—and no. You always duck them. But they're just security anyway, trying to keep your reckless ass safe."

Ronan sighed. "It's not about my ass, Charlie. My voting shares keep us in the game. But cops don't need bodyguards. It fucks with our credibility."

"Anything you do reflects on us, Ronan, and?—"

“You’re not calling to check on me because of some bullshit gala. You’re calling because you know I asked the medical examiner about our father.”

This time, the pause was longer. Their father’s death was no accident—everyone knew it. They just couldn’t prove it.

“You need to let it go, Ronan. The M.E. deemed his death natural causes. Stop trying to prove something that isn’t true.”

“That’s just it, Charlie... I think it is true. You were there the night he died—I know you were. It’s kinda funny that no one else does.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Charles snapped. “Asking questions just makes people suspicious. I didn’t kill anyone. And if you say that shit to the wrong person, we lose every single cent—every voting share, gone in an instant. Which is probably what you want, you masochistic fuck.”

If he was a masochist, their father was a sadist of the highest order. His father’s will had pitted the Duffy clan and the O’Connors against one another. Every child who married and had children of their own got additional voting shares. But if their father’s death was a homicide, every share on the side of the killer’s family vanished into thin air. If Ronan outright accused Charles, if the shareholders believed it... it could be worth billions.

Was Ronan worth more dead than alive? Probably. But Charles wouldn’t kill him, even if he had—possibly—killed their father.

“I just want the truth,” Ronan said. “That’s all. If you tell me, I don’t have to dig.” A dangerous thing to say on the phone under normal circumstances, but Charles’s cell scrambled transmissions to prevent anyone from eavesdropping.

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Ronan hit the turn signal and hooked a right into the precinct lot. He didn't know for sure what he'd do with the truth... but he needed to know. Maybe he just wanted to ask whoever had done it how his father looked as the life drained from his face. Maybe he wanted to shake their hand, hug his brother for doing what Ronan never had the guts to do—for finally saving their mom.

Maybe he wanted justice. But damn if he knew what justice meant when it came to his father.

"If I wanted him dead, he'd be dead," Charles said. "How's that for truth?"

"What a coincidence. He is dead."

"I meant he'd have been dead a lot earlier."

"That's not better." Ronan slammed the car into park. "Gotta go, Charlie."

"Wait—"

He kicked the door open. "I'll catch you at the next gala." Then he hit End and shoved the cell into his pocket as he hustled up the walk and into the precinct.

Paddy looked up as Ronan approached their back-to-back desks. Paddy raised his hands in mock surprise. "Where's my coffee?"

"What?"

“The coffee you were supposed to be getting?”

“I... forgot.”

“Mm-hmm.” Paddy pursed his lips. “I’m sure you did.”

Ronan peeled off his suit jacket and slung it over the back of his seat. “Fine. My brother called. Threw me off my game.”

Paddy’s gaze softened. Paddy didn’t know he suspected his brother of something so deviant as homicide, but his partner knew what an asshole his father had been. And Paddy also knew about his mother—Rosalie Duffy was in the system, so she’d popped up on Ronan’s background check. It wouldn’t shock him if everyone here knew that his mother was a whore.

Correction: used to be a whore. When it suited his father’s business interests. When they’d met, she’d barely been fifteen.

Paddy tossed a file onto Ronan’s desktop as Ronan slumped into the chair.

“Flatfoots found the murder weapon three streets over—covered in blood, no prints, tossed in a trash can,” Paddy said. “There wasn’t enough time for either Waylon Pierce or the bartender to hide that blade.”

Ronan flipped open the file folder and scanned the text. “We know those two didn’t do it. Not enough blood on them, plus what you just said about the knife.”

Jenny did have blood on her hands... but no one else knew that.

You’re letting her slide, withholding evidence, but can’t leave your own brother alone? The worst Charlie did was slay a dragon.

“Yeah, your girl isn’t going to jail today,” Paddy drawled. “As much as I’m sure you’d like to handcuff her.”

“She’s not my?—”

“Whatever.” Paddy kicked his chair around the desk until it was beside Ronan’s. He tapped the file. “Her lipstick was on our vic’s mouth. You saw it as well as I did. At first, I thought Mercer was a customer—got a dance, a kiss, maybe followed her to the back where something went bad between him and the killer. Then the killer cut and ran. But?—”

“It doesn’t make sense,” Ronan finished. “I checked the street-side cameras—Mercer didn’t walk in the front door. Either someone let him in the back, or he knew it’d be unlocked.”

Ronan had checked the electronic video feeds the night before while sitting vigil in front of that motel, his dick so hard it made his entire abdomen ache. He’d run Mercer through his laptop software, too—advanced tech that tended to find things their police database didn’t. But he hadn’t found any connections between Mercer and the club itself, though he had verified that the man’s mother claimed residence a few blocks over.

“And another dead end,” Paddy went on. “Mercer wasn’t an informant. I’d heard whispers, but I couldn’t find any cop who actually worked with him. Which makes sense because he grew up an Air Force brat and still moved nearly every year like clockwork.”

Like clockwork... or like he was running.

“So we’re back to square one. We know he entered the club from the back, kissed a girl, and got himself stabbed. And the only person back there besides the two we

ruled out was the girl in Waylon's office.”

Paddy cocked an eyebrow.

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“That pervert was fiddling with his zipper when I arrived on scene. I didn’t see anyone, though—I don’t think the bartender did either.”

But there had been tension between them. Whether Jenny had seen something incriminating or not, Waylon seemed to believe she had.

But Waylon wouldn’t protect Jenny. He also wouldn’t protect whoever was blowing him in his office if they’d hurt Mercer, not when the penalty was accessory to murder. So what exactly was Waylon hiding? Ronan could guess. But he definitely wanted to be wrong.

“Do you think Jennifer Crandall was fucking?—”

“No.” His hackles rose at the thought of Waylon’s greasy hands on her perfect body. “There wasn’t time for that.”

Paddy’s eyes widened. “Because you somehow intuited how long she’d been back there when you ran in from the alley?”

Ronan leaned in and whispered, “You know I was in the club. I don’t know why she said what she did?—”

“Because she likes you. Or wants to seduce you so you’ll help her.” The look in his eyes said, is it working? It looks like it’s working.

But Ronan went on, “Either way, she’d barely gone through that swinging door when I heard her scream. She didn’t have time to mess around in Waylon’s office. I think

Mercer was back there before she entered the room.”

“Like he was waiting for her?” Paddy’s eyes narrowed. “Sounds threatening.”

“I’m not sure he went there to threaten her. He kissed her, remember? Maybe he had a crush, figured he’d take a chance. But no matter why he entered the building, someone took that opportunity to stab him while his back was turned.” Ronan snapped the file closed. “We need to learn more about Jason Mercer.”

He was setting the victim up as the villain. Ronan believed he was. A gut feeling, but he didn’t think he was wrong—his gut was almost never wrong. And his conversation with Charles had sparked something in his head.

If I wanted him dead, he’d be dead.

If someone had wanted to kill Jenny, they would have—Waylon, too. That would’ve been less risky than leaving them alive to scream for help. And the motive wasn’t robbery—nothing had been taken.

The suspect had waited for Jenny to step away, stabbed Mercer between the ribs before he could fight back, then stuck him a few extra times for good measure—or perhaps to make sure he was dead. All of it had taken less than a minute. Fast, clean, efficient.

Jason Mercer had been assassinated.

And they had no idea why.

Chapter 10

Juliette

The short walk between her motel and the strip club was clean this time of morning—after the street sweepers had come through, but before the evening crowds emerged to skulk around the massage parlors that gave more than massages. Three different sex clubs in total, and Waylon had been the only one willing to hire her.

A mangy gray cat meowed at her as if in commiseration, then took off up the alley. The rest of the road was silent save for the warm October breeze, her footsteps on the cobblestones.

Juliette crossed her arms, wrapping her sweater tighter around her chest. There was a humid stickiness in the air, but she'd been cold since she'd awoken, her blood too hot—feverish. It had been twelve hours since a man had taken his last breaths in that club, but it felt like weeks. Every second had been filled with trepidation.

Except for those blissful moments she'd spent in front of the motel window.

Juliette swallowed hard. Whatever momentary peace she'd felt last night had vanished, her veins crackling with panic, her blood pumping gasoline. She didn't want to make herself look more guilty than she already did, but she had to get out of here. The moment the police cleared her, she'd be gone.

It wasn't the first time she'd had to run—far from it. But the pit in her belly was new, a little voice in her head whispering about grief and regret, hissing that if she left, she'd never see the detective again.

It made no sense. She barely knew him. And it wasn't as if she could get close to him—have a real relationship. He didn't even know her name.

And he never could.

No, he was just a way to pass the time—a bandage for her shattered self-esteem. And

for the rest of her life, whenever she was feeling down, she'd remember the way he looked at her. She'd remember the way he'd mouthed beautiful. She'd recall the way she'd believed him, if only for the night.

The fantasy had to be enough. It had to be.

The sign for The Velvet Cage approached on her right. An angry purple backdrop with neon lights that only worked sometimes, turning it into HE VET AGE, which sounded more like a medical service for older male poodles than a strip club. She grabbed the handle and pushed, but... the door didn't budge. What the hell?

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“There’s no one here.”

Juliette turned to see Brittany striding up the walk from the alley. She must have tried the back door already.

“Where’s Waylon?” I need my money.

“I was walking up the alley when that hot cop from last night showed up, shoved him into the backseat of his car.”

Juliette’s jaw dropped. “Are you serious? Why?”

But she knew the answer, didn’t she? Brittany had lied, told Ronan that Waylon had been arguing with the dead guy. And Ronan seemed to believe that Jason was a bookie. Of course, Waylon looked guilty.

But the lack of blood on Waylon should have been enough to clear him. Did they think Jason had been stabbed with a fire poker or something from across the room?

“I think because of that argument thing,” Brittany said with a triumphant smile. “I sure as hell didn’t tell them the dead guy was there for you.”

There for me. Dead because of me. “Thanks for that.”

“Hey, it’s not like you killed some customer in the back room.”

Customer? But Juliette didn’t correct her.

Brittany shrugged, nonchalant. “I mean, even the cops seem to know you’re innocent.”

That was true enough... she thought. But they had just taken Waylon in, and she looked guiltier than he did—she’d been the one with blood on her hands.

“Do they really think that guy was a bookie?”

“A bookie?” Brittany pursed her lips. “I have no idea. I kinda thought that girl from Waylon’s office killed him.”

Her heart stopped, the humid breeze hissing down the back of her sweater, raising gooseflesh. “What girl?”

“You didn’t see her back there? She was heading into Waylon’s office when I went back to freshen up. That’s when I saw your friend and came to get you.”

Juliette nodded. The girls often used wet wipes between dances. All it took was one headstand in front of a guy with beer breath to make your G-string funky. “Who is she? Does she work here?”

“I’ve never seen her before.”

“Do you think that she?—”

“Girl, I have no idea. But if she stabbed him and ran out, I wouldn’t blame her. We all want to stab these bastards sometimes.” Brittany brushed her dark locks from her face. “Maybe Waylon’s new girl just has more balls than we do.”

Right. More balls. The scar on her chest throbbed. But there was something else there, too—the tiniest flicker of hope. The same fragile hope she’d felt when Ronan

had mentioned Jason being a bookie.

She needed Jason's death to be about something he'd done—something unrelated to her. Maybe it was even an accident. What if the new girl had been trying to escape Waylon, and Jason had gotten in the way? Six stab wounds were definitely overkill, but panic made people do crazy things. Illogical things.

Juliette knew that firsthand.

She let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding, and Brittany smiled sympathetically, probably assuming she was frustrated about Waylon's absence—about the money. But she wasn't frustrated, not now. Could she actually stay here? Did she have to run?

You just want to stay with Ronan. See what his hands feel like on your skin—what he does when you're not separated by glass.

Her heart clenched. Those thoughts were just more reasons to leave. Any connection was a risk, especially one with a cop. Jason was the first "date" she'd been on since leaving Daniel. He'd somehow figured out where she worked, had kissed her... then died immediately after. That was too much coincidence, wasn't it?

If only she could get into that phone. She'd spent three hours at the library this morning, making a list of potential passcodes using social media clues. But she knew so little about Jason that her social engineering tactics had hit a wall. The combinations she'd tried this morning—his birthday, his mother's birthday, Babe Ruth's birthday—had all failed.

Brittany squeezed her arm. "It's okay, girl. I'm sure Waylon will be back soon enough. And if he's not... maybe we'll get a new boss who will give us all of our tips." Brittany pulled a piece of gum from her pocket and folded it into her mouth.

“Yeah, maybe,” Juliette said, but her mind was elsewhere.

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Soon enough, the police would realize Jason's phone was missing... if they hadn't already. They might be tracking it now, which was why she'd only turned it on briefly at the library, a ball cap pulled low over her face to hide her from any cameras. The sooner she could confirm her safety and ditch the thing, the better.

There was only one place left to go: the morgue.

Brittany extended the pack of gum her way, but Juliette waved it off. Was the morgue really the least risky option? Ronan wasn't going to help her with a stolen cell, and he'd ask far too many questions if Jason actually had been hired by her ex. But did she really think that she could scan Jason's face with the phone to get it open? Was she stupid enough to walk into the morgue? Just because she could talk the talk with other "death professionals" didn't mean she'd walk out unnoticed.

Just wait a few hours for Waylon and get your money. Convince Ronan you're innocent. Then fucking run.

Running was the only viable option. What else could she do? She'd faked her own death once, but she'd waited three months for the perfect opportunity. Left her own blood all over the house, overturned tables to make it appear there had been a struggle. Then she'd lit the house on fire as if Daniel had been trying to obliterate the evidence.

The fire was a contingency plan—whether he was locked away in prison or dead hadn't mattered to her so long as he was gone. But both plans had inexplicably failed.

Every single part of that crime scene had been staged to make him look guilty. Even

the inside of the trash can was smeared with her blood. Body or not, they should have arrested him, at least questioned him—ruined his career.

But they hadn't. He was above the law, as he'd always claimed to be.

The hairs on her spine prickled, and Juliette refocused on the street. Brittany was still watching her.

"How long ago did they take Waylon away?" she forced out.

"Maybe... five minutes? And before you ask, your hot cop didn't say anything about when they'd be back. He's such a... take-charge type." She winked, a sparkle in her eyes.

Juliette resisted the urge to ball her fist—rage? No. Jealousy. "He's not my hot cop," Juliette managed, but her voice shook.

"Then you won't mind if I take a run at him, right? He seemed pretty into me last night." Brittany waggled her eyebrows—if you know what I mean.

Her heart sank. Juliette did know what she meant. He'd probably been hard when Brittany brought him that drink.

Juliette wasn't special. Even if he thought she was beautiful, she was just another girl for him to watch. And now... she was a witness. She was a job. The way he was a job to every girl in that club.

"Jenny?"

Juliette blinked. "Sorry. Yeah, go ahead. Let me know how it goes, okay?"

From the excitement in Brittany's eyes, Juliette had no doubt that she would. And from the way her chest tightened, acid boiling in her stomach, she knew she was already in too deep. Deep enough to be dangerous. Because whether Daniel knew where she was now, he'd find her eventually.

He always did.

She couldn't afford attachments or heartbreak—emotions were dangerous when she needed every ounce of her resolve just to survive.

Juliette watched Brittany turn on her heel—platforms even outside of work—and click her way up the road. She took a deep breath, the sharp tang of garbage from the alleyway souring the sticky air.

This was for the best. Let Brittany distract him. Let Ronan fixate on someone else.

Maybe then Juliette could convince herself to forget him too.

Before she got him killed.

Chapter 11

Ronan

Ronan slapped the cruiser door shut hard enough to make his hand ache.

"So, she knew the deceased," Paddy said, the autumn air ruffling the orange mop on his head. "They were together at Last Stop two days ago, the night before he died."

Last Stop Tavern. The place was grimy in the light of day, the sloppy proprietor in a T-shirt that said "Kiss the Cook," a stain in the left armpit. The building probably

looked better at night, when Garrick Vinder had seen the couple, her in jeans and a sweater—“Downright conservative for this part of town,” he’d said.

Vinder had no idea what Mercer had been wearing. He’d been sure the blond man was with her but had no other information outside of that she’d left suddenly. He hadn’t been surprised, had thought the woman was too good for Mercer. Ronan barely knew her, but he definitely agreed. Every curve on her body was downright perfect.

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“We also know that she kissed him,” Paddy went on, yanking the precinct door open.

“No.”

Paddy raised an eyebrow.

“She said he kissed her and that she pushed him away. That meshes with what the Last Stop owner saw, which was a pretty woman trying to get away from a man who wanted more than she intended to give him.”

Paddy nodded and followed Ronan through the door toward their desks. “I stand corrected, brother. But Jennifer Crandall feels suspicious to me, even if she didn’t do the deed herself. What if she kissed him to distract him while someone else stabbed him in the back?”

He’d floated a similar theory in the car when he was driving her home, but her face said that wasn’t how it had gone down. “We’ll talk to her again.”

“You want to talk to her again,” Paddy fired back but kept his voice low. The bullpen was bustling with other officers, the air thick with the stench of stale coffee, cardboard files, and the macabre heaviness that comes with too much death. “That’s what you mean.”

“We still need a reason for Mercer to end up dead,” Ronan said instead of responding to Paddy’s sniping. “We know she didn’t stab him. We know Waylon didn’t stab him. But what if someone besides Jenny didn’t like that he kissed her?”

“Jenny?” Paddy blinked, then went on, “You think this was jealousy?”

“I have no idea what to think. He had no reason to be there outside of her. He’s never robbed a business during working hours or had any involvement in the sex trade. Petty theft, house burglaries—empty houses—and drugs. That’s it.”

They’d spent the morning putting together Jason Mercer’s last week on earth. He was an off-again-on-again mechanic—off this week. His mother had been less than welcoming; she’d said two other officers had come by the house in as many months to speak to her son, seemed to blame the department for his death.

But there was no information about that in the system. Mercer’s mother didn’t have the other officers’ business cards, didn’t know what they’d questioned him about, but he was clearly into something shady. Was that why he was dead? And what did it have to do with The Velvet Cage? Was that club simply where the killer had caught up with him?

“He’s been staying with his mom three blocks over,” Paddy said. “If he was dealing drugs again or acting as a fence—both things he’s done before—maybe someone followed him to the club, waited until he was alone, then stabbed him and stole whatever he was slinging.”

“We have another witness, too,” Ronan said. “Whoever was in the office with Waylon.”

“I know, you keep saying it, but he keeps denying it. We questioned him for a damn hour.”

Ronan rolled his eyes and slumped into his chair. “You know as well as I do that he’s a lying asshole. Not a single one of his girls likes him.”

“That might be true.” Paddy collapsed into his own chair across the way and leaned over the desks, voice almost a whisper. “But if you keep saying that shit, people will want to know how you’re so sure that these girls don’t like him. You really want to tell them it’s because you’ve been watching them interact for weeks? A month?”

Longer, Ronan thought. But he said, “I think Brittany Sinclair, or should I say Dorothy Kensington, lied about the argument. She’s new, thinks there’s someone better to take Waylon’s place. She’s also naïve enough to believe that we won’t tell him who ratted him out.”

Paddy shrugged. “To be fair, we didn’t.”

“Any other working girl wouldn’t make that assumption. She’s pissed at him. And he clearly has a reason to hide what he was doing in that office. Like I said yesterday, it’s not against the law to get a blow job. He’s not worried about an HR complaint. He’s worried about something else.”

Paddy’s eyes narrowed. “You think whoever was in his office was underage.” Not a question.

“I do. He has a history.” Ronan’s cell jangled, and he pulled it from his pocket. “And you know as well as I do how some of these club owners audition their girls.”

The cell jangled again. He glanced at it, but it wasn’t Jenny—he hadn’t realized he’d been hoping for that until he looked. The morgue? He’d call them back. Those guys weren’t going anywhere.

“Either way, we have no proof,” Paddy went on. “We interrogated every dancer and customer in that place. Everyone said that Waylon was alone. And he doesn’t have security cameras out back—we looked. We can’t hold him much longer just because one of his girls said he was arguing with the deceased. Hell, he even had the balls to

ask if I'd arrested you for being there."

Ronan tried to suppress a smile but failed. For the last six months, he'd been peppering the club with false information through Ellen, then Yasmine, then Shonda. Rumor was that a new law had been passed after a sting exposed several high-ranking police officials engaged in sexual activities at strip clubs.

The fabricated Officer Conduct Act made it illegal for officers to visit adult venues without written approval from their department. Any officer caught inside for personal pleasure could face arrest.

"What the fuck are you grinning about? The fact that he's willing to tell any and everyone that you were in that club is a black mark for you, buddy."

Ronan cleared his throat. His partner was right. He had spread the rumor as a cover—to ensure Waylon wouldn't kick him out even if he realized Ronan was a cop. Guys like that loved to have blackmail fodder. He'd also hoped Waylon might let his guard down a little because of it—enough for Ronan to catch him red-handed with an underage girl.

When Ronan didn't reply, Paddy pushed himself to his feet. "Until we have something more... I'm going to cut him loose. Do me a favor and find something that'll stick, eh?"

Ronan watched Paddy meander through the bullpen and into the hall. When he cut a right toward the interrogation rooms, Ronan called up his email. The information he'd requested from their tech guy had come through. He clicked the link and frowned.

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Someone had stolen Mercer's phone—his mother had confirmed he had one. And that cell had been at the library today. Huh. Were they trying to figure out how to open it? He'd have to stop over there, get the feeds from the library cameras. But first...

He shoved himself to standing.

The main elevator was on the far side of the bullpen, opposite the direction Paddy had vanished. There was also a freight elevator that went from one end of the morgue to a dedicated bay in the garage where funeral homes picked up the deceased.

Ronan tapped the button on the wall, wishing he had a cigarette. He'd quit ten years ago, replaced that particular vice with weight lifting, but damn if he didn't miss it like an amputated limb on days like this.

The elevator binged. Ronan stepped in and punched the button for the basement.

"Afternoon, Detective."

Ronan glanced over. The woman who'd followed him into the lift wore a smartly tailored navy suit, a string of pearls around her throat—a lawyer, based on her Jimmy Choos. Not defense attorney heels either. High-priced criminal law was her game.

"Afternoon." He couldn't remember her name. Olivia? Octavia? She'd sat beside him once at a posh hotel bar where they served gold-infused Negroni spheres—alcoholic Jello covered in gold leaf. He'd walked away before she could say more than, "What are you drinking?"

“Got anything new on the Sandabal case?” she asked now.

Ronan’s hackles rose. Julius Sandabal. Child trafficker. Killer, though he farmed out the homicide. He was currently looking at sixty to life, which meant he’d be out in thirty... or less. Ronan needed to ensure he’d never see the outside of that prison.

“You’ll know when we know,” he replied.

But she wouldn’t, not until such disclosures were required by law. He despised criminal attorneys, especially ones who tried to keep kidnappers out of jail. Ronan himself had been kidnapped when he was four, but the kidnappers had overestimated what he’d be worth. His father had told them to go to hell. They’d discarded him, bloody and cold, in a gutter like the trash his side of the family had always been.

Charles was the only one who’d seemed to miss him.

Guilt pricked in his chest—he’d been hard on his brother earlier. Ronan was the one with the gun, but Charles was still trying to protect him. He suspected this was the main reason his brother didn’t want him working with the police. This job came with the very real risk of death.

Ronan finally turned to meet her gaze. “Are you heading to the morgue to look into the eyes of your client’s victims?”

“I came here to see you, actually.”

“Well, you can fuck off then,” Ronan said.

Her smile fell. Her eyes tightened. “We aren’t enemies, Detective. Your own family is known for toeing the line between legal and illegal.” His jaw clenched, and she amended, “I don’t blame them—just business, right? And I want this to be more of

the same. I hoped we could speak about what it would take for you to cut a deal with my client. There's no need to be impolite."

The elevator slid to a stop. "Oh... sorry about that." He touched the first-floor button and stepped into the basement, then turned to meet her gaze. "You can fuck off... Ma'am."

He smiled at her furious eyes until the doors slipped closed, then headed up the hallway. The cold hit him three steps in, twenty degrees cooler here than upstairs. The chatter hit him next—barking from the exam rooms at the end of the hall.

Ronan frowned—it was almost always quiet down here. Had there been a huge pileup? Had someone unearthed a serial killer's mass grave? Something had happened for the medical examiner to call in reinforcements.

"Ortega! Where you at, brother?"

The medical examiner was one of the nicest people Ronan had ever met—downright jolly, friendly even when he was cracking open someone's rib cage. He was also the only one who ever called Ronan's cell instead of his desk phone. And Ronan had asked to be notified immediately about anything related to Jason Mercer.

He'd also asked Ortega to call him about any bodies with brands on the feet—Sandabal's calling card was a dollar sign burned into the pinky toe. Maybe that was why the lawyer was here.

He hooked a right into the first office, the one Ortega usually worked out of, but stopped short in the doorway.

Ortega stood behind a long stainless table, a brain balanced in his gloved hands. As Ronan watched, he lowered the glistening mass onto the scale.

“Brain’s little light,” Ortega said, squinting at the numbers. “Must have been a racist.”

Normally, Ronan would have smiled—gallows humor was par for the course in a police station, ditto in the morgue. But Ortega wasn’t the only one in the room.

Jennifer Crandall turned slowly from her spot opposite Ortega, her hazel eyes wide, her platinum hair pulled back in a tight bun—not a hint of those blue tips in sight. A white sweater that one might mistake for a lab coat if they were in a hurry. She looked like another person entirely.

Because she was—he was almost sure.

Jennifer Crandall, my ass.

Chapter 12

Juliette

Juliette stared, her heart in her throat. Ronan looked pale under the bluish fluorescent glow of the morgue lights but just as gorgeous as he'd been when he was watching her in the window—broody yet dangerous.

And especially dangerous now.

Juliette swallowed hard. She thought she'd be able to walk in under the guise of assessing reconstructive work on the body—"I'm here from Silverbrook Memorials."

She'd found Silverbrook the same way she'd found Jason's birthday: social media. His mother had posted the funeral home information with the date "to be determined." When Juliette worked in the coroner's office, mortuary representatives occasionally dropped by—just enough for it to seem routine. She'd even waited until late afternoon when morgue admissions usually spiked. While that alone wouldn't make them busy enough to brush her off, she'd thought the bus accident on her police scanner would have kept the staff too preoccupied to question her.

She had underestimated Ortega.

"My friend!" the medical examiner boomed, lifting the brain from the scale. "You said you wanted to be kept abreast of the Mercer situation. This young woman

wanted to assess his injuries for, quote, ‘restorative work.’ I told her he had no injuries that might require such intervention, but she insisted.”

Ronan cocked his head, eyes narrowed.

When had Ortega even called him? The only time the doctor had left the room was... when a colleague had flagged him down in the hall. Damn it. Had she known, she’d have taken the stairs and escaped before Ronan got here.

Now, Ronan would arrest her, take her upstairs, run her fingerprints. And if Daniel’s game was over, she was as good as dead. At best, she’d be locked up in jail, where Daniel could torture her for the rest of her life. And her mother... her mom...

Her throat closed. She could not find the air. What the fuck had she been thinking, coming here? Every muscle in her body was tight with the frantic need to run, to escape.

“It’s okay, Ortega,” Ronan said in that growly voice. “We can show her.”

She blinked. What? He wasn’t going to arrest her? But that wasn’t what he’d said. Her breath hitched, lungs filling with precious oxygen, his quiet confidence a balm against the panic.

Ortega deposited the brain on a stainless tray but did not remove his gloves. “You know where to find him,” he said to Ronan, then went back to his work.

Ronan glanced at her, then headed for the far right side of the room, where metal drawers glinted from floor to ceiling. She followed, debating whether to make a run for it, but she didn’t think herself capable—her legs felt numb. He popped the latch on one of the drawers near the center and rolled it open as she stepped to the other side.

The body was not draped in a sheet as she'd always done in her morgue—Jason Mercer was nude in all of his gray-corpse glory, mouth ajar, flaccid penis lying against his pubic hair. A Y-shaped incision glared from his chest, dark and angry.

She could feel Ronan's eyes on her as she studied the corpse—at least, she pretended to study it. All she'd wanted was five seconds alone with the body, enough time to open the cell. Now... she couldn't.

Why was Ronan even letting her do this? Was he trying to figure out what she wanted? Was she a suspect? Should she cry? Act traumatized by the fact that she'd seen Jason die at her feet?

"You're shaking," he said.

"I'm cold."

Ronan blinked. Then he shrugged out of his suit jacket and, with a practiced flick of his wrist, stepped around, wrapping it over her shoulders. It smelled like sandalwood.

"You're not assessing anyone for restorative work," he whispered into her hair, and the heat of him made her heart clench—panic or attraction, she couldn't tell. Maybe both. "How about we take a drive, and you can level with me?"

She nodded, mute. She'd been ready to break out the waterworks, sob that she just wanted to see his face—this man she wasn't supposed to know—hoping he'd buy trauma or closure as an excuse. But it appeared he wasn't even going to ask her why she'd come, at least not in front of the medical examiner.

Ronan slid the drawer closed, then headed for the hallway with a backward wave. "Thanks, Ortega!"

“Right on, Detective!”

The walk up the hallway was cold and quick—past another set of bustling exam rooms. None of the people within them looked over as they marched by. And this was not the way she’d come in. Where were they going?

A good rule-following cop wouldn’t leave with her at all—he’d make her sit in an interrogation room. A dirty cop... well, his motivations would be much more complicated.

She forced a breath into too-tight lungs as they turned the corner. The next hallway ended abruptly at a wide freight elevator. Ah, he was taking her out the back way—keeping her from the bullpen. She’d been nervous as hell when she’d walked through the main doors, past all those cops to the elevator, but no one had glanced her way. Until Ortega.

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Ronan stepped inside, then hit the button to hold it for her. She paused for a moment—once more weighing her chances of escape on foot—then stepped in after him.

“Why didn’t you tell him?” she asked when the door closed.

He didn’t have to ask who. “One good turn deserves another.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Goddamn it, no.”

His eyebrows hit his hairline.

This wasn’t the right way to go about it, but pent-up adrenaline was racing through her body like lightning. And she had to know why—this didn’t make sense.

But her behavior didn’t make sense either. She’d all but convinced herself to run the second she had her money and had found herself at the police station anyway.

“It wasn’t illegal for you to be in that club,” she said to him now. “There are no city mandates that say cops have special rules—I looked it up. You didn’t do anything wrong. But what I just did, lying to the medical examiner to get into the morgue... it’s egregious. Lying for me could upend your career. You stayed outside my motel room last night when I’m quite sure your skeptical partner would not approve. And you’ve been coming into that club for so long, always watching me?—”

“Why am I stalking you? Is that your question?”

Juliette frowned. Why did he sound ashamed? She was the one who'd stripped down and finger fucked herself to orgasm while he watched. At the thought of that, blood pulsed low in her belly, her nerve endings sparking.

"I never thought you were stalking me," she said, voice hushed, though they were the only ones here. Yeah, she'd assumed him a voyeur, and once she realized he was a cop, she'd thought him dangerous in a more general sense. But she had never felt any threat directed at her.

The elevator binged open.

The garage was dim compared to the brilliant white lights of the morgue. Juliette squinted, trying to force her eyes to adjust.

"Is your car?—"

He gestured. "It's in the front."

She'd been right—he'd taken her out the back way to keep her from the prying eyes of the other officers. He wanted to... protect her.

Or keep me for himself—all to himself.

Her mouth went dry. But she followed him from the parking lot and into the jaundiced afternoon.

"Pretty car," she said when he popped the locks on a navy-blue Volvo—shiny. The smell of leather was strong inside. "I didn't... notice so much last night."

"It's functional," he said, climbing into the driver's seat. The engine purred to life.

“Cars usually are, I guess...” But she stiffened when her eyes locked on a stooped gray-haired figure pushing his way through the front doors.

“We had to let him go,” Ronan said when he clocked where she was looking. “We don’t have anything on him.”

As if realizing he was being watched, Waylon’s head snapped their way. His angry eyes lit on hers. They narrowed. But Ronan maneuvered the car through the lot, past her furious boss, and out onto the main road.

“Do you know who... hurt that man?” she forced out.

Without the phone to verify that Jason hadn’t been talking to Daniel, she could only hope that they had another suspect, someone with a reason to kill him.

Please let this be about something else—anything but me.

“I should probably ask you the same thing.”

She swallowed hard. “I... no. I wish I did.”

“His cell phone was at the library earlier today,” he said calmly. “And a few hours later, you were in my morgue. I don’t believe in coincidence.”

The silence stretched, her fists clenched so hard that her fingernails dug divots into her palms—she had no idea what to say, what might help her dig herself out of this hole.

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Ronan eased them onto the freeway, late-afternoon sun painting long shadows across the asphalt and turning the bumpers of the other cars into a sea of sparkling metal. The shadows felt longer still when he took an exit, but she was too tense to notice what the road sign said. Either way, she was stuck. This man could put her in jail any time he wanted. But for some reason, he didn't seem to want to.

Was that good? Or very bad?

“Do I have to check the library cameras?” he said finally, eyes still on the road. “I have Mercer’s call logs on their way from the phone company. Whatever you’re trying to find on that cell, it’s only a matter of time before I have it. And you’re riding shotgun in my car, without handcuffs—play deputy for me. We can help each other here, Jenny.”

That’s not my name. She’d never wanted to hear her real name on someone’s lips so badly. “Deputy, huh?”

He cut his eyes her way, half a smile, then back to the road. “My partner thinks you were a distraction.”

She blinked. “A distraction? What does that even mean?”

“That you kissed Mercer so someone else could sneak up behind him and stab him in the back.”

Her jaw dropped. That was the second time he’d mentioned that theory—definitely a bad sign—but Ronan didn’t seem to notice that she’d stopped breathing. He was busy

maneuvering the car onto a two-lane road, maple trees flaring red on either side, the culverts overrun with Queen Anne's Lace, the grass gone to seed.

She cleared her throat and managed, "Are you actually suggesting that I conspired to kill a man? That my big plan was to let him kiss me, wait for someone else to stab him, and hope that no one noticed?"

Did he really think she had a reason to kill Jason? She did... if he was working for Daniel. But motive or not, she hadn't killed him, and she'd be damned if she went down for it.

"You could have conspired to kill him—I don't think you did. I know you went out with him the night before, but one bad date isn't enough reason to murder someone in cold blood."

Bile rose in her gorge. "I didn't kill Jason—I didn't have anyone else kill him either. I didn't tell you I knew him because I didn't want to be a suspect. But I guess I'm a suspect now anyway."

"So you stole his phone... why?"

She took a deep breath, trying to steady her heart. She couldn't use erasing her own number as an excuse—she didn't have a cell, and he'd know it soon enough. And she certainly couldn't tell him the truth.

"I'm not positive, but I think Jason took a photo of us at the bar. I didn't want the police to find it."

"I see." The words were heavy with skepticism, as they should be—who'd break into the morgue for a single, innocent snapshot?

Ronan pressed harder on the gas.

“I wish I could help, I really do,” she said softly. “But we both know there’s nothing to go on. I saw that room—it was clean. And if you had a better suspect, you wouldn’t have dragged Waylon in.” She fiddled with a thread on her sweater, knotting it before it unraveled. It was too close to the feeling in her head right now—unraveling.

“But Waylon is an asshole,” she went on. “He should be locked up. If not for this, for other things.”

He glanced her way, eyes sharp. “You’re suggesting a frame job? To a cop?”

Her heart spasmed. “No, I mean... I’m just saying that he’s a dick.” Nice save, idiot.

But Ronan didn’t look angry. “Do you have evidence that he should be locked away? Have you ever seen him do anything illegal?”

“Not exactly... but there’s something wrong with him, and you know it the same way I do. You watch him, too.” Actually... “Is he the reason you’ve been coming to the club?” That thought definitely stung.

Ronan hooked a right but didn’t answer. He eased them through a narrow alley between a meat processing plant and... an abandoned milk-bottling factory? No streetlights out here—it’d be pitch-black once night fell.

The air shivered from her lungs. “Where are we going?”

“I want you to feel safe.”

“So, you’re taking me to the middle of nowhere?”

Ronan finally cut the wheel hard left and tapped the car into park. “I didn’t bring you out here to be alone with you. I brought you out here so you’d feel safe from whoever it is you’re so fucking scared of. Because despite what you just said, I know that person isn’t Waylon. And I’m damn sure you’re not scared of me.”

His steel-blue gaze bored into hers, melting her insides. “You wouldn’t strip naked for a man you’re terrified of... would you?”

Her heart fluttered—butterflies in her chest. Butterflies between her legs. Butterflies everywhere.

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I am special, a little voice whispered in her head. I am. She knew better than to listen to it, but was it so wrong to want to believe it? Was it so wrong to want one fleeting thing for herself in all these years of misery?

The fluttering in her chest only intensified as the seconds ticked past, his gaze still locked on hers, his clear-eyed sincerity making hope flicker in her chest. But if she let that flicker burst into flame, she couldn't trust herself to make the right decisions.

And her mother would pay the price. She'd already gone to the morgue, the stupidest thing she could have done, because she'd wanted so badly to stay. Because of him, a dirty cop she hardly even knew.

"You're running from someone," he said. "You're here under an assumed name?—"

"I'm not?—"

He put up a hand. "I don't give a shit about that. What matters right now is that I'm on your side. I want to protect you."

"So, I'm just a dumb girl who can't fend for herself?" The words were defensive, reactionary, but he was right—she'd already tried to save herself. She was breathing, so she'd technically succeeded, but it was arguable whether her current situation could really be called "success" or even "living." And she certainly didn't feel safe... not unless she was with him.

"I don't think you're dumb," he said, gravel in his throat. "And I don't judge you for the line of work you've chosen. But I also don't want you to vanish in the middle of

the night because you thought you'd fare better alone."

"I don't have enough money to leave until Waylon pays me, anyway." She dragged her eyes from his.

His gaze was sincere, kind, but eventually, it would edge toward pity. And she didn't want to see that.

For a moment, all was silent, Juliette studying her clasped hands, Ronan studying her—she could sense his gaze in the fine hairs on the back of her neck.

Finally, Ronan cleared his throat. "Is the person you're running from the one who killed Mercer?"

"I don't know." Her lip quivered, and she ground her teeth to steady it. "I really hope not." Shut up, Juliette! Shut the fuck up!

"Have you seen this person lately?"

She shook her head, eyes locked on her hands—knuckles white from clenching.

"Who is he? An ex?"

"I can't tell you."

"Yes, you can—you have to. I can protect you. You can even stay in my guest room while we investigate. He wouldn't expect that, and Hawthorn Ridge is a good distance from?"

She shook her head hard enough to make her ears ring. "No. I can't. You'd be in danger, and if he wanted to kill me, he'd have done it already."

But when she met his eyes once more, it felt as if he was looking into her soul—seeing something more than what she was in that stupid tank top, more than she was in a sweater and jeans. The wrapping didn't matter. Her scars didn't matter. He thought she was beautiful. Maybe she could believe that, too, if she looked at his face long enough.

“You don't have to worry about me,” he said.

Her eyes filled. “He's insane, Ronan. He once hid in my trunk when I went to a work dinner, spying through a hole in the backseat. If someone else had gotten into that car, anyone he didn't approve of, if I'd said the wrong thing... he would have shot them dead.”

“You know that because he told you? Or because he killed someone else?”

Both. But she'd already said too much. Her lip was trembling uncontrollably now.

“I don't want you to die.”

He raised his hand to her face. It was not sexual, just a sincere gesture of assistance, but the heat of his fingertips bled down through her chest.

“I'm a detective. You're safe with me. You're definitely safe here, out in the middle of nowhere, without a single prying eye—without cameras.”

“Whether he can see me or not, he probably knows where I am. I don't even have a cell phone because I don't want him to be able to track me. Anywhere I go... he has contingency plans. Places he can hide. Unless he wants to be found, you won't see him coming.”

“And what would make him want to be found?”

Her eyes burned. “Me. I’m the only one he’d risk showing his face to. He’s not threatened by me, but honestly, it feels more like... an addiction. An obsession. He feeds on my fear like a leech.”

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She closed her stinging eyes, unable to look at him any longer. “Don’t you understand?” she whispered. “I’ll never be safe with you—with anyone. And you’ll never be safe with me.”

He ran his thumb along her cheekbone—wiping away a tear, prompting her to open her eyes once more.

“That’s a risk I’m willing to take.” He smiled, so confident, so fucking gorgeous.

That was all the motivation she needed to crush her mouth against his.

Chapter 13

Ronan

Her lips against his own made his thoughts short-circuit, but the little voice came through to his ears easily enough.

What are you doing, Ronan? What are you doing?

She was a witness—that alone should have given him pause. But no part of her heat against his skin felt wrong. He’d wanted her from the moment he laid eyes on her and every moment since. It might end badly, might cost him his job, but the joy blazing in his heart couldn’t be wrong, could it?

Fuck protocol. Fuck this case. All that mattered was her.

The heat of her was intoxicating, the musky-sweet smell of her flesh, the clean lemon scent of her hair. The softness of her lips, the hardness of her shoulder against his arm as she shifted forward, slipping her hand between his legs, moaning into his mouth when she felt his dick, stiff and ready.

He was a man who'd learned to trust his gut, saved more lives than he could count by relying on his instincts, and right now, every cell in his body was screaming yes. Was there anything more beautiful in this fleeting life than those shared moments, completely and utterly immersed in someone else?

He wasn't sure—it had never happened to him before. But it felt right, even necessary. This feeling was something he'd always wanted but never had: honest emotion, free from pretense.

Unless she wants something from you, Paddy's voice whispered in his brain. Maybe she wants you on her side so you'll protect her.

But Jenny didn't need to earn his protection—she already had it. He'd been caught in her orbit for months, unable to pull himself free, every glance, every dream, dragging him further under.

The evening sunlight glinted off the hood of his car and painted her face in a hazy yellow that accentuated her high cheekbones and made her eyes shine with lust. He drew his fingers down the side of her face and to the hollow of her throat. Feeling her heartbeat against his thumb. Fast—so fast.

“Are you nervous?”

“No.” She released his groin and tugged the top button on his shirt instead.

When it came free, she moved on to the next, baring his flesh all the way to his belt.

Jenny leaned her upper body across the console to unbuckle his pants, tearing the zipper free. He shivered as she buried her head in his lap, slipping his cock between her lips.

For a moment, he just moaned, letting her have her way with him, the pressure so intense that his eyes watered as she bobbed her head up and down. Her tongue massaged his shaft, flicking against the tip before she sucked him back into her throat.

“Jesus,” he moaned. He resisted the urge to tangle his fingers in her hair—she clearly didn’t need his guidance. “You’re fucking amazing.”

She dragged her tongue from the base of his shaft up past the tip, then lifted her face. “Do you want to fuck me, Detective?”

“Is that what you want, Deputy?” It was weird to say deputy like that, but he didn’t know her real name—it wasn’t Jenny. And he didn’t want to use the name she’d adopted out of fear. Not now.

His cock twitched, fingers itching to grab her, to fuck that pretty mouth of hers. Instead, he remained still—restrained. Her eyes were hooded with naked desire, breath coming sharp and fast, but he needed to hear her say it.

He brushed the hair from her forehead. “I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life. But I need to know that this is what you want. I’m not going to use my role as a detective in some bullshit power play. This is your decision.” His dick twitched again like it was begging her to say yes. It was—oh, it was.

When she spoke, her voice was low. “In this car, with you... it’s the only place I’ve felt safe in years.”

He trailed his thumb over her cheekbone, searching her face for signs of uncertainty. He saw none. “I’m not sure that’s a reason to fuck me. No matter what happens here, I’ll still protect you.”

Her eyes glistened, and she angled her mouth down, planted a kiss on his thumb. “It’s not about that. It’s... I mean, logically, I know I’m not safe. But you make me believe that I’ll be okay. Except...” She gripped his cock in her fist, working him up and down, drawing a moan from his belly. A rush of heat exploded in his veins.

“Except?” he gasped out.

Her eyes cut left. “Maybe we should move to the backseat.”

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He shook his head. “I have a better idea.”

He pulled his hand from her cheek, she dropped his cock, and the absence of her irritated his flesh as if they were magnets being pulled together. But he forced himself from the driver’s seat, yanking off his shirt, kicking his pants to the dirt as he walked around to her side and threw open the door.

She blinked at him as she took his hand, letting him pull her from the car and into the setting sun.

The moment she was on her feet, he snatched her to him, crushing his body against hers. Their mouths found each other, teeth and tongues, heat and need, and a passion he’d never known. Of all the women he’d been with, none of them had needed him, not really. They’d wanted his money. They’d wanted his body. But they didn’t know him, had no desire to peel back his defenses and look at what was underneath.

Jenny did—he felt it in the way she returned his intensity, her fingers talons in his hair, her ankle hooked around his hip, cementing his body against hers in a desperate dance. She’d already taken her sneakers off—comfy-looking things with wide rubber soles. Her jeans were already unbuttoned, too, and he shifted back slightly to slide his hand down the front of her pants, shoving the zipper down with his knuckle until his middle finger found the slippery opening between her legs.

“Fuck,” she breathed out. “I’ve never been this wet.”

“I can make you wetter,” he whispered into her open mouth. “Just give me a chance, Deputy.”

She laughed, but he could feel the tension in her shoulders. He brushed his lips against her cheek, then looked into her hazel eyes, rings of amber made orange by the sunlight.

“Let me know if you want me to slow down,” he said, slipping his finger in and out of her slick cunt. “I’ll do absolutely anything it takes to make you feel good. And if you need me to stop?—”

“I don’t want you to stop.” As if to prove it, she pulsed her hips against his hand. “It’s just...” She gestured to her sweater, but he knew what she was really pointing to: the scars.

His chest clenched—sorrow for whatever she’d been through, rage that someone had hurt her. “Let’s take this off,” he said, stroking the soft cotton over her shoulder, the fingers of his other hand still working her hot, slippery center.

“Maybe we should leave it on,” she said, averting her gaze—looking down. “It’s one thing to see them across a dark parking lot, but I might... gross you out up close.”

Fucking hell. “Never,” he said, cupping her chin in his hand, and when she raised her eyes to his, he went on, “Not in a million years. I want to see your skin. Your tight muscles. That warm, wet pussy.” He slipped a second finger inside her, massaging her G-spot.

She gasped but made no move to take off her sweater.

Ronan pulled his hand from her pants. He dropped to his knees and slipped her jeans and underwear down her hips, baring her shaved cunt, her juices glistening in the sunlight. He lifted each ankle to remove the garment, then planted a chaste kiss on the mound between her thighs.

She watched him as he spread her lower lips with his thumbs.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he whispered. Then he dipped his tongue into her opening and ran her wetness up over the hood of her clit.

She moaned out, “Just so you know... I have an IUD. And I haven’t had sex in seven years.”

He raised his face, staring into her eyes. “Oh, you poor thing. That’s far too long.” To emphasize the point, he drew his teeth to her clit, nipping gently, making her moan louder. She ran her fingers through his hair, but instead of relaxing into the pleasure, she tugged, pulling his gaze back to hers.

“What about you?” she asked.

Oh, right. “It’s been a year. And I get tested for STDs every six months working in law enforcement.”

And because it was a habit—his mother had taken them to get tested every year starting in high school. It had surely been a necessary habit in her youth, too.

Ronan lifted the lower hem of her sweater and trailed his lips from one hip to the other. “You’re so fucking beautiful,” he repeated.

When her abdominal muscles relaxed, he drew the sweater and his mouth higher up over her belly button.

She did not resist when he rose to his feet, tugging the sweater up over her bra, pressing his lips to every inch of newly bared flesh. When he reached her nipples, she raised her arms, giving him permission.

Ronan whipped the shirt up and off like a bandage, and when she laid her hands against her chest to cover herself, he captured her mouth with his and reached behind her to unhook her bra. Tugging it off her shoulders. Gently, gently, gently, until she dropped her arms.

He stepped back. Jenny stood before him, sun shimmering against her naked skin, her lip trapped between her teeth, her eyes locked on his. Waiting for his reaction. Waiting to see the disgust in his face.

He raised his thumb to the place where her ribs met. She hissed an inhale as he dragged his fingers over the scar—bigger than he'd realized. A dark, shiny maroon that edged between her breasts, hitched a left at her clavicle, deepened over her heart, and branched like lightning to her shoulder.

Two wounds? No. He studied the lighter scar between her breasts. These weren't done with one stroke of a blade. Three?

“He tied me up for a week after I rented a place for my mother out of state. This was after he managed to secure guardianship by gaslighting her into believing... Whatever, it doesn't matter. I used a fake name, but he still found out.”

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That was quite a feat. Was the guy a hacker? Was he just really good at surveillance? But he pushed the thoughts aside as she went on.

“He’d come in, ask me questions about whether I intended to leave him—cut me more if he thought I was lying.” Her voice shook. “He said he’d make me so ugly that no one else would ever want me.”

His heart twisted—breaking for her because he knew exactly what happened when a psychopath got inside your brain. But he managed, “He failed.” Let me show you how glorious you are.

She whined when he brushed his lips against the healed wound, the muscles in her back tightening. He slid his thumb against her shoulder blade, flicking his tongue out along the edge of the scar. When the muscles in her back relaxed, he moved his mouth higher, repeating the pattern until he’d traced every inch of it with his lips, his tongue.

He brought his mouth to her throat. “I want to see all of you spread out in that setting sun, Beauty. Let me touch every inch of your gorgeous body. Let me taste you.”

She hissed an inhale—she was barely breathing. “I thought I was your deputy.”

“Not right now.” Maybe not ever again. “Beauty” was... right. He brought his lips to hers.

She melted into him, flesh on flesh.

He shifted them to the front of the car and leaned her back against the hood. Ronan stood there for a moment, admiring her—nipples hard, her knees bent against the front grill, baring her glistening pussy. Inviting him in.

He slipped a finger inside her, then drew the wetness to her right breast, watching her face as he smeared that sweet juice over her nipple.

“Tell me what you like, Beauty. Do you like this?”

She arched her back in response, lip trapped between her teeth once more but not nervous this time. The look in her eyes was pure lust.

She nodded.

He used his other hand to tease her left nipple the same way, then pulled that hand back down between her legs, pressing one knee then the other wide. Splaying her out.

He used his index and middle to tug the hood of her clit up, exposing that most sensitive nub of flesh. Then he lowered his mouth and flicked the tip of his tongue against it.

She groaned louder. Her eyes slipped closed.

He repeated the act, lapping at her, pausing to nip at that pink bud when her breath hitched. He rotated his knuckle against the front wall of her pussy, and when he hit the sweet spot, her back arched, and she moaned so loud that he chuckled.

“That’s it, eh?”

“Yes. Jesus Christ, yes,” she gasped. “How’d you know? I mean, do you just know your way around every woman’s body?”

“You told me,” he murmured, never slowing his pace, keeping her hood pulled back to expose that tender pearl of sensitive tissue. “Last night in the window... I paid attention. Imagined what it would be like if it was me between your legs. Imagined how you’d taste, how you’d feel around my cock. How you’d sound when you came, whether you’d whisper my name or scream it.”

He grabbed her hips and tugged her lower, the head of his dick aimed at her sopping-wet opening.

“Do you want me, Beauty?” he asked.

He rotated his hips, teasing her with the head of his cock, slipping it over her clit, then down between her pussy lips.

“Shut up and fuck me,” she hissed.

Ronan smiled and edged inside her, feeling her muscles clench around him. Her clit was swollen against his thumb, and he toyed with it as he inched inside—slowly, slowly, slowly. She raised her hands to her nipples, and he bent double to lap at the left one.

He’d intended to go slow, to make her beg, to make her come with his fingers before he properly fucked her, but that tight, pulsing wetness was driving him insane. It was pure instinct to thrust his hips, burying himself in her depths, and then his hands were on her ass, squeezing, raising her just-so while he slammed into her again and again and again. Her long, loud moaning filled his ears, the sight of her pinching her own nipples nearly enough to make him come.

She opened her eyes suddenly and pushed herself onto her elbows. Ronan lowered her ass to the hood and reached for her, pulling her to him, never slowing the pulsing of his hips. His arms slipped around her back. Their lips pressed together, tongues

flicking out to find each other.

“I wish I’d known you before,” she said into his mouth. “Before I was... his.”

“You’ll never belong to anyone again,” he said.

But he was lying, and he knew it. He’d never been a possessive man, but he was claiming her all the same.

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“I know. But I wish...” She threw her head back, a tiny whispered shriek emanating from her lips.

Mine, he thought. Mine. But only if she’d have him. Only if he could be hers, too.

And he was. Oh, god, he was.

He dragged his left hand over her spine to her ass, supporting her as he fucked her, pounding into that tight wet cunt for all he was worth.

“Suck on my nipples,” she hissed, leaning back in his arms, offering up her gorgeous, bouncing tits. “Hard.”

Holy shit. He lowered his face, massaging that sweet, puckered flesh with his tongue as he accelerated his pace. Then he sucked her nipple into his mouth as hard as he could.

She screamed, a sound of pure ecstasy. Oh, Beauty. Yes. When he sucked again, nipping the tip, she cried out more loudly—“Ronan, oh god, Ronan!”—and then she was shuddering, arching, her body a writhing mass of tight muscles.

They all released at once. The intense pulsing of her pussy around his dick drove him over the edge, but he did not slow his pace. He fucked her harder, the deep contractions of her cunt milking every drop from his body.

He stood there, locked inside her until the pulsing stopped. She wrapped her arms around him, their eyes on one another, their breath mingling between them in the

sultry evening.

What were they going to do now? He didn't know. He wasn't sure he cared. He was drunk on this woman in a way that whiskey had never been able to accomplish.

He was lost.

He was hers.

Hopefully, she'd be his savior and not his downfall.

Chapter 14

Juliette

Juliette closed the motel room door and leaned the back of her head against it. The room felt more homey tonight... peaceful in a way it hadn't in months past. Even the police scanner, with its steady blinking lights, the low hum of crackling voices, was somehow soothing.

Juliette sighed and flipped the lock, tossing the thought aside the same way she was kicking off her sneakers. She couldn't stay here, and she knew it. Her night with the detective would make things more complicated, more dangerous—too risky. But for now, every inch of her skin was warm with the memory of his mouth.

They'd watched the sunset bleed across the sky from the hood of the car, him sitting behind her, gently stroking her arms, planting chaste kisses along her throat and shoulder until she'd asked him to drive her home. The longer she'd stayed, the more her brain tried to convince her that her future was here—with him. And she'd already made far too many mistakes.

Juliette slipped Jason's cell from her back pocket.

Every cop she'd ever known would have asked for that damn phone, but Ronan hadn't—she hadn't offered. And she definitely hadn't told him who her ex was.

But she had told him about her scar. That had been an egregious error. If Daniel ever found out... her mother would die far sooner than she should. Or worse. He could always do worse than death.

Her scar prickled—angry. So fucking stupid.

That was precisely the reason she needed to leave the city—why she'd told him he needed to go home tonight instead of watching the motel or, riskier, staying in her room. She'd already let her guard down too much.

Earlier today, she'd been pondering the notion that Ronan was a dirty cop. Then she'd gone to the morgue. She'd spilled her secrets anyway... because he told her she was pretty.

Beautiful, he'd said. Beautiful.

Her chest clenched. It was only a matter of time before she let her real name slip. And the second she did, she was fucked. She had faked her own death. She'd tried to frame a man for murder, lit his house on fire. And she was wanted for worse—for things she couldn't even think about. No detective could ignore all of that, and under the current circumstances, her past crimes would look even more damning.

In the crime-fighting business, they'd call that "a pattern of behavior." She was a deviant. The justice system believed that she belonged in jail.

Ronan would too.

Juliette glanced down at the dark cell phone, then climbed onto the bed, stretching up to slide it beneath a ceiling tile. Maybe she should just give it to Ronan. It was no good to her, and he clearly knew that she had it—keeping it just made her look more guilty.

At least if she turned it in, she could say she picked it up in a state of shock. It wouldn't explain away her being in the morgue—Ronan clearly knew why she'd been there. But she also didn't think he'd tell anyone else.

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But why exactly was he protecting her? That was the part that didn't make sense. She didn't think it was about sex—she was the one who'd come onto him... twice. And if he had real feelings for her, he'd have spoken to her before he found her standing over Jason's corpse.

Juliette carefully replaced the ceiling tile and stepped off the bed. Even without the cell, Ronan would soon have access to all the information on it. All the numbers Jason had called. One way or another, the case would soon be over. And she'd be gone. Tonight's sunset might be the last time she ever felt safe.

Her eyes burned, but the hairs on her neck were prickling, and it took her a moment to figure out why—headlights? Juliette frowned and stepped to the window. She paused with her fingers on the rough plaid curtain, then peeled it back just enough to peek beyond the panes.

A yellow Taurus sat near the front of the lot. It had been there yesterday, too, a car seat in the back—she'd seen the mother bundling her toddler into the motel. But the dark car in the back of the lot was new. As she watched, the headlights flicked off.

She smiled. Was Ronan standing guard outside her motel room again? She'd give his freaky ass another show. But... no, she'd watched him leave. And why were all the hairs along her spine standing on end? Usually, when she saw Ronan, she felt calm, safe even, but?—

That's not him. The realization smashed into her guts like a wrecking ball. That definitely wasn't his car. Yes, it was dark blue, but the vehicle shape was wrong—the headlights weren't right either. Maybe a Buick, and... a super old one at that.

Juliette's heart squeezed, ribs tightening around her lungs. Maybe they were waiting for someone. Maybe they'd leave. Maybe this had nothing to do with her. Why the hell did I tell Ronan to go home?

Seconds ticked by as if time was made of molasses. Her blood was too hot, the tips of her ears burning. She glanced at the bedside clock. Five minutes passed. Ten.

No one went out to meet the car. The driver did not exit, the barest hint of streetlight shining off his glasses, bulky rings glinting when he shot his arm out the window. Smoking, as if he planned to stay awhile.

Juliette backed away from the window on leaden feet. What should she do? The phone in the motel room was broken, and Jason's was useless without the passcode. And even if she had a phone, what if she was wrong? What if Ronan thought she was crazy?

No, that wasn't what she was worried about... what if she was right?

Juliette slipped her sneakers on and tied them. She snatched her switchblade from the bedside drawer. Then she made her way across the room and through the door at the back.

The bathrooms in each room were located on the far side of the building, which meant there was a second way out. That was always a requirement when she was scoping out places to stay. You never knew when you might need an escape hatch.

The shower curtain was held up by a spring-loaded tension rod—a lesser weapon than the blade, but she'd rather not get too close if she could help it. And she couldn't just run away. She needed to know for sure—needed to know whether he was actually here for her.

The window latch squeaked. But the glass slid aside easily.

Juliette hauled herself through and dropped down into the dark shadows behind the building.

Thorns tore at her ankles, snagging her shoelaces as she ducked beneath each window along the back side of the motel, the curtain rod clutched in her fist. She turned left at the corner, another full row of bathroom windows leading to the end of the U-shaped building. When she emerged on the far side, she'd be steps from the shadowed woods that ran behind the parking lot. He might not see her before it was too late.

That was what she was counting on.

The end of the motel approached. Juliette peered around the corner. The man in the car was barely visible, but she could see his glasses reflecting the streetlight's glare—still facing her room.

Juliette rushed from the motel and into the trees, picking her way over dewberry and thicket, head ducked low. The man did not move as she approached. Rust coated his rear wheel. The back bumper was held on with duct tape. How had she thought for even a second that this was Ronan?

Because it was pitch black here. And... she'd wanted it to be Ronan and not some sleazeball hiding in the dark.

Juliette ducked behind the taillights. Smoke wafted from the open window, one arm flicking out to ash a cigarette. He had a compass tattooed on his wrist, the directions replaced by shapes: a star for north, a diamond for east, three triangles for south, waves inside a circle for the west.

Now, Juliette. Go now.

Juliette leaped from the shadows and jammed one side of the curtain rod into his throat—what if he shoots you? But it was too late for second-guessing.

The man's eyes widened. He dropped his cigarette to the asphalt, hands up—stunned. “What the fuck! Get away from me, you crazy bitch!” His neck was bright pink, scraped by the rusty rod.

Juliette pressed the curtain rod harder against his Adam's apple. He wasn't her ex—Daniel rarely did his own stalking—but was he here on Daniel's orders?

“Are you following me?” she demanded, twisting the metal.

He shook his head in a stunted jerky motion and raised one hand to this throat, but his movements were lethargic, wary. He was clearly worried she'd ram the rusty metal into his neck, damage his trachea. Maybe kill him.

“Are you kidding?” he croaked.

No weapons in his lap. None on the seat. The console was wide open, revealing a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes and a family-sized sack of Starburst.

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She loosened her grip, pulling the rod from the open window, but she kept it at the ready, held against the top of the window frame. “Why are you sitting back here?”

“Who are you, the fucking meter maid?” When she just stared, the curtain rod poised for action, he sighed.

“I’m... jonesing,” the man said. “Okay? I was supposed to meet someone here, get a fix. But this ain’t worth it. I can drive downtown.”

He kept his left hand raised in supplication and reached out to crank the ignition with his right. She didn’t stop him. Juliette stood in the shadows, staring after the car as it bumped over the curb, clanking like it had dropped something vital, then squealed onto the main road.

She scanned the lot, then the trees, the metal rod still clutched in her fist. All was quiet. Not a single motel curtain twitched—no one had seen her assault a man in the back of the lot. And now that the supposed threat had vanished, it felt as if she’d imagined the whole ordeal.

Was she crazy?

Or was she right?

The problem was, she couldn’t tell. She’d never been able to tell until it was too late.

No one could make a woman feel insane like Daniel fucking Graves.

Chapter 15

Ronan

She stood in the window, gloriously naked, the pale globes of her breasts shining in the moonlight, her scar a lightning bolt where she'd stitched herself back together—where she'd healed.

“Do you like what you see, Ronan?” She drew a finger over her clavicle and between her breasts, down toward her naval.

“Yes,” he whispered.

He was standing on the motel sidewalk on the opposite side of the glass, but somehow, he could hear her just fine.

“What do you want me to do?”

Oh god, he wanted to see her lips part when she came, wanted to see her sink her fingers into that sopping-wet pussy. He wanted to see her nipples harden into stiff points. Wanted to see her... pleased. Yes, he wanted to please her himself, but the biggest thing was that she was happy—no. Ecstatic. That was what he wanted. To see her delirious with pleasure.

He'd do anything she wanted him to do if only she'd let him remain here in her orbit, her beautiful hazel eyes fixed on him.

“Touch yourself,” he said. “Show me how you like it.”

She licked her lips, tracing her palm along her abdomen, fingers coming to rest between her legs. But he knew what she liked now, didn't he?

“Spread your pussy lips. Open up wide for me.”

She shifted her feet apart, then lowered her other hand to meet the first. She splayed her inner lips, that shiny pink drawing him in, his dick aching against his lower belly—yearning to be buried in her heat.

Her focus dropped to his cock, one eyebrow raised—waiting for him to touch himself. He grabbed his dick in his fist, imagining that it was her lips wrapped around his shaft. Imagining her hot slickness as he thrust himself deep into her cunt.

Jenny smiled, rubbing her clit with frantic little movements of her index finger. She closed her eyes, breath coming faster, his fist moving faster, too, pulling him higher, higher, higher. Her mouth opened in a silent wail, her back arching. And then he was coming with her, spraying his load all over the glass?—

Ronan’s eyes snapped open, sweat prickling on his forehead, his sheets sticking to his skin. Damn. The release from the night before apparently hadn’t been enough. He could fuck her a hundred times, and he’d still want more.

He’d never have enough of her.

Ronan kicked the covers hard enough to send them to the floor. He marched to the shower on shaky legs. He should be thinking about more than sex—she was clearly terrified, and he was worried about banging her? If he needed proof that he was an asshole, surely this was it.

But he had spent last night thinking about more than sex, which had to count for something. He’d hated leaving her at the motel, but she’d told him to go home, and he got the distinct impression that to stay would have shut her down for good. Still, he’d sent a few patrols by for good measure. And once he’d dropped her off, his brain started working overtime.

Ortega's words had whispered the loudest: This young woman wanted to assess his injuries for, quote, "restorative work." Ronan might expect a layman to say they were there to assess Mercer's injuries, but restorative work was a less common phrase for those outside the business of death. For Jennifer Crandall to use those words...

Had she researched what to say, or did she have experience in forensics? Maybe she'd once worked at a funeral home?

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The name on her driver's license was a dead end. As he'd suspected, Jennifer Crandall was an alias—a fake. He'd sifted through photos of licensed funeral home directors and morgue personnel from New York and the surrounding states, but none of those photos matched her either. He had been watching her tend bar for months, had dreamed about her, made love to her in the setting sun, and he had no idea who she really was.

More critically, he had no idea who she was afraid of or whether that man was actually in the area. Whether he'd killed Mercer.

Ronan squirted shampoo into his palm, letting his brain work.

An ex—that was clear. Did she think Mercer was working for her ex? Did she believe that her ex had gone after Mercer because she'd had dinner with him? The man she was scared of was clearly violent, extraordinarily dangerous—that scar was proof enough.

Ronan washed the suds from his head, lathered his skin. Damnit. If she would just give him the guy's name, he could protect her more effectively. They could arrest him. By withholding his identity, she was shielding the man she claimed to be trying to escape. Hell, just showing that wound to the authorities should have been enough to lock him away. So what the fuck was she hiding?

He slapped the shower off and snatched a towel from the rod. He didn't let his brother get away with this shit—why was he letting her hold so much back? Because he was hot for her?

His cell buzzed as he was slipping into his pants. Ronan grabbed it, hoping it was Jenny... but no. Paddy. Duh—she didn't even have a phone.

He balanced the cell against his shoulder. "What's up? We get anything new from forensics?"

Fingerprints would be great. DNA would be better, provided their perp was in the system.

"Nope. But Bobby called. Anything you want to tell me?"

The tech—the one who'd been dealing with the cell phone. The cell that was almost certainly in Jenny's possession.

"Yeah, I got his email after you went to cut Waylon loose. I haven't had time to look into it yet. I figured I'd head over to the library this morning on my way in."

"Better late than never, I guess." But he didn't sound convinced. "Why didn't you go over there yesterday? Or at least wait for me to release Waylon? I didn't expect you to be gone when I got back."

"I figured I'd visit the library and run by the club again this morning." That wasn't exactly an answer to his question, but Ronan pressed on, "And I was thinking... there are no security cameras in the back alley, presumably, so no one can prove Waylon's abusing underage girls. But there are traffic cams on the adjacent street corner. Not a clear shot of the club's back door, but it should show anyone leaving the alley."

"Unless our perp went out the other side," Paddy said.

"The other side of that alley dead-ends at a giant brick wall topped with barbed wire. Online fulfillment warehouses take no risks when it comes to mingling with the

riffraff.”

“I’m not even going to ask how you know that.”

But he could—it had nothing to do with Ronan frequenting the club. There had been plenty of news stories about the two-mile-long building that cut entire neighborhoods off from one another, starving the now-closed restaurants of hungry diners.

“Listen, Ronan... the chief called me this morning. Asked who you were with last night—who you drove from the station. Whether we had another witness.”

Shit. He shoved his feet into his shoes. “What’d you tell him?”

“That we’re following a few leads, and that there is no shortage of witnesses from that club.”

Ronan frowned, tugging at his shoelaces. “Why’s he worried about the Mercer case, anyway? A strip club stabbing isn’t exactly high profile.”

“He might think that his detective is a little too involved with the crime scene... or the strippers.”

Ronan paused. “And why would he think a thing like that?”

A sigh. “He doesn’t. Okay? And I don’t know why he’s asking about it. I mean, I did ask around about Mercer being an informant, so it might have raised a red flag. Want me to meet you at the library?”

“No, I’ve got it.”

Silence. “We need to talk, Ronan. Seriously. You can’t be running around with our

witness. The defense attorney will have a field day. Neither of us wants a murderer to walk free because you couldn't keep it in your pants."

Ronan grabbed his jacket and shrugged into it. "She doesn't know anything—didn't see anything. And yeah, I met with her, but I was just asking questions. Making sure we covered every base."

All the bases. A home run even.

He kicked his bedroom door shut behind him and marched up the hall.

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“I’m sure you were covering something,” Paddy said, then let out another long, low sigh. “I’ll see you at the station. Bring actual coffee this time, eh?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Ronan shoved the cell into his pocket and reached for his front door. The knob clicked—louder than usual?

But Ronan didn’t have time to ponder that.

The explosion roared in his ears, heat blistering his chest. He had the sensation of flying through the air, surrounded by a million fireflies of orange flame.

Then the world went black.

Chapter 16

Juliette

The bus smelled like old feet and sour apples, but it was mostly empty. Good news—she probably would have leaped out of her skin if someone brushed against her arm or sat down beside her.

The man in that car had nothing to do with Daniel. The man in the car was just meeting his dealer. She had replayed the mantra all night long, whispering it aloud as she watched the quiet parking lot.

The stranger she'd accosted had driven into the night and had not returned; no one had come looking for him. The man with the compass on his arm could have called his dealer to meet elsewhere—the dealer could have been a no-show, too, which was why compass-man had still been sitting alone when she'd gone out with her curtain rod.

But she didn't believe that. Not anymore.

She'd stopped believing herself insane the moment the call had crackled through the police scanner. No, they hadn't said Ronan's name, but he'd told her he lived on Hawthorn Ridge—"explosive device at officer's residence" and "code nine," shorthand for emergencies.

Ronan had been hurt. And what were the odds that a gas leak or some other accident coincidentally occurred mere hours after he'd dropped her off?

She stepped off the bus and into the fresh air, mind racing, her senses on high alert. The dappled walk outside the hospital made her mouth go dry, though she saw no one lurking beneath the trees.

She'd gone to a bar with Jason Mercer—the next day, he'd been in a body bag. And Ronan Duffy had fucked her senseless on the hood of his car. She didn't believe that Daniel knew the specifics, but he clearly suspected enough to try to kill the man she loved.

Loved? Did she love him? From the way she was shaking, trying not to vomit as she made her way up the walk and through the hospital's main entrance... yeah. She did. Shit.

I have to get out of here. Now. Not later. While she still had the will to do so. She'd go back to the club tonight and get her money, run before things got any worse. But

she couldn't go without warning Ronan. Plus... she needed to see him one last time. She needed to know that he'd survive.

Juliette stopped at the front desk. "Detective Ronan Duffy?"

"Are you family?"

She held up the bouquet, the cellophane wrapping slick in her sweaty palm. She'd stolen them from a roadside vendor on her way to the bus stop. She wasn't proud of that, but she needed a good reason to be here—a disguise in case they didn't wave her through. Hopefully, this would go better than yesterday when she'd posed as a funeral home employee.

"Ah," the nurse said, blinking at the flowers. She aimed an index finger up the left hallway. "Elevators are that way. Third floor, room 301."

How had the nurse known that right off the bat? Was this a trap?

Juliette's hackles rose, and she whipped around. Nurses bustled past in their scrubs. An orderly pushed a tall cart full of silver trays. Half a dozen patients, one in a wheelchair, one leaning heavily on a cane, another dragging a spindly IV stand. None of them looked at her.

Juliette nodded her thanks and hustled to the elevator bay, ducking inside with the crowd, pressing her back against the corner of the lift. Barely room to move, let alone breathe, but at least no one could stab her in the back.

The slow creep to the third floor seemed to take forever, but 301 was the first door on her right. Juliette scanned the hallway, said a silent prayer—please let him be okay—then ducked into the room.

The door clicked shut behind her, but she barely heard it. Relief flooded her veins. White gauze covered the front of Ronan's left shoulder, but his bare chest appeared uninjured save a few bruises and some small, round cigarette-type burns. She couldn't see his legs, and his face was turned toward the window, but... it seemed he'd gotten off easy.

Ronan appeared to register her presence because he turned her way.

"Hi," she said softly, almost shyly, as she started toward the bed. Was that even her voice?

But Ronan's eyes narrowed. "What are you doing here?"

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The words hit her like a punch to the gut. “I... have a police scanner. I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Not what I meant, but that does explain a lot.”

For a moment, all she could do was stare. Certainly not the greeting she’d expected, but the tightness in his eyes might be pain—irritability after the explosion.

Juliette licked her lips, her tongue dry. “I think this is about me. There was a strange man in the motel parking lot last night,” she forced out.

“What a coincidence. There was a strange man at my house this morning, trying to blow me up.”

The acid in his tone made her breath catch. He was a completely different man than he’d been the night before. Switching on a dime... the way Daniel used to.

Just say what you came here to say, Juliette. Then run. It’s obvious that he doesn’t want you anymore—he already got what he was after.

At least this would make leaving easier.

“Listen, Ronan?—”

“I’m done listening.” He gestured to his body, the bandages on his shoulder. “I’m in a hospital bed. And I’ll be out of here later today, so whoever tried to kill me can try again.” Not a shred of desire now, nothing to indicate that he thought her beautiful.

That savage hatred in his gaze... was for her.

He turned away, staring straight ahead as if he couldn't bear to look at her face.

Her chest heated—fury, yes, but a deeper hurt was gnashing its teeth in her guts. Betrayal. Sorrow.

Instead of letting her stinging eyes fill, she snapped, “Are you blaming me for that pathetic scratch? If so, suck it up.” He balked, and she closed the distance between them. “This isn't a coincidence, and neither was the man at my motel. He used to do this all the time, paying people to follow me and?—”

“These other people... were they arrested?” he said to his hands. “Did you call the police to report them? Did you even report that wound on your chest?”

Her scar throbbed, the air too thin. “I'm trying to protect the people I love. So, no. But do you really think that Jason stumbled into my life by accident?”

“So, what, he paid Mercer to date you, then killed him for it?”

“No, he paid him to follow me, but then we had dinner and?—”

Ronan rolled his eyes. “That makes no sense. And it's awfully convenient that you'd suddenly decide to tell me now.”

What the fuck is wrong with him? But the hollow pain in her chest felt more like grief than fury.

“I wasn't sure, okay? I really wasn't. Years of gaslighting... it messes with your brain, and after having relative peace for so long?—”

He snorted, and her blood boiled. Still refusing to meet her gaze.

“If I knew who to look for from the beginning, this never would have happened,” he growled. “You’ve been running around playing some sick game of cat and mouse and leaving me blind.”

“You don’t understand. I am the game. If he finds me, and I’m not suffering enough, he’ll do something to hurt me worse. I honestly hoped he’d get tired of it eventually—tired of me. Then I could go get my mother and disappear.”

“Your mother...” His voice trailed off, eyes softening.

Her chest softened in kind. Could she blame him for not understanding when she’d held so much back?

“The second place I ran was this little town in Oklahoma,” she croaked out. “I got a good job as a secretary under an assumed name. Two weeks later, someone slipped a note under my motel room door that my mom had fallen down the stairs.”

He frowned. “So... you work in strip clubs because it’s demeaning? Because it... placates him?”

“I used to tell myself I took those jobs to build my confidence, but I just wanted an excuse—a reason to feel less helpless. I don’t think I ever felt like I had a choice, and I understood that more clearly after Oklahoma. It is its own brand of torture, constantly being told you’re not pretty enough, not even good enough for a strip club. That I’m ugly, the same thing he always told me. And maybe I deserve a little punishment. I’ve done... terrible things.” Her back straightened. “But I don’t deserve this.”

She’d told Ronan enough for him to understand her position, her fear, and he was

torturing her, acting as if this was all her fault. Just like Daniel always had. And she'd be damned if she took that shit from Ronan, too.

In her time away from Daniel, it seemed she'd recovered just enough confidence to walk away from assholes.

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Ronan opened his mouth to reply, but she was already backing off. “To think I believed that you had goodness in you—that you were more than just another voyeur with a Pretty Woman fetish.”

He finally turned her way, the softness in his eyes gone. “You lied to me. Forced me to cover for you with the medical examiner and my goddamn boss?—”

“You chose to cover for me. Even now, I have no idea why you did it.”

Ronan shrugged, then winced, brought a hand to his injured shoulder. “Yeah, well, I don’t know either.” He said it softly, deliberately, but her breath caught in her throat. There was power in his voice. Danger. Threat.

“I knew you were running from someone,” he went on. “I couldn’t figure out why you were hiding his identity. But it’s obvious now that you’re making a deliberate choice. And with the way you’re covering for him, it feels a lot more likely that you’re an accomplice. My partner thinks so, too.” His nostrils flared.

The air left her lungs, her eyes on fire. “Ronan, you don’t get it, he’s?—”

He put up a hand. “I don’t want to know who he is.”

Her jaw dropped. “All this about me not opening up to you, and now you don’t want his name? Now you don’t give a shit?”

“I gave a shit when I could have done something about it. Now, I’d like to live, Jenny. Whatever you’re involved in?—”

“What I’m involved in?”

He turned to face the window once more. “Go home, Jenny.”

She dropped the flowers; the dull smack when they hit the ground was louder than it should have been. She stood there for another moment, her eyes burning with unshed tears, her chest wrapped in jagged thorns. Then, with a final glance at the back of Ronan’s head, she walked out.

Goodbye, she thought. And fuck you.

Men were all the same.

She’d been stupid to think otherwise.

Chapter 17

Ronan

Ronan listened to the hospital room door open and close with his heart in his throat. He hated himself for hurting her. Hated himself more when he’d seen the tears in her eyes.

What he’d just done was extreme, a tactic he wished he could have explained to her beforehand—he hadn’t expected her to show up in his hospital room. But he thought she’d understand... in the end.

The killer knew more than he should. He’d realized that when he woke up on the foyer floor.

Ronan owned a number of homes, all through holding companies—none of them

were in his name. This precaution was imperative because he used those homes as safe houses for women running from abusive relationships. Shonda lived in one with Ellen, both former dancers at The Velvet Cage. A dancer from another club lived in a different house while she got her finances in order.

Domestic abusers were a particular brand of vicious, so he'd let Charles install "bug detectors" in each garage. No one could track his car without him knowing. There were also cameras on the roads, sending up alerts if anyone followed him or sat too long outside any of his homes.

Yet, despite dozens of safeguards, the killer knew where he lived—not just that he owned the place, but that this specific house was where Ronan would be. They'd already confirmed there were no explosives at the other locations.

And the only time he'd said his street aloud had been in his own car—with Jenny.

He was certain she hadn't told anyone. Despite how he'd treated her, he knew she wouldn't sell him out to her ex. There were no bugs or trackers on his vehicle—security would've flagged them. No one had followed him home, and Charles had secretly outfitted Paddy's car with cameras. If someone had tailed Paddy to his place, they'd know. And Jenny didn't even have a phone to track.

So how the hell did he know? Was it Jason's cell? Bugs hidden in Jenny's clothing—a button, maybe? Sneaking into the club locker room wouldn't be hard. And if the killer had that level of access...

Ronan kept his gaze on his hands, trying to avoid scanning the corners, the television, the metal nightstand. Was this hospital room bugged? The idea was a stretch, but no precaution seemed far-fetched right now. This guy had resources to spare, following her for so long. Money. And if he'd killed Mercer, he was in the area.

Ronan didn't believe her ex outsourced homicide. Yes, there were the inherent risks that a hired gun might get caught and talk, but Ronan had seen that scar on Jenny's chest. This asshole might pay for stalkers, but he liked to do the wet work himself.

Ronan swung his feet to the floor, his lungs aching, guilt threatening to eat through the lining of his stomach. If this psycho believed Ronan and Jenny were together, they were both in more danger. If the killer thought Ronan suspected her, she was all the safer. He'd even called her by her fake name to demonstrate that she hadn't told him who she really was. That she was still playing this maniac's game.

Ronan grabbed his singed jeans from the corner, ignoring the faint hint of sulfur when he shook them out. He needed to make the killer overconfident, lull him into thinking his plans were still in motion. He couldn't send private security to follow Jenny, or the killer would know Ronan's accusations were a ruse.

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But if she was a suspect, police surveillance would make sense... if Paddy played along. He could only hope he'd stopped her from saying too much. The guy surely had an endgame in case he was outed. Perhaps one that involved her mother.

Jenny's tear-filled eyes flashed in his head. Forgive me, Beauty, he thought. Forgive me.

"Did you fuck with your security cameras, brother?"

Ronan turned, chest still bare, but at least he was wearing pants as Paddy slipped through the door and pulled it closed behind him. Shit. Why was everyone coming to his hospital room?

"Can we do this after I take a shower?" Ronan stretched his back, shoulder twinging. He winced. Jenny was right—he needed to suck it up.

"Nah, I think we need to do this now," Paddy said, lips tight, thick arms crossed over his chest. "Your fancy security company didn't catch anything. The bomb squad's been out there all morning. They said someone had to be there personally to rig the device, but all we've got on your feed is a blank door. If you tampered with it to hide that you took that girl home... I kinda need to know."

That girl. He was asking about Jenny. "I didn't take her to my house, Paddy. I took her to a motel well outside the city to question her. No one could possibly have seen us."

Paddy's eyes widened.

He didn't want to lie to his partner, but he needed information. If the killer was as smart as Jenny seemed to believe, he'd likely try to ruin Ronan's reputation since his assassination plot had failed. Provided the guy didn't just haul off and try to kill him again, which story would come back to bite him? Would it be that he'd covered for her with Ortega, which would indicate that Jenny herself was bugged? Or that he'd taken a witness to a seedy motel, which suggested a device on Paddy? If it was both, the hospital room was suspect, and he'd look more deeply into hospital personnel for leads. Once they were out of here, he could explain... but right now, he had to appear natural.

"So... my cameras?"

Paddy blinked, but his eyes had hardened. "If it wasn't you, I guess someone hacked them."

Ronan frowned. "No, that's impossible. Charles is very careful to ensure that our data can't be hacked from the outside."

Nothing was fully hack-proof. But Ronan couldn't say that out loud.

"Well, Charles is right to push for safeguards—they kept you alive. The only reason you got out with a couple scrapes is because of the steel-reinforced doors and trimmings that were part of his security plan."

Ronan nodded, albeit reluctantly. "And if his other safeguards are as good as he says... Maybe someone inside the security company was in on it. Let's start there."

"It's bigger than that," Paddy said. "Because guess who else doesn't have a single grainy video of our killer?"

Ronan cocked his head. "You... got the feeds back from the traffic cameras behind

the club?”

“Bingo. Whoever messed with your cameras also gained access to the traffic cams. It’s not just the security company we need to worry about. I think our guy?—”

Fuck. “Stop, Paddy. You’re giving me a headache.”

If Ronan was right and this guy was some tech genius hacking into their shit, he couldn’t know that they suspected. They needed to make sure their perp didn’t notice the noose tightening until his feet were swinging.

Paddy’s brow furrowed—what do you know, Ronan?

Ronan shook his head, then cut his eyes at the ceiling. Paddy’s gaze flicked from him to the corners of the room, then back.

“I think we need to look harder at Jennifer Crandall,” Ronan said, hoping his partner would understand what he was doing. Not all the way, but enough to get them out of there.

Paddy’s arms dropped to his sides. “I agree,” he said slowly. “It’s not a coincidence that you were attacked right after Mercer. And the only connection between you two is that girl. We’ll pick her up for questioning, run her prints.”

Ronan’s mouth went dry. Paddy was playing his role perfectly, but his heart had stopped at the mention of fingerprints.

The killer didn’t seem to mind that Jenny was a suspect—the way he’d set up Mercer’s death made it appear that he wanted her to be a suspect. Why else would he kill the man in that club?

But that also meant that he didn't mind if they knew who she was. Which meant he didn't care if they knew who he was. And no one thought they were that far above the law.

Why hadn't he seen this before?

Jenny hadn't hidden the killer's identity to protect him—her real identity was more threatening to her than to their killer. What did he have on her? It had to be significant for her to deem it safer to play this monster's game rather than come forward. If they ran her prints... would they have to lock her up for something else?

Luckily, Paddy didn't wait for him to reply.

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“Just because this girl likes you well enough to go to some motel doesn’t mean you’re not wrong. And I’m not going down with you. Do you understand me? Get your shit together.” The words might have been for the sake of anyone listening, but they sure felt real as Paddy turned and headed for the exit. He paused at the door. “Get better too. I don’t want to go to another funeral this year.”

Me either, Ronan thought, watching his partner march into the hall. Especially if he was the one in the coffin.

Chapter 18

Ronan

Ronan nodded to the unmarked on the street outside the club. He’d expected some resistance to that request, but Chief Sam Rourke had only sniffed, then made the call. Strange. Even if Rourke thought Jenny was an accomplice—that they were hoping she’d lead them to the killer—surveillance wasn’t usually the first plan of attack. But he didn’t have the luxury of questioning the chief’s motives.

He didn’t think the killer would come here, despite his request for officers on-site. Everyone at The Velvet Cage would be on high alert, and the police presence would make it less likely that her ex would show. They’d also learned through their interrogations of the dancers that paranoid-pedophile Waylon routinely swept the main floor for cameras.

They knew their suspect was adept at accessing security feeds, so Ronan was safer speaking to her in a place that had none. Especially since any bug on Jenny herself

would be harder to hide on her skimpy work costume. The music would distort an auditory feed, too, even if their perp had bugged every chair in the place.

Ronan grabbed the door handle. Early evening, but music was already booming from inside. He ducked into the club and winced as he made his way up the short hallway, through the beaded curtain, and into the main room. While he wasn't severely injured, just a few scrapes and burns, he had smashed his head against the floor when he'd fallen. He wasn't concussed, but it was enough to make every pulsing downbeat stab into his temples.

Ronan paused just inside the entry. Brittany was behind the bar today, dressed in her usual pink outfit. When she saw him, she raised a hand and waved.

Ronan returned the gesture, but his lungs were too small. He'd been certain that Jenny would come here tonight—she'd told him she needed money from Waylon. Had she not arrived yet? Or had she already come and gone?

Brittany was still watching him from behind the bar. He took a step toward her, and she grinned more broadly, then glanced at the stage. Her smile fell. Was that... guilt in her eyes?

Ronan stopped and followed her gaze.

The room went black at the edges. The music vanished as if it had been set to mute. All he could hear was the throbbing of his own heart in his ears, the whooshing of blood in his head. All he could see was her.

Jenny's graceful fingers were wrapped around the silver pole, hips swaying side to side in the dim neon lights. Eyes on the ceiling. Her other hand rested between her breasts. She was still wearing that silvery skirt and her tank top despite being center stage.

What the fuck? Why was she on the stage at all?

His hackles rose, and he turned slowly to see Waylon standing beside the swinging door, shoulder against the jamb. Waylon didn't notice Ronan. The club owner was watching the stage, too, with a leer on his face that made Ronan want to choke the shit out of him. Smug, but also intensely mean, brows knit together, lips curled downward in a way that could only be rage.

Ronan knew without asking what had happened: this was punishment. Waylon had seen her with Ronan at the station. He probably assumed Jenny was the one who'd accused him of arguing with the deceased. No wonder Brittany looked so damn guilty.

Ronan refocused on the stage. Jenny still hadn't registered his presence—didn't seem to notice any of them. Her eyes were staring off into the distance as if she was pretending to be anywhere but here.

Ronan's mouth filled with iron. His vision went red. The world came rushing back, music blaring, his head throbbing. He marched across the room and stopped in front of the stage. "What are you doing?"

Jenny blinked. She finally looked down.

From behind him came another voice, "Hey buddy, I'm trying to watch the show."

Ronan ignored the man and offered his hand, reaching across the stage toward the pole. "Get down. This shit is over. If he's holding your check hostage, I'll make that bastard pay up without you doing... this."

Her nostrils flared, but she let go of the pole and crouched so they were eye-to-eye. "Did you really come here to tell me that I can't work at my fucking job?"

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it. And this isn’t your job, not anymore.” He didn’t care what he had to do. She was never coming back here. Never.

A tap on his shoulder.

Ronan turned to see a tall man with Navy tattoos and a neck that said I haven’t worn a sweater in ten years glaring at him.

“I told you, I’m trying to watch the show.”

Ronan squared his shoulders. “You will sit the fuck down, or I swear to god, I’ll shoot you in the fucking head.”

The man’s gaze dropped to Ronan’s hip—registered his weapon. He raised his hands and retreated, sidling backward without taking his eyes from Ronan’s trigger finger.

Not the right thing to say, not the right thing to do, especially for a cop, but his self-control had all but dissolved. It was taking every ounce of restraint not to run across the room and grab Waylon by the balls.

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Waylon pushed himself off the doorway, eyes narrowed at the scene. Irritated that she wasn't doing what he'd told her. What he'd made her do.

"Come home with me," Ronan said, turning back to Jenny, reaching for her hand once more.

"You basically tell me to fuck off when I try to tell you who killed?—"

"I want a dance," he said loudly enough that Brittany froze behind the bar.

The Navy man had vanished. Maybe calling the police from the parking lot... but probably not.

"No dances for cops," Waylon snapped.

Ronan pulled his billfold from his pocket. He had no idea how much was there, didn't bother to count it. He unclipped the entire wad and tossed it Waylon's way.

Hundred dollar bills fluttered through the air, skittering along the floor. A skinny man who'd been sitting in the back scrambled out of his chair and made his way forward. So did another dancer, a new girl with long, siren-red hair and acne.

Brittany's eyes widened. She started around the bar, but Waylon waved her back and set to work, snatching up the bills. Not a cent of that would find its way to the women who worked here. But Ronan didn't care, not now.

Ronan once more offered Jenny a hand to help her off the stage and onto the main

floor, but she slapped him away. He raised his palms—okay, do it yourself.

“You’re guilty too,” Waylon called, one knee on the floor, cash fisted in both hands. “Lots of witnesses here. If I go down, you go down.”

Ah, yes. The fictional Officer Conduct Act. Even if that law had been real, he had every reason to be here. He was working a case, actively investigating. And this place was a cesspool. He’d make it his life’s work to ensure that Waylon paid for every crime he’d ever committed.

“I’ll take my chances,” Ronan told him, his gaze on Jenny’s face as she finally climbed off the stage. “Some things are worth the risk.”

Chapter 19

Juliette

There was no champagne room here, just the three rows of seats that surrounded the stage, staggered to allow for maximum visibility. Ronan marched to a chair in the corner at the end of the long back row that she’d never seen used for anything but lap dances.

Anger prickled in her guts, yet beneath it simmered the memory of his touch, his whispered promises that now felt like lies. Did he actually think she’d dance for him after what happened at the hospital?

Fucking asshole.

But it felt better back here in the corner—away from the stage, all those prying eyes, Waylon leering at her after telling her to keep the shirt on. Ronan might be a jerk, but she couldn’t forget the appreciation she’d seen in his gaze just yesterday, the way

he'd called her Beauty. She needed him to erase Waylon's disgust from her memory—and that other man, who'd only been trying to watch Desire on the next pole.

“Did he make you do this because he saw you at the station?” Ronan asked, sinking into the chair.

But his hands were moving beneath the seat, along the back, around the tiny side table. What was he looking for? Unbeknownst to Waylon, she and Shonda had secured pepper spray to every fifth seat in the club, but there wasn't a canister on this chair—most men wanted to sit closer to the stage. This was the first time the seat had been used in months.

She stepped in front of him, hands on her hips. “Well, you just know everything, don't you?”

“You don't have to dance for me.”

“No shit,” she spat out.

A half smile, but his eyes stayed sad. “We can walk out together, if you'd like. But speaking here might be prudent—no bugs. No cameras. Unlike in that hospital room.”

She blinked. Wait... he thought the hospital room was bugged? “That's why you were such a dick?” She dropped her arms to her sides, but the trepidation in her chest remained.

Was he lying? He might just be working the case—working her.

Unease shimmered between her shoulder blades, and she turned to see Waylon

standing dead center in the room now, his sharp gaze on her. Making sure she did the job she was being paid for—the job he'd been paid for. Her jaw clenched.

She turned back and put her hands on Ronan's shoulders. His eyes widened when she bent at the waist, her lips brushing his ear.

“Why would you stay in that hospital room if you thought it was bugged?” she asked.

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“You don’t have to?—”

“Standing around like a goon instead of dancing would be a hell of a lot more suspicious.” She rotated her hips just above his knees, tossing her blonde hair back over her shoulder. “You said we could talk. Now talk.”

“Fair enough,” he said, and the croak in his voice was enough to make her heart beat faster.

“I wasn’t anticipating that anyone would show up at the hospital,” he said, voice huskier than normal. “And I can’t prove it was bugged, just a strong... a strong... suspicion.” The last word came out as a whisper. “I want him to think he still has the upper hand. You’re safer if he doesn’t know you’re working with me.”

He closed his eyes a beat longer than a blink, and she hiked her skirt and lowered herself fully into his lap. Her breath caught. He was hard as fuck, his dick pressing against her through their clothes. He could be lying about a lot of things, but a man’s cock always told the truth.

This isn’t about him making you feel pretty, Juliette. This is about survival.

Ronan’s fingernails dug into the armrests. Part of her wanted to push him away, to fight, to slap him for the way he’d treated her, but his nearness was unraveling her defenses. And a bugged hospital room was a pretty good explanation.

You’re weak, Juliette. He’s making you weak.

“Tell about the man in the motel parking lot.”

Juliette shifted her hips side to side, dragging her panties across his groin, relishing the way his dick twitched at her attention. And it wasn't weakness to tell him what she'd tried to earlier, was it?

“The guy in the lot had a tattoo on his wrist,” she said. “A compass with shapes where the directions should be. He said he was there to score drugs, but no dealer ever showed up.”

“Hopefully, there's a vein of truth to that—if he's engaged in illegal activities, he'll have more motivation to help us.” He tilted his head slightly, his piercing blue gaze unreadable.

Was that regret on his face—or calculation? Ronan closed his eyes again, a sharp inhale hissing through his nose when she thrust her pelvis against him.

He's faking. It's an act.

But it didn't feel fake. It felt like they were the only ones in the room. And the steady, delirious throb at the apex of her thighs was as real as it got.

“Whoever is after you knows where I live,” he rasped. “He gained access to my security cameras. Is he a tech guy? A hacker?”

She continued to move as seductively as she could manage, her eyes locked on his, memories clawing their way to the surface: Ronan's hands cupping her face, his voice low and steady as he promised to protect her. But she needed to protect him, too. If she told him who Daniel was, he'd kill them and her mother. Daniel wouldn't put his game of cat and mouse above his need to get rid of witnesses.

Juliette swallowed hard, channeling her anxiety into her movements. It didn't make sense for her to feel anything except panic, but the raw desire in his gaze was electrifying her blood, her heart racing at a breakneck pace.

Maybe I really am crazy. Maybe Daniel finally broke me. And why is Ronan staring at me like that?

It was all too much. She stood and turned, bending at the waist, still swaying to the beat. But it didn't ease the pressure in her chest. She could imagine Ronan behind her, his hungry gaze on her skin, wanting her with such intensity that it made her feel like the most powerful person in the world—for once, more powerful than Daniel. For once, in control.

Her eyes burned, but then she felt his fingertips on her ass, a gentle but possessive squeeze that sent a bolt of lightning surging through her veins, igniting every nerve ending. Her legs went weak, the ache in her core insistent and desperate, her lungs too small.

"No touching!" Waylon practically screamed, and Ronan yanked his hand back to the armrest.

"Sorry," he gasped out—for her benefit, not for Waylon's. "I couldn't... help it."

Because I'm in charge. Juliette righted herself and sank into his lap.

"You have no reason to trust me," he said, voice shaking. "I don't know who this guy is. I don't know where to find him. But I know he has something on you, or you wouldn't have kept his name a secret."

Shit. Why couldn't he have been terrible at his job?

“What did you do?” he went on. “Try to kill him? Hurt someone else, even accidentally? It has to be something worth jail time.”

She swallowed hard—she was supposed to be dancing, but her muscles had stalled. Juliette forced herself to unfreeze and leaned against him, the back of her head on his good shoulder. His dick was still hard on her ass, twitching every time she shifted her weight, but just being wrapped in his warmth almost felt like a hug.

She really needed a hug.

“I... just wanted to escape,” she whispered.

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The confession spilled out before she could stop it. What are you doing, Juliette? You know better than to trust him!

But this had nothing to do with trust—she was forcing herself into a corner. With a few sentences, she'd make sure she had no choice but to leave. She'd be gone before he could get an arrest warrant, before he could bring her in for questioning.

If a choice to stay with him existed, she'd choose wrong—she'd get them both killed. The warmth in her chest, the way she desperately wanted him to hold her, was proof enough of that.

“I left the gas on, lit the house on fire while he was sleeping. Which is probably why he blew up your place.”

He said nothing but raised his hand to the front of her shoulder, dragging his fingers down her chest.

She waited for Waylon to shout at him again, but when she opened her eyes, Waylon was gone. Probably in the office, counting Ronan's money.

“You must have been terrified,” Ronan said against her throat, his lips so soft that it took everything in her power not to kiss him.

Insane. This is insane.

His hands on her body, his rock-hard dick on her hip, should have felt demeaning in a club where women were supposed to be subservient. But it didn't feel wrong. If she

wanted him to stop, he'd stop. If she wanted to make him hard, she could. It felt like she was taking some hidden piece of herself back—something that had been stolen from her.

“He hurt you,” Ronan said now, pinching her right nipple and sending tendrils of lightning through her belly, coalescing between her legs in a heady, delicious throbbing. “I’ll make sure that he gets what’s coming to him.”

“I don’t want you to die, too.” Her voice cracked.

“What’s your real name?”

“Jenny.”

He dropped his hand from her breast. “Please?—”

“He’ll get away with it—he always does. I’ve moved nine times already. I should have left the night Jason was killed.”

A pause. He drew his lips to her ear. “Why didn’t you?”

I was busy dancing for you in that window. I wanted something that I could never have.

“I thought running would make me look more suspicious than I already did.”

This time, the pause was longer. She was hyperaware of his hand on the armrest, the other at his side. His heat along her spine.

“I know you feel something for me. By holding his name back, you’re leaving me vulnerable to whatever he has planned next. Even if you run off again, it’s not like

he'll just leave me alone," Ronan said.

Her eyes stung, but she blinked back the tears. He didn't understand. The second he popped Daniel's name into the system, they were screwed.

"What else can you tell me?"

"He stabbed me in the back with a pair of gardening shears when I was working in the yard."

Of all the things she could have said, why the hell had she told him that? Maybe because she'd never said it aloud. Maybe she just wanted someone to know. To believe her.

His breath caught, and he moved his hand to the back side of her ribs. She sighed when he found the scar—one he'd missed yesterday. Then he drew his fingers lower, over the curve of her hip, and forward to her upper thigh. "Is that why he stabbed Mercer in the back? As a reminder?"

That hadn't occurred to her before, but... "Maybe. He likes games. But if you arrest him and he gets out of it, he'll kill my mother. I've done everything I can think of to get him locked away. None of it has worked. This time will be no different."

"We can put your mom into protective custody."

"You can't. He'll find her."

"Jenny—"

"I said no. It's bad enough that I can't go back there—that I let him cut me off from the only family I have. I won't let her die for me."

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He wrapped his arms around her, cementing her body against his. “It must have been so hard to leave your mom behind,” he said into her hair. “I understand what it’s like to watch your mother held captive by a monster.”

The sincerity in his tone finally broke her, her heart sharp and brittle, as if it might shatter. She needed him to understand—needed someone to understand, just this once. Before she started this bullshit game all over again.

“Do you have a safe place I can stay tonight?” she asked.

The thought of letting him go home alone made her stomach turn. She’d be no match for Daniel herself, but she could keep an eye out. Scream in time for Ronan to pull his gun. Wishful thinking, surely, but it calmed the panic in her chest.

He swallowed hard, took a deep, shaky breath, and nodded.

Juliette pushed herself to standing, gooseflesh prickling along her suddenly chilly spine. “I have to go get my money. I’ll meet you back here.”

His eyes widened. “You don’t have to talk to Waylon. I’ll cover what he owes you.”

She shook her head. She would not take his charity. It felt too much like pity, and she needed no further blows to her self-esteem—thank you very fucking much.

But instead of telling him that, she said, “How do you have so much money? Are you a dirty cop, or what?”

“No, just an ordinary detective.” He chuckled, and when he spoke again, his voice was lower, one eyebrow cocked. “Do you want me to be dirty?”

The growl simmered deep in her core. Heat swarmed her insides.

“Yes,” she whispered.

Chapter 20

Ronan

“I thought your house blew up,” she said as he maneuvered the car up the long driveway toward the garage.

“Just the front door.” It was hard to keep his voice steady.

He hadn’t intended to be turned-on in that club, but just seeing her, feeling the heat between her legs... he’d lost control.

He’d calmed a bit after climbing into the car, mostly because Jenny seemed more subdued. Had she decided his behavior was unacceptable? Did she regret her own actions? Maybe she regretted telling him what she had or getting into his car at all. But he hoped not. Even now, the smell of her sweat in his sinuses, the memory of her gyrating in his lap, the touch of her lips on his ear, Jesus?—

“It doesn’t look blown up.” She squinted through the windshield.

Think about baseball. Basketball. Dead bodies in gutters. But his fingertips were itching with the urge to grab her, to yank her against him, to slide into her so deeply that she forgot what she was afraid of.

He swallowed hard. “Different house.”

Her current demeanor did not suggest she was in a similar state of mind. Dancing in the club had been a necessity, a response to Waylon’s glare—a job. This was reality. And with all she’d been through, he didn’t want to make the first move. He didn’t want to scare her off—she was already terrified enough.

“You have two houses?”

He had seven, half of them currently being used as long-term sanctuaries for women like Shonda, whose bruises had told him all he needed to know. Ronan shifted the car into park.

“It’s an investment property.”

Jenny frowned.

Huh. He’d initially believed the dirty cop statement was a joke, but now he wasn’t so sure. Did she really think he was on the take? Why that and not family money or the lottery? Then again, nothing said “dirty cop” like skulking around a low-rent strip club.

He expected more questions, was ready to clarify, but Jenny nodded and popped the door, heading for the porch as if that was all the explanation she needed. He let her lead the way while he scanned the surrounding area, raising his eyes to the camera situated beneath the eaves.

This home, like all the others, was equipped with top-notch security and reinforced with steel, something the perp had probably guessed by now since Ronan was still alive. The bomb squad had said the explosives should have killed him—would have without those reinforcements—which meant two things. One, he owed Charles his

life. And two, the explosion hadn't been a warning or a distraction—it had been a sincere attempt to get rid of him.

The killer would almost certainly try again. Unless Ronan got to him first.

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He stepped past her to unlock the door, then edged into the foyer, trying to ignore the subtle musk of her skin, the laundry soap she used. His mouth watered anyway.

Control yourself, asshole. She asked if it was safe, not whether you'd fuck her silly.

“Do you think anyone else...” she began.

“No. But I'll look around to be certain.”

Charles had sent his “best guys” to the house earlier to ensure that all was secure before Ronan's arrival. They'd also shot up firewalls at the security company and had a team of white-hat hackers trying to figure out how the guy had gotten into the system. He should probably call Charles for an update.

“You're really just a detective?” she said, following him up the shiny marble hall and into the sunken living room.

The home had a wide-open floor plan, which meant far fewer places to hide. No one lurked behind the end tables or beneath his waterfall dining table, and unless someone had climbed inside the oak cabinetry, the kitchen was clear. Just the marble island, plush area rugs, and modern art on the walls, pieces his brother didn't have space for. Charles said it was good to keep things like that in the family. Art and secrets—basically the same thing, right?

He could feel her eyes on him—watching, waiting for a response. “Yup. Just a lowly detective.” He glanced over his shoulder. “You sound like my brother.”

Her eyes widened. “That’s not what I meant, I?—”

He turned left, heading for the hall. “Don’t worry, I know. And yes, I have family money. I don’t like to talk about it... or about them. I think you know what that’s like, even if our reasons are different. There’s a spare bedroom here.”

The change of topic was abrupt, but hopefully, it’d serve to cut the family conversation short. He stepped through the first door on the right, peeking into the attached bathroom, the closet, beneath the bed.

“You’re welcome to stay here if you’d like. The bathroom should be fully stocked with shampoo and toothpaste and whatnot.”

Jenny peered through the doorway into the bedroom, then met his gaze. “Can I see your room?”

He blinked—baseball, basketball, bodies. “You can see anything you want.”

Emphasis on the anything. He gestured up the hall, trying to ignore the pulse between his legs—how his pants were too tight.

The double doors to the master suite were at the end of the hallway. He could see the sitting area near the floor-to-ceiling windows from here and the sliding glass door—all bulletproof. The bed was on the left, along with the bathroom and a master closet that only held a few spare changes of clothes. Enough for when he needed a change of scenery but didn’t have time to vacation. No rest for the weary.

And cops were always weary.

He led her through the double doors. “Or... you can sleep here if you want. With or without me.” Please say “with me.”

He pushed that thought aside and headed for the open door that faced the bed. No one was hiding in the bathtub. No one lurked in the sauna. When he turned back to the bedroom, she was standing in the doorway, peering around at the white marble.

Ronan slipped past her into the bedroom once more, trying to ignore the way her jeans hugged her curves, the way her hair brushed his arm. The open, trusting way she was looking at him. How she turned to follow him with her eyes.

“All clear,” he said. “The shower’s obviously through here, if you want to?”

“Wash the debauchery off of me?” A wan smile crossed her face.

“Not exactly what I meant, but I can’t imagine that pole is especially sanitary. Not that people going into that club are worried about sanitary.”

She stepped toward him, her hazel eyes locked on his face. “What were you worried about all the times you came in there?”

“You.” No hesitation.

“Not just me though...” She cocked her head. “Do you know where Shonda is?”

Well, shit. But he nodded. He wouldn’t give Jenny an address—wouldn’t tell anyone for Shonda’s safety—but he didn’t think Jenny would push.

She swallowed hard and averted her gaze. “Are you... I mean, are you with her? The way you were with me?”

He blinked. “What? No.” When she looked back up, he went on, “I’m a one-woman guy. I don’t mess around. I’m alone more often than not. As for Shonda, I helped her find a way out of a dangerous situation. That’s all. I’ve never touched a single person

in that or any other club outside of you.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Any... other club?”

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“My mother used to work in a place like that. There are a lot of them around. A lot of people who need help.”

Jenny studied his face as if this were the first time she was seeing it. And god help him, he felt seen. She stepped nearer and laid a hand against his cheek. “You’re just about perfect, you know that?”

“No one’s perfect. But you’re as close?—”

“You don’t have to lie.” Her gaze darkened, hand dropping to her side. “I know what I am—I’m the only girl in that club who has to wear a shirt.”

“You’re the only one Waylon is threatened by.”

Jenny balked. “That doesn’t make any?—”

“You’re smarter than he is, and he knows it. Making you believe you’re less-than is the only way he has any control. Don’t give him that, Jenny.”

Her eyes filled. “Julie,” she whispered.

His heart thundered in his ears. He traced a finger down the side of her face. “Julie,” he said, testing it out. “It’s a beautiful name.”

Her lips twitched into a smile, but her eyes stayed glassy, tears on the verge of falling. She pulled back before they could, then started for the bathroom.

Ronan stared after her. Had he gone too far? Probably—he usually did.

“I’ll be in the kitchen. I’ll let you?—”

“Wait.” She turned back. “Will you... stay here? I don’t want to be alone.”

Oh. Right. “Of course. And I promise not to peek.”

She met his eyes. Then she peeled the sweater over her head and dropped it to the floor. The bra came next, breasts round and perfect, nipples already hard.

Ronan’s breath shuddered from his lungs. He took a step toward her, but she turned around, hooked her fingers into her belt loops, and bent at the waist, shimmying her jeans down her toned thighs. Baring her pussy from behind—pink and glistening. Already wet.

His mouth watered, his fingers burning with the need to touch her, his dick so hard he could feel the bite of the metal zipper against his shaft.

Julie righted herself. “I want you to peek,” she said without turning around.

Then she stepped through the wide-open door into the bathroom.

Ronan watched as she glided over the tile with that grace he’d first noticed in the club. Was he supposed to follow? But she hadn’t asked him to follow. She’d asked him to... peek.

He backed away and lowered himself to sit on the end of the bed, directly across from the bathroom door. Julie—he loved how the name sounded in his head, had loved the way it felt on his tongue. Loved more that she’d trusted him enough to share it.

Julie glanced back, making sure he was paying attention.

He was. He definitely was.

The bathtub was off to the right, situated in an alcove with wide skylights so you could watch the sunset while your fingers got wrinkly. There was a television on the wall, but he'd never used it. On the left side of the space was the sauna, fronted with a wooden door.

But the glassed-in shower was straight ahead.

Julie reached in to twist the knobs. The waterfall shower heads turned on, water hissing against the marble floor. She stood, nude, gorgeous, feeling for temperature, then stepped beneath the spray.

His dick throbbed as he watched the water flow over her skin. She reached for the shampoo, breasts swaying slightly as she washed her hair. Soap cascaded down her body, rivers of bubbles caressing all the places he wanted to touch.

He unzipped his pants, the buckle clanking as he kicked them aside. Tossed his shirt, too, ignoring the twinge from the gauze—the tape.

Julie met his eyes through the hazy shower door. She pinched her nipples with both hands.

Ronan took his dick in his fist as she slipped her fingertips down over her ribs, past her navel, to rest between her legs. The fog in the shower turned the hazy lines of her body into a tease, but he could tell she was spreading her sweet pussy for him. Practically begging to be fucked.

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Julie moaned, and lust spiked through his blood. He worked his cock up and down, up and down, but it was no match for the way her cunt would feel pulsing around his dick.

She pressed her nipples against the glass door—rosy, perfect. He wanted to see her pussy more clearly. Wanted to taste it.

He wanted to taste every inch of her.

He worked his dick harder, muscles tight with the need for release. Wondering when she'd come into the bedroom and put him out of his misery.

Chapter 21

Juliette

His shower was bigger than her entire motel room, the water warm, the smell of his soap delicious. But that wasn't what had sparked electricity in her lower belly, forced her to press her breasts against the glass in order to feel that pressure against her nipples.

She couldn't see him well through the foggy wall of the shower, just an amorphous shape on the bed. But she could see the movement as he worked his cock. The bright white of the bandage around his upper arm. She could feel his gaze as he traced the curves of her body, seeing all the hidden places that had felt so ugly until she'd met him. All the places she'd never imagined letting anyone else see.

He didn't only see them. He thought they were beautiful. He thought she was beautiful.

Juliette turned the shower off and stepped onto the mat. For a moment, she merely stared through the hazy air, watching him pump his dick in his fist. She grabbed a towel and dried herself gently, then dropped it to the ground.

She kept her gaze on his as she sauntered into the room—not walked. She didn't feel like she could walk. The intensity in his eyes made every step feel charged with lust. With need.

He dropped his hand as she approached, palms on the bed on either side of his hips. Fully erect, his thick, veiny shaft resting against the hair below his belly button.

She carefully lowered her hands to his shoulders, the same way she had in the club, her lips at his ear. “Do you want to fuck me?”

It was the second time she'd said that to him—the second time she'd said such a thing ever. Before Ronan, she'd never felt confident enough. But somehow, he made it feel okay, even right, to put those things into words. To ask for what she wanted.

“Jesus,” he said.

“That's not an answer,” she whispered. “Tell me.”

“Yes. God, yes, I want your gorgeous pussy wrapped around my dick. I want to tongue your clit and make you come. I want to fingerfuck your asshole—I want to take the way you teased yourself in that window to a whole new level.”

His words vibrated through her entire body. She swayed her hips, lowering herself into his lap, their noses touching. Without the layers of cloth between them, the heat

was more intense, tingles of pleasure lighting up her nerves.

He spread his fingers over her ass. His thick cock pressed against the apex of her thighs. She pulsed her hips, rubbing herself along his shaft, coating him with her wetness. He smelled of sandalwood. He smelled of sex.

Ronan slid his hands from her ass, up her spine, to the back of her head as he raised his mouth to hers. Their tongues tangled so fiercely that she felt as if she were being devoured.

She groaned, a low guttural cry in her chest.

Eat me, Ronan. Take me.

He broke their kiss, and Juliette pulled away and stood, but she didn't have time to speak—invite him to do all the dirty things he wanted. Ronan was already on his knees, his face buried in her pussy.

Juliette bucked her hips against his mouth. Ronan used his fingers to spread her wide, his tongue flicking out like that of a snake—fast and hungry.

She tangled her fingers in his thick, dark hair and threw her head back, face aimed at the ceiling. “Fuck. I love the way you eat my pussy.”

He moaned. His fingers found her opening. Juliette was shaking, her legs trembling so hard she thought she might fall, but that sensation went away when he pulled his lips from her cunt.

Juliette looked down in time to see him crawl behind her. Her heart launched into her throat.

Ronan pressed on her back just above her hips, gently, gently, and she obliged by bending at the waist, her elbows on the bed, ass in the air. He slipped his tongue into her sopping-wet opening, rolling her clit between his thumb and forefinger.

She sighed, a low hiss of pleasure, and he increased his pace, tonguing her slit, flicking frantically at the swollen nub between her legs with his thumb. Then Ronan pressed his tongue deep inside her pussy and ran it up, higher, higher between her ass cheeks.

She jolted, then moaned at this unfamiliar sensation but made no move to shift away. It was strange but... absolutely fucking incredible.

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Ronan pressed his finger into her pussy, keeping the pressure on her clit with his other hand, and went to town on her freshly washed back door. Every time his tongue hit that sensitive ring of muscle, she moaned louder until she was panting in tiny high-pitched bursts.

“I need you inside me,” she squeaked. “I want to come on your dick.”

“Oh, you will,” he chuckled, then flicked the tip of his tongue against her asshole, two fingers in her pussy, her clit rolling against his thumb.

Her muscles contracted. She pressed her face into the mattress and screamed, pussy throbbing, the waves forcing the air from her lungs. When the last wave collapsed on itself, she lifted her head and turned to look over her shoulder.

Ronan smiled. Then he slipped his fingers from inside her and stood, positioning the head of his cock at her opening.

“No,” she whispered, and he stopped short, eyes widening with worry.

She pushed herself to standing and turned to face him. “Let me fuck you the way I wanted to in that club,” she said.

The smile on his face was the most genuine she’d ever seen, his eyes hooded with lust, his meaning clear—I’ll let you do anything you want to me. And that only made it sexier.

He let her guide him backward, and when the mattress hit his knees, he sat down, his

hands on her bare ass.

“What did you want to do to me in that club?” she asked.

“I wanted to touch you,” he said.

She swayed her hips side to side, a sultry, intoxicating rhythm. “Show me.”

He drew his hands over her hips, tracing her ribs. When he reached the globes of her breasts, she arched her back, offering them to him. He leaned in and sucked her nipple between his teeth, biting down gently as he slid his other hand between her legs once more. Her wetness had slithered down her thighs—slick to the knees.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he moaned.

“Did you want to be inside me?”

“I always have. I wanted to fuck you from the moment I saw you.”

She turned her back on him, widening her stance. He planted his hands on her hips, guiding her as she eased herself down into his lap. The head of his dick slipped into her pussy from behind, and she thrust backward quickly, forcefully, taking every inch of him inside her.

He hissed a breath and grabbed her right nipple, holding her against his chest as she rotated her hips, fucking him harder, squealing when he found her clit with his fingers once more.

He met her rhythm thrust for thrust, the tip of his cock slamming into her cervix as she worked her body against his. But she wanted more.

She stopped and slid forward just enough for the head of his dick to emerge from her depths.

“Are you okay?” he asked, but she was already sliding backward again, this time with his dick aimed at her backdoor.

“I want you to come in my ass,” she said, shocked by the words. But they were absolutely true. She’d never let anyone touch her back there, but what Ronan had just done with his tongue awakened new fantasies she’d never known she had.

“I have lube,” he whispered through clenched teeth. “Night table. Want me to get it?”

“No. Don’t move.” Juliette’s legs shook as she snatched the bottle from the drawer. “Just so you know... I’ve never done this before,” she said as she passed it over.

“Don’t worry,” he said in that rasp that always made her insides melt. “I’ll be gentle with your virgin asshole. I’ll make it feel good.”

She waited, trembling, while he squirted the lube onto his cock. She slowly lowered herself to sit in his lap once more and slid back until the head of his dick pressed against that tender pucker of muscle.

Ronan shifted as if to take it slow, but she forced her hips backward. He grunted as the head of his cock popped beyond the outer ring, and she responded in kind, the sensation intense but delicious—so fucking full.

Juliette rocked harder against him, shaking with need, taking him deeper, deeper, a little at a time, squeaking out a protest when he pulled out. She heard the wet sound of the lube as he reapplied, but she was hungry for him—impatient. She wanted to be stuffed with his cock. She felt insane with desire, outside herself as if she had never been anything else but this sexual being, created for pleasure—for joy.

“You okay?” he asked, perhaps mistaking the tension in her shoulders for pain.

Instead of answering, she rammed herself backward, burying his cock deep inside her ass.

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The sensation was unlike anything she'd ever felt before, the intensity all-consuming.

"Fuck," he said against her shoulder. "You're so tight."

He thrust his hips gently, every minute shift so overwhelming that her vision went black. She could feel his palms, though, pressing against her thighs, widening her legs as he rotated his hips. His left hand found her clit. His right moved to her pussy. Two fingers, then three slid inside her cunt, deeper, deeper, his dick still working in her backdoor.

"God, you feel incredible. Do you like that?"

"Yes. Oh, fuck. I love it." Juliette shuddered, her head falling back against his shoulder. No more thoughts, no more worries, just his cock in her ass, his fingers flicking her clit, his knuckles working her G-spot.

"You're beautiful," he said against her neck. "You're so goddamn beautiful. And I'm the luckiest man in the world to be fucking you right now."

She could barely understand his words, let alone respond. Her brain was drowning in ecstasy, fierce pulses of pleasure ripping through her every time he drove his dick deeper into her ass, every time he thrust his fingers into her pussy. She was lost in a sea of raging sensations.

Juliette moaned, grunted, moaned again, then she heard a long, low sigh that she thought had come from her lips... but she couldn't be sure. Every nerve ending in her body was on fire, shivering on the edge of a precipice.

Ronan pinched her clit.

Her spine arched suddenly. She could not so much as gasp. Every muscle in her body had tightened—even her vocal cords twisted into a knot. Her vision went fully black. And then...

Release.

Stars exploded behind her eyes. Vibrant pulses shuddered through her body, blasts of sheer euphoria mingling with the throbbing contractions of orgasm.

Ronan did not slow his pace, did not stop fucking her ass, did not stop fingerfucking her cunt. He moaned, letting her body clench around him, but then he suddenly bucked harder, her breasts bouncing once, twice, three times.

“Come inside me,” she squealed in a voice she didn’t recognize. “Come deep inside my ass.”

Another grunt, then Ronan clutched her to him more tightly, pinching her clit hard enough to make her scream, setting off another burst of throbbing waves that cascaded clear to her toes. He slowed his pace when she collapsed against him, the back of her head on his shoulder.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded, panting, shaking so badly that she didn’t trust herself to move. “I’ve never been better.” And she meant it.

For once in her life, she felt powerful—loved.

She didn’t regret a thing.

Chapter 22

Ronan

Her face was immobile in the dim moonlight, lips slightly parted. Peaceful—calm. Maybe even... happy?

He might be projecting, probably just hoping, but he liked that smoothness in her forehead, the relaxed set of her mouth. Just the idea that she trusted him enough to sleep in his presence was something he could cling to while he tried to catch a killer.

He knew she was trying to keep herself safe—that she believed her ex would know the moment she told him the guy's name. She might be close there. If her ex was in technology, as she'd almost verified that he was, his system would alert him if anyone in law enforcement typed him into the database. The right hacker could watch a police database as easily as any other.

But this dickbag had yet to come up against a billionaire with a voting stake in O'Connor Media. They weren't just televisions and radio and music—they had a significant technology arm, one that was more than able to secure electronic devices.

He'd screwed up there—royally. He'd had to get a new cell phone a week ago after an altercation with a suspect shattered the screen. He'd completely forgotten. And the fact that Charles hadn't yet applied his particular brand of security to his new phone made his cell suspect. He should have remembered that.

But there was no way the killer knew who Ronan was—who he really was. Even a psycho wouldn't try to blow up a billionaire's home with a few coils of C-4.

With a final glance at Julie, Ronan headed for the seating area by the windows and booted up his laptop.

“A compass with shapes instead of directions” wasn’t incredibly specific, but he found the tattoo within twenty minutes in the federal prison database. He frowned as he read through the file. Eli Dawson hadn’t been locked up here in New York—he was from Ravenbrook, Nebraska, a Podunk town in the middle of nowhere, not three hours from where he’d served his time.

Ronan leaned back in the chair, brow furrowed. Was this the man Julie had seen, or was the tattoo not quite right? He’d ask her when she woke up. Dawson had been arrested for cocaine possession back home only ten days ago, so if he was their guy, he hadn’t been in New York long.

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Then again... why would he be local? Julie wasn't from New York; she'd moved nine times. Her ex would probably rely on accomplices he knew personally rather than take a chance on strangers.

Ronan leaned in again, clicking through the rest of Dawson's file. Two children, two different mothers—delinquent on his child support payments. Every arrest was for cocaine, so at least they knew the guy's weakness.

But something wasn't adding up—the man should be in jail now. Serial offenders didn't typically get catch-and-release treatment, and his bail should've been far beyond what Dawson could afford. And if he got caught crossing state lines before his trial, he'd be right back in Nebraska Penn.

Ronan cut his eyes at the bedroom—Julie's peacefully sleeping form. Was she from Nebraska? Her stalker didn't just pull Dawson out of a phone book—again, presuming that this was actually the man she'd seen in the motel parking lot.

He had a little time for speculation. It was too early to call Charles and touch base about the security company—too early for Paddy, too. Maybe by dawn, he'd have a real lead.

Ronan opened a new tab and tapped in Jason Mercer's information. He'd already gone over Mercer's file, but when he'd first run the man through the system, he hadn't had anyone to cross-reference Mercer against.

Unlike Dawson, Mercer had been born in New York, had been staying here with his mother at the time of his death. But he'd been an Air Force brat, lived in thirteen

different states, including Nebraska—Mercer’s father had been stationed there twice. He’d never served time in a Nebraska prison, so that was unlikely to be the connection, but he had been arrested at twenty-nine, two years ago... in Ravenbrook.

Bingo.

And there was another connection, according to his software.

Ronan’s heart raced as he read through the court transcripts. One name showed up three times between the two files—Daniel Graves had testified at Dawson’s last trial, vouched for his character. But compass-loving Eli Dawson was a deadbeat father and a chronic offender, one who was still using substances.

He clicked through to the software’s homepage, then scrolled for any other connections: common groups, credit card transactions, even news stories involving Jason Mercer, Eli Dawson, and Daniel Graves. None had all three, but there was a two-year-old photo attached to a Ravenbrook press release about catching the perpetrator in a string of burglaries. Mercer in handcuffs, the sheriff walking behind him: Sheriff Daniel Graves.

Ronan squinted, thinking. Graves, Graves, Graves. The name wasn’t familiar, but his face... Did they know each other?

Then it clicked: He did know Graves. He’d been in the news after he’d nearly died in a house fire—arson. But that wasn’t why he remembered the man. His wife had gone missing that night. Ronan generally stayed out of O’Connor Media’s “top stories,” but his brother Charles had brought the guy up as evidence that Ronan’s profession was tainted—Graves should have been a suspect. Instead, he’d somehow become a martyr, the victim of a disturbed woman that he’d tried so hard to help.

“Is this why you keep that lame job?” Charles had asked. “Because if your wife

pisses you off, you can get rid of her and walk away more popular than you were before?”

Mouth dry, Ronan tapped in “Daniel Graves” separately, watching the circle on the screen while the program pulled his data—public information and much more that wasn’t. Even small-town newspapers were online these days, and Graves’ name came up often. Every year, in fact, for... the Christmas tree lighting ceremony.

Ronan scrolled through the online paper to years past. One year back. Three. Five. Seven...

The world stopped spinning. His lungs turned to ice.

Her hair wasn’t the same, a darker shade, but he’d know her face anywhere. Juliette Graves—pretty close to Julie. Missing for six years now, legally declared dead the year prior.

Ronan forced a breath into his too-small lungs, but his heart remained rabbit-quick against his breastbone. Her husband was the sheriff—a fucking cop. Was that how he’d gained access to Ronan’s security feeds? Companies often shared footage with law enforcement willingly, assuming they were allies, but Daniel might have found a way to erase any footage that implicated him.

His gaze remained locked on the screen—on Juliette, standing in front of a twenty-foot Christmas tree, a madman’s arm around her shoulders.

Juliette wasn’t just a suspect in her husband’s attempted murder case, hadn’t only lit his home on fire. She was supposed to be dead. And according to this, she was wanted in connection with the disappearance of another officer, too—a Ravenbrook deputy.

His chest was wrapped in thorns, acid eating at his guts. According to the law, the APBs, the warrants, all the files that mattered, she'd tried to kill a cop and made another disappear. The moment the world realized she was still alive, she was on the hook for attempted murder and arson, a suspect in another disappearance. She'd go to jail, if only to await trial.

And Ronan knew better than anyone how easy it was for law enforcement to get to someone inside a prison.

If they locked her up, she was as good as dead.

Which was what Daniel Graves was counting on.

Chapter 23

Juliette

His voice came to her in snippets, low, frantic words whispered from somewhere across the room. Juliette stretched—the other side of the bed was cold.

“Charles, I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important. I need your help here. This guy... he's too smart for me.”

Juliette pushed herself to sitting, her heart in her throat. Her eyes were bleary, brain still asleep—unable to process what she was hearing.

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Ronan was pacing in front of the bedroom window, already dressed—jeans and a blue button-down that probably brought out his eyes. He wasn't looking at her now, though, and the tension in his shoulders, the hard line of his jaw, made her hackles rise.

“No, I can't ask them. They fucking fired me!”

This she understood, and her chest clenched. He'd... lost his job? Because of her?

Juliette swung her legs to the floor, the silky top sheet brushing over her shins as it slipped off the bed. He glanced back over his shoulder when she bent to retrieve it.

“I'll call you back.”

“Who was that?” she asked, wrapping the sheet around her naked shoulders.

“Charles. My brother.”

She hadn't even known he had a brother until now.

That's because you don't really know him, Juliette. Your first conversation ever was three days ago. Three.

“Who's too smart?” she asked, but even as she said it, she knew. The killer.

They might not know who he was, but the sentiment was always the same—he was always too smart. Or too brutal. Too sneaky. And it all added up to the same thing:

Daniel won. Every single time.

Ronan paused, and something in his eyes made her legs go weak—for once, not in a good way. He closed the distance between them and wrapped his arms around her back, pulling her against his chest.

Shit. Definitely bad news. But at least her mother was okay... right? Mom's okay, she's okay, she's okay. It was a thin comfort, but over the last six years, it had often been the only comfort she had. And she'd have to cling to it extra hard today. Soon, she'd have to say goodbye to New York, to Jennifer Crandall—to Ronan. For good.

"I'm making a donation to the Nebraska governor's campaign and another to the Ravenbrook Sheriff's Department," he said into her hair. "They need new equipment, new cars. And I think they'll do most anything to make that happen, especially once they find out that their sheriff is a murderous piece of shit."

She felt the color drain from her face, heat vanishing into cold nothingness. Her chest was encased in ice. He knows. Oh, god, he knows everything.

Was he going to handcuff her, take her in? Even if he didn't arrest her, he couldn't exactly let a dead woman run off again, not when she had warrants out for her arrest.

Juliette backed away as if she might outrun him wearing only this sheet, him in jeans and sneakers. What was she going to do now? How was she going to protect her mother? She should have left already—she should have left last night. She should have left the day Jason died. Fuck.

But mingling with her panic was a white-hot fury deep in her belly. She'd warned him. Begged him not to look into her.

What other option did you give him, Juliette? Let the killer go? You didn't actually

think he'd frame Waylon for it, did you?

"Whatever you do with me... you have to help my mom. Just the fact that you put his name into the system?—"

He raised his hands in a calm down gesture that made her want to punch him in the dick. Why didn't he understand how fucking serious this was? This was life or death for the only family she had.

"Your mother is fine—I sent private security. They're discreet, ex-military, but Daniel's here, anyway. He won't know she's being watched. Also... I didn't put him into the system."

He stepped closer, and when she backed away again, he paused beside the bed. "There's no way he can get through the encryption on my laptop. Right now, my brother is working the angles in Ravenbrook, setting things in motion so I can have that bastard replaced—sheriffs are appointed there, not elected. No matter what happens here, he's out of law enforcement. But no one there will know that until I have him in cuffs."

"You can't be sure of that. He has access to all of the?—"

"I'm Charles O'Connor's son, part owner of O'Connor Media Enterprises. There's no way he infiltrated them. It's a multi-billion-dollar corporation, and they don't take orders from any branch of government, let alone a sheriff from shit-nowhere Nebraska." He caught her eye, then said, "Sorry. Maybe Nebraska is nice. But that fucker is going to get what's coming to him."

She blinked. Had he said... billions? "I... You're a... But your last name is Duffy, right?"

“Bastard son. I told you, I have family money, and I also have more resources than he could ever dream of. He doesn’t know I’m looking at him—doesn’t know that any of us are looking at him. But I’m going to take him down with or without your help.”

She swallowed hard. “He’s killed men for less. He’s killed other cops.”

He closed the distance between them in one long stride and took her face in his hands. This time, she made no move to back away.

“I’m going to catch him,” he said.

“You can’t. No one has.”

“I’m going to catch him.”

“You’re not.” But it was quieter this time.

“Juliette.” The way her name rolled off his tongue made her resistance crumble. “I’m going to catch him. You and your mother are going to be safe from now on.”

Her lip trembled, eyes burning. She wanted to believe him, but how the hell was he going to accomplish that? Was money really enough? Plus... “You already lost your job. You’re out of law enforcement. If you’re anticipating a citizen’s arrest, I don’t think?—”

“I just said that because Daniel has access to my cell. I got word from the chief today that someone saw us having sex at the reservoir.”

Juliette’s head was spinning. “The... where?” What was he talking about?

“On the phone, I told my partner that I took you to the reservoir to interrogate you. In the hospital room, where I didn’t have my cell, I told him I questioned you in a motel outside the city. I planted different information at every potential leak point. And I told the chief I was doing it.”

“So you’re... not fired?”

Ronan smiled. “No. And they don’t know who you really are yet; don’t know you

and I are together, either. But we've all known men like Daniel Graves. And the officers I work with aren't going to let a few bad apples ruin the force's reputation. We're not all abusers. Most of us are desperately trying to stop people from being harmed, and you're no exception." His gaze bored into hers. "I wish you'd told me sooner."

"I—"

"I know. You couldn't. You tried that before—called the authorities, and he hurt you, hurt your mother. Made the deputy who tried to help you vanish and pinned his disappearance on you. Right?" He traced his thumb gently along her jawline. "We have two goals. One is to catch him. The second is to clear you."

A spark flared in her chest—hot and bright—but it took her a moment to decipher what it was. Hope? "Do you think... I mean, is that actually possible?"

"We have his man—the one you saw in the motel parking lot. And Ortega is an honest-to-god genius. Daniel might be the sheriff, but he's not a forensics expert."

"Put security on Ortega, too, okay?" He seemed like a nice man, albeit more suspicious than she'd have liked that day in the morgue.

Ronan's gaze did not falter. "You're worried he'll vanish like Deputy Sanchez?"

Her eyes filled. She nodded.

"If we can find Sanchez, it might go a long way toward clearing your name. Is there any way he ran off like you did, or?—"

"Daniel told me he's buried under my mother's house. Presumably covered in trace evidence that will point squarely at me—evidence I won't be able to explain away."

Her breath shuddered from her lungs, secrets pouring out of her, but there was no point in holding back now—he already knew what Daniel wanted the world to think. The least she could do was defend herself.

“Daniel made it look like we were having an affair,” she went on. “He wrote fake journal entries, called Sanchez from my cell phone late at night, but he was happily married. His only crime was believing me about Daniel’s abuse.”

Ronan dropped his hands and stepped back, heading for the table by the windows. “Daniel has a lot of contingency plans,” he said, retrieving his laptop. “But so do I.”

He returned to her side and flipped the computer open. “He might shell out cash to have you watched, but it’s easy enough to explain his interest in finding you—you’re a wanted woman. What sheriff wouldn’t want to track you down? And what criminal wouldn’t want to be on the sheriff’s good side by finding his estranged wife? He could even argue that they took it on themselves. But he’s not stupid enough to hire a hitman.”

“I know.”

“You do?” His lip curled into a smug half-smile. “Do you also have the video feed of him sneaking out of the alley right after Mercer’s death?” He tapped a button, and she peered around his shoulder at the hooded figure creeping from the alley. “Can’t see his face, but we managed to place the watch—a gift from the Nebraska governor.”

Her heart was beating so violently that she could barely breathe, but she forced out, “How did you?—”

“Cleareye Traffic Solutions: the company who owns the traffic cams down there. They’re contracted through that big-box warehouse.”

She stared at the screen, watching Daniel saunter out of the alley. When he walked out of frame, she tapped the replay button. Again, again, studying the black jacket with bright orange flames on the sleeves. She didn't recognize it, but he always wore a distinctive coat. It was one of his favorite tricks. If they were looking for a guy in that jacket, they weren't looking for a guy... not in that jacket.

Ronan sniffed, interrupting her train of thought. "Your tattooed-compass friend bribed Cleareye with cash and a threat. The man in charge of monitoring the feeds has a brother in jail for negligent homicide—his parole hearing is coming up. The deal was, get rid of the videos, or baby bro stays behind bars. He wiped the feeds, but they didn't account for the backup on Cleareye's main servers in Washington. That data isn't accessible locally."

"I'm surprised a cross-state warrant went through that quickly."

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Did this seem too... easy? But was it really so weird to get a break after six years of running and five years of horrific abuse before that?

“No warrant—I didn’t want a paper trail. Cleareye Traffic Solutions is a small, private corporation. I put in an offer to purchase it for twenty percent above market value with the caveat that they provide those feeds within the hour.”

She swallowed hard. “Exactly... how much money do you have?”

But he’d already told her. Billions, he’d said. Billions.

“Enough to bury that entire Podunk town where Daniel has deemed himself king. And enough to take care of your mother.”

Her heart soared, hope flickering through the darkness that had held her captive for so long. Ronan was going to do it—he was really going to put Daniel away. But... with or without her help? Fuck that. She wanted to be there—wanted to watch them slap the cuffs on him. Wanted to see Daniel’s face when he realized he’d lost.

Juliette sniffed. “I should be the one to lure him out.”

Ronan snapped the laptop closed and shook his head. “Tell me what you know. Agree to testify. Then you’ll stay here with private security, where you’ll be safe. That’s all the help I need.”

Was he fucking kidding? “No.”

His eyes widened. “No?”

She clenched her fists, muscles knotted, her bare toes touching his shoes. “He would have left the city already if he’d managed to kill you the first time. You’re the reason he’s still here.”

“I know. Which is exactly why?—”

“I’ll be damned if I let you go out there alone. I’m safer than any of you in his presence. I’m dead, remember? A wanted woman if anyone finds out I’m still alive—plus, he has my mother. I have more to lose than he does. Trust me, he won’t show his face to you or anyone else.”

She laid a hand on his shoulder atop the gauze, a silent reminder of yesterday’s brush with death. “He tried to kill you once. He’ll try again. But he’s had thousands of chances, and he’s never tried to kill me.”

He balked, but she went on, “He’s hurt me, but he doesn’t want me dead. If he has a choice, he’ll let me get away so he can keep playing his stupid game. And if we let him leave New York, if he figures out you’re protecting my mom, that he has no job... he’ll vanish. We’ll never be safe again.”

Ronan’s jaw tightened. “I won’t put you in harm’s way, Juliette. I can’t do that.”

“I’m not asking your permission.” She squared her shoulders, suddenly feeling ten feet tall. “He’s tortured me for years. I want to make sure that payback is a bitch.”

Chapter 24

Ronan

High gear—there was no other speed, not now. They had to move quickly. It had only been three days since Jason Mercer’s death, but their window to catch Daniel was already closing.

Juliette was right: The only reason Daniel was still in the city was because he saw Ronan as a threat. He might not know that Ronan was onto him yet, but he clearly knew that Ronan and “Jenny” were closer than he’d like. That Ronan would believe her if she told him what a monster her husband was. As Deputy Sanchez had.

Daniel couldn’t let that stand. It was one thing to go up against your wife, especially when you were holding her mother hostage. It was another to cross a cop. And it was far easier to kill any officer who got in your way than to fight it out in court.

Ronan studied the wall in his office, the window covered in the pastel sticky notes he’d been using to sort his thoughts. The names of the men Daniel had hired to follow Juliette, possible hideouts, notes on the security cameras, and details about the bomb planted at Ronan’s home.

One section focused on Pathguard Technology, Charles’s security company, which had conveniently disabled Ronan’s front door camera while a bomber rigged the knob. Now they knew why: a new hire had joined last week. On paper, he had a clean record and extensive network engineering experience. According to Benjamin Shannon, all he had to do was shut off the feed at a precise time, and no one would discover that his résumé was a complete fabrication.

Ronan blinked at the scribbled notes. He was a ball of red string away from looking like a full-blown conspiracy theorist. He sighed and raised his fingertips to his head, rubbing his throbbing temples.

Ronan had no idea when Daniel would attack again or what he might have planned. But Daniel couldn’t wait long. Ronan highly doubted the sheriff had taken a month

off—a week, tops, and that was already half gone. And he wouldn't want a paper trail, plane tickets, which meant he'd need a day and a half to drive back home.

Today was the day. He could feel it in his bones.

And therein lay the problem. It took weeks to get approvals for a proper sting. They had a number of officers ready to go, but he'd need backup from private security, maybe friends in VICE. They might need more than he could rally in a few hours... presuming he had a few hours.

Ronan dropped his hands. He hated this. Hated that even here in his house, she might be in danger.

“There's no faster way to end this than to put me in front of him.”

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He turned as Juliette pushed through the office door. Dressed in her own clothes now, her hair wet.

“No.” He shook his head. “Fuck that.” Her eyes widened, but he amended, “Juliette, I need you alive. I’ll never forgive myself if something happens to you.”

Her eyes hardened. Not anger—guilt. “You wouldn’t be in danger at all if not for me.”

He edged around the desk. “Neither of us is in danger because of the other, and no one has ever been in danger because of you. We’re in danger because a psycho murderer has decided to take his tiny penis bullshit out on us.”

She cocked her head. “Tiny penis bullshit?”

“It’s all narcissistic insecurity.”

“At least you don’t have anything to worry about in that department,” she muttered, but it drew a smile to his lips. “Ronan... let me talk to him.”

“No way. But if you know how to contact him, you need to tell me now.” He was doing this wrong—he could feel it—but she couldn’t actually believe he’d let her visit a man who’d carved her up like a Thanksgiving turkey. And they’d already traced Daniel’s cell—still in Ravenbrook. Jason Mercer’s phone had yielded no contact information. She had no way to speak to him from a distance... so far as he knew.

Juliette crossed her arms. Her gaze was hard as stone. He could practically hear her molars grinding together.

“You don’t get to tell me what to do.”

“I know what I’m doing here. I’m a detective.”

“He was the fucking sheriff. So try again.”

The strength in her voice made his chest feel lighter, but he said, “You need to make it out of this alive, and not only because I care about you.” Care about her? It was far more than that. But he pushed on, “You need to testify against him. We can’t let him win.”

“He won’t kill me.”

“He might.”

“He won’t. He doesn’t even have anyone watching me now. This is the cat-and-mouse portion of the game, where he lets me decide whether to run. If he sees me, he’ll gloat, threaten my mother. He’ll tell me what evidence he planted to make me look guilty for Jason’s death. I’m sure he hid something... somewhere.”

“So you expect me to wire you up, let you wander into his orbit, and hope you get a confession? I’m the one he’s after—I’m the one he’ll follow. You just said yourself that this isn’t the part of the game where he goes after you.” His cell buzzed, but he did not take his eyes from hers.

“A wire won’t work. But I can lure him to the motel. It’s quiet, you can get the other customers out of there, and?—”

“I can lure him to the motel, too. And more easily since I’m the one he wants to kill.” The fury in her gaze was making his stomach ache. “I’ve been up for hours, researching, strategizing, making calls. But none of my plans involve letting you get anywhere near that bastard. Do you understand?”

The cell buzzed again, and he glanced at the caller ID. Paddy. “Just give me a second, okay?”

She closed her mouth, but her eyes stayed tight, cheeks flushed with anger. When she nodded, he turned away and snatched his laptop, settling it on the front side of his desk. Daniel might have access to his cell, but he couldn’t get into the encrypted computer.

He felt Juliette stewing at his back, heard her step toward him. He had the fleeting thought that she might wrap her arms around him, show him they were on the same team. But all she did was stand there, her heat against his shoulder as he read Paddy’s message on the laptop’s screen: Flatfoot saw him leaving the club in that stupid-ass jacket. Lost him behind the warehouse complex.

Fuck. He must have a way around those cement walls. A tunnel? Nah. Had he paid someone to use the gates? Paddy had interviewed those working in the complex already, but none of them had said a word. Maybe Daniel had something on them, too.

Hold for now. Wait to see if he goes back inside, he replied back, but Juliette sighed.

“You’re not going to trap him, Ronan,” she said to his back. “He clearly knows your people are watching. He’s probably had an inside track here since I arrived.”

“Then why did you stay?” he asked, reading Paddy’s response: Moving units to the warehouse. We’ll see if we can figure out how he got through. Could still be inside.

“Sometimes things get quiet for weeks, even months. Occasionally, I delude myself into thinking that he’s actually given up.”

He glanced over his shoulder. “That’s no way to live.”

Her jaw tightened. “My mother’s alive. That’s all that ever mattered.”

“This will be over soon, okay?” Ronan turned back to the laptop. “You’ll never have to live like that again. I promise.” He meant every word, but his mind was elsewhere—to make it true, he had to plan. He had to catch this asshole.

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They had to surround the strip without alerting Daniel—Juliette’s motel, too. Undercover officers needed to be briefed, and it would take at least two hours to get them mobilized. Right now, he had Paddy, five cars from the chief, and Charles’s security company.

Ronan opened another tab and fired off a new encrypted message to his brother. He could contact Pathguard himself, but Charles was spitting mad after realizing his security firm had nearly gotten Ronan killed. And it had taken no convincing for Charles to drop his phone’s encryptions for five minutes, listening while Ronan said this killer was too smart for him. The point had been to lull Daniel into complacency, feed his ego, but he was sure that Charles had enjoyed it.

Ronan frowned. Maybe he should just let this thing with his father go. Juliette had spent years running from a maniac, trying to keep her mother safe. He didn’t blame her for trying to kill Daniel. If Charles had killed their father to protect their own mother... was that really so different?

Plus, ever since he’d seen Daniel’s face, his mind had been flooded with violent fantasies—visions of strapping Daniel down and driving a blade into his chest, replicating every scar he’d inflicted on Juliette before letting him bleed out. If it came to it... he could hurt him. And he wouldn’t feel a single shred of remorse.

Ronan swallowed hard. No. He’d do this the legal way. It was worse to rot in jail, especially for a control freak like Daniel Graves. And while Ronan was his father’s son, he wouldn’t let that sadistic asshole’s genes get the best of him now.

The clacking of keys filled the room. Instructions. The names of the people they’d be

working with.

We can do this, he thought on repeat in his head. We have to do this before that asshole leaves the state.

When he was finished, he closed the laptop and turned. Juliette was no longer watching him. The room was empty.

“Juliette?”

He pushed through the office door and into the hallway. She wasn’t in the kitchen or the living room. Nor was she in the master bedroom. And... hadn’t his wallet been sitting on the end table?

The bathroom walls were still damp from her shower, but she wasn’t in there either. A chill crept up his back—nerves? But it wasn’t nerves ruffling his hair.

He turned slowly to the bedroom once more.

There were no operable windows in the bathroom, but there were three in the bedroom—floor-to-ceiling panes. All were closed. But as he approached, he could see that the sliding door had slipped open a crack, admitting the cold hiss of rain and chilly October breeze.

His hackles rose. He never left exterior doors unlocked, never even left his car unlocked—never.

He ran to the door and flung it wide. No, no, no. Where the hell had she gone? The motel? The club? Somewhere else entirely? She knew Daniel better than the rest of them, but she hadn’t shared anything that might be useful.

Fuck. He'd only wanted to protect her, but it seemed that she had no intention of letting him cut her out. With or without you.

Ronan raced out onto the back patio. He was soaked instantly, the heavy rain obscuring his vision, fogging the earth. But he could see the wooden fence at the back of the yard. The gate wasn't open, but she'd likely gone out that way. Unless she'd backtracked around the front. There was no way to tell. Any footprints had already been washed away by the downpour.

If he were her, though... the back gate would be a fake-out. Too obvious.

He raced around the side of the house to the front gate and out onto the driveway, breath panting from his lungs. He knew before he made it to the sidewalk that she was gone. Whether she'd hailed a cab or ducked between the houses or even gone out the back way in a double-fake maneuver, Juliette was nowhere to be seen.

Those anguished eyes at his back might be the last time he saw her alive.

Chapter 25

Juliette

The Lyft dropped her in front of the rainy building. She'd waved the driver down on the street, offered twice what the ride was worth in cash. She'd gotten lucky.

Hopefully, her luck would hold.

Juliette knew Daniel's tricks—after a decade of life-and-death maneuvers, she'd gotten pretty good at predicting his actions out of necessity. She had known what he was up to from the moment she'd seen that message come across Ronan's laptop... at least she thought she did.

Twice—once in New Orleans, and again in Virginia—Daniel had committed crimes while wearing one of his stupidly distinctive coats, only to pass the jackets to people on the street in the aftermath. He'd worn a similarly brazen coat the night of Jason's murder—he'd never wear it again.

Whoever those flatfoots had seen wasn't Daniel. And if they'd seen that person leaving the club... maybe Daniel was still inside. Perhaps talking to Waylon about how to make her life more miserable. Or doing something terrible to Brittany.

Her mouth went dry, but she forced herself over the sidewalk, head ducked to avoid the downpour.

Are you really going to do this, Juliette?

Yes. She was.

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She couldn't kill him. He'd be armed, and even if she had a gun, she was a terrible shot. And she wouldn't win in hand-to-hand combat.

But she could stall him, buy Ronan enough time to gather his team. The message thread made it clear that they needed more manpower to pull off the sting. And once he had enough people... Daniel would be at a disadvantage.

Daniel knew it. That was almost certainly the point of that ruse with the coat: Daniel was pulling the department's resources elsewhere. Leaving Ronan vulnerable. Once he was sure the squad cars had left the area, he'd be on his way to kill the man she loved.

If he hadn't left already.

Juliette cut her eyes left, then right—no one on the street. No cars that might be unmarked police. Just an old jalopy sitting on blocks. Shit.

Please let him be here.

Part of her expected the front door to be locked, but it swung inward with no resistance—so easily that she stumbled over the threshold. She'd worked here for a year, and while the dancers sometimes left the back entry open between cigarette breaks, Waylon had never left the front door ajar.

He's here. Right?

“Waylon?” Her voice trembled.

No response. She could hear the music, though, a low throb from the main room. Much softer than usual.

Juliette pushed through the beaded curtain. The stage lights glowed pink, but no one stood at the poles. The lights in the main room were off, the space swathed in shadows. But as her eyes adjusted, she could see that she wasn't alone. Someone was sitting in the chair near the corner beside the one where Ronan had sat just yesterday.

"Hello?" Juliette called, stepping toward him.

It wasn't Daniel—his shoulders were too thin. Perhaps a homeless man, someone seeking shelter from the storm? She'd seen that happen twice in the last year, and that would have made him easy pickings if Daniel needed someone to wear his coat. Though... why would he come back?

But as she stepped closer, she knew she was wrong. Gray hair glimmered softly in the hazy light from the stage. And now she could see the paunch of his belly beneath his dark shirt, the saggy skin of his jowls.

"Waylon?" she said, but the man did not move.

She hadn't really expected him to. Juliette touched his shoulder, and his hand flopped off the armrest to hang limply against the side of the chair.

His shoulders shifted. Then his head tilted back just enough for her to see his wide, glassy eyes... and the glint of the paring knife still lodged in his throat.

"What did that poor man ever do to you?"

His voice turned her blood to ice.

“The knife is from our kitchen set,” Daniel went on. “I’m surprised you’d use something with your prints all over it. It’s like you’re trying to get caught.”

Juliette stood, eyes on Waylon, frozen to the floor. This was what she’d been hoping for, in theory—a reunion, just her and him. But actually being here, hearing his low, nasally voice behind her...

He’s here—he’s right fucking here.

“Clever of you, saving that knife all this time,” she managed. Juliette forced her feet to move, turning slowly, her fists clenched so he wouldn’t see the way her hands trembled. Daniel was nothing more than an amorphous shape in the gloom, but she could feel the animosity—rage coupled with haughty satisfaction. The room crackled with horrible energy, vicious sparks snapping against her flesh.

“I kept lots of things you touched over the years,” he said, voice barely discernible over the music. “At least what I could salvage after you destroyed our home. You’re lucky I didn’t burn your mother alive the way you tried to do to me.”

She forced air into her lungs, trying to keep the panic at bay—Mom’s okay, she’s okay, she’s okay. If he killed her mother, he had nothing to hold over her. But Juliette didn’t really believe that. He’d find some way to keep her in her place, just as he had before he’d taken guardianship of her mom.

She inhaled more softly, more slowly, her breath a quiet whisper against the tension in the air. She’d expected this—his threats, his gloating. And she was here on a mission.

Stay steady. Stall, Juliette. Stall.

“The police aren’t stupid,” she said quietly. “Why would I run away from home with

only the clothes on my back but pack our kitchen knives?”

He stepped closer, still too deep in the shadows to see him clearly, but her heart leaped into her throat. Air—there was no air. She swallowed hard, trying to force her lungs to work. Stall. Stall. Stall.

Ronan and his officers would be here soon, wouldn't they? No, she hadn't told him she was here—he'd have kept her from coming at all, would have risked Daniel leaving here and killing him instead. But he'd surely figure out where she'd gone. Even if his team went to the motel first, they'd end up here within fifteen minutes... probably less.

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But even five minutes couldn't save Waylon. Even now, she could feel the dead man's eyes on her back. Watching her as his flesh cooled.

Daniel stepped closer. Her mouth went dry at the dull metallic glint in his hand, hazy pink in the stage lights—the gun aimed straight at her chest. But guns had never been his weapon of choice, and they both knew it.

Fifteen minutes, Juliette. Probably less. Let him think he's won.

Juliette let her shoulders sag. "I don't want to run anymore," she whispered, just loud enough to be heard over the music.

"You don't have a choice. You're a fugitive." He stepped out of the shadows.

The bloodlust in his eyes was exactly as she remembered it, his smile cold, smug, as if he'd just murdered her pet and couldn't wait to tell her how they'd screamed.

How had she once thought him handsome? How had she ever loved him?

But she had. She had.

She raised her hands, palms up at her sides—supplication. "You can clear me of any charges. I mean, you're the one who set me up. Just fix it to prove that I didn't do those things, and I'll come home with you. I've learned my lesson."

"Nice try." He slunk nearer, gun still trained on her, and then it was pressing into her chest, against her scar, his sick heat raising clammy gooseflesh along her spine.

Every muscle in her body tightened with the urge to run.

“Don’t move,” he hissed against her neck.

He smelled sour, bitter, sharp—like pure hatred. His fingertips slid over her waist, around her ribs, the barrel of the weapon pressed hard enough to bruise. Her skin crawled everywhere his hand came into contact with her flesh.

“There’s no wire if that’s what you’re looking for. I know you’re too smart for that, Daniel.”

“I have to make sure. You’ve tried it before.”

He wasn’t wrong. She’d tried to trap him on three other occasions—cameras, bugs, her phone set to record. She’d failed. Sanchez had, too. And he’d paid with his life.

Daniel ran his palm over the front of her stomach, beneath her breasts. “You remember this, Juliette? It wasn’t always so bad, was it?” His thumbs brushed her nipples on their way past, his pinky finger lingering on her scar—itching, stinging.

“No. It wasn’t all bad,” she lied, her voice shaking. She couldn’t help it—her entire body was trembling, her heart beating much too quickly as he frisked her. “I remembered that, too, being so far away all these years. We did have good times; I wouldn’t have married you otherwise. And if you clear me, we can have more good times. I can come home, be with my mother. And... you.” The words burned like acid on her tongue.

“You know what I’ve realized?” he hissed into her ear.

Her mouth was stuffed with cotton, but she forced out, “What?”

“I like you better like this.” His fingers traced her hip, the belt line of her jeans, dipping behind the button. “I like you running. Scared. Degrading yourself, working in shit-hole clubs where they refuse to let you dance because even they see how disgusting you are.”

Shame twisted in her chest, her eyes burning, but then she saw Ronan’s eyes in her mind, the lust in his gaze, heard her name—her real name—on his tongue. The shameful heat fizzled out. She blinked her tears away.

“I don’t have anywhere else to go, Daniel. Just that awful motel.”

He stepped back suddenly but kept the gun trained on her chest. “You weren’t at the motel last night,” he said, dark eyes boring into hers. “Were you fucking that detective?”

Her ribs tightened. Did he know where Ronan’s second home was? But then he finished, “Tell me where you went, baby.”

Relief edged through her belly—thank god. “I thought that if I walked around, you might see me. Pick me up so we could talk.” She closed her eyes for a heartbeat, inhaling deeply as if she could draw courage from the air.

Five minutes now. Probably less. But...

What if Ronan didn’t show? What if he was still working in his office? What if he hadn’t yet realized she was gone?

It’s okay—Daniel won’t kill you. That would ruin his game.

But there was something in his eyes that unsettled her more than his smugness. A dull kind of listlessness. Was he... tired of this? That’d be bad—very bad.

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But she forced out, “I can’t run anymore, Daniel. Please take me home. I don’t want to go back to the motel.”

Ronan believed he could trick Daniel into going to the motel, lured by the promise of killing him. But Daniel’s motivations were more nuanced than that. Guessing what she might do was one part of the game. Inflicting the most suffering was another. And if he knew where she’d be... would he try to hurt Ronan there, in front of her? Take the game to the next level, soothe his boredom?

It was a long shot. But it felt true.

Daniel cocked his head as if waiting for her to act. Utterly still. Almost as if he wanted her to attack him. Wanted her to say she was done with this shit so he could finish her off, then go home and finish her mother.

Not today, asshole.

Juliette stepped backward.

He smiled. “Don’t run away from me, baby. Not yet.” He said it as if he was a hunter waiting for the start of big game season.

It was easy to be a predator when you were the only one with a gun.

“I’m not running.” She resisted the urge to add, and I’m not your baby, biting back her rage, her fear. “I just don’t want him... looking at me.” She gestured to the dead man and sidled backward to the arm of Waylon’s chair.

“But... you are going to run again. Aren’t you?” He cocked an eyebrow, no longer bored—the glee in his face turned her stomach. Bile rose in her gorge.

“Yes,” she whispered. “As soon as I get my stuff from the motel, I’ll go.”

“You aren’t going to say goodbye to your detective? You didn’t say goodbye to Sanchez, either.” He edged closer, eyes tight. “Maybe you should go now. How much more desperate might you be without a dime to your name?”

Juliette rested her left hand on the back of Waylon’s chair.

“What would you do for a meal, Juliette?” Daniel smiled. “Are you going to hitchhike to your next location? Let some trucker pick you up? Let him do nasty things to you so you don’t starve to death?”

Her eyes burned, and this time, she let the tears stream down her face. “I doubt those truckers will want me,” she said, bringing her right fingertips to the scar.

“But the ones who do...” The leer on his face was straight out of a horror movie. “They’ll put you in your place. Even that detective is just having a little fun before he arrests you for killing Jason. You have to know that.”

Daniel closed the gap between them, expecting her to run—he always expected her to run. Instead, she ripped the canister from the back of the chair and released a stream of pepper spray straight into his eyes.

Daniel stumbled back, shouting—“Goddamnit, you fucking cunt!”—but she was already leaping backward, head ducked low as the first shot rang out. The bullet cracked off the table to her right. She zigged left. Another bullet hit the chair.

Her eyes watered, her throat burning, but she managed to lurch through the beaded

curtain, and then she was outside, racing through the freezing rain.

She raised her face to the sky, but it only seemed to make the burning worse. Juliette stumbled across the road, breath ragged, eyes on fire, her throat half-closed—choking. In the distance, sirens squalled. About time. She'd only been in the building for ten minutes. But would she make it back to Ronan before Daniel?

Juliette blinked, swiping at her watery eyes, running as fast as she dared over the cobbles. She cut a right at the next alley just as the police cars squealed onto the road.

She already knew what they'd find: Waylon with a blade in his throat, her fingerprints on the handle, the caustic reek of pepper in the air.

But no Daniel.

He had a way out of there. Same as he had the night he'd killed Jason. A hidey-hole in a nearby building, a way into the warehouse. He always had a way out.

But this time... she had Ronan. This time, she knew who Daniel's next target was. And Daniel was the one on a time crunch—she could tell by the tension in his eyes when he'd said she should go now.

The sirens were already fading in her ears. Juliette ducked into a doorway and put her hands on her knees, trying to catch her breath, her lungs resisting the fresh air—irritated by the pepper.

The rest of her life hinged on what happened in the next few hours. Her mother's life. Ronan's life.

Please, she thought to herself, suppressing a cough as she pushed herself from the doorway and raced off through the rain.

Please let this work.

Please let it be enough.

Chapter 26

Ronan

The motel was silent save for the hissing of breeze through the pines at the back of the lot. No guards. No people. Not a single cop in sight.

Just him. He'd never felt quite so alone.

Ronan left his car in the back of the lot, the same place he'd parked his first night here. Had it only been three days? So much had changed that it felt like a different world. Hell, twenty-four hours ago, he didn't even know Juliette's real name. Last week, he'd been obsessed, maybe a little stalker-ish, but love hadn't been part of the equation.

Now... he'd spend the rest of his life making Juliette happy. Keeping her safe.

If she'd let him.

But first, they had to catch Daniel here in New York. If Daniel made it home, he'd discover that he had no job to go back to. And nothing pissed a narcissist off more than realizing he was no longer in control. He'd be consumed with rage, dedicating every waking moment to hunting her down—to making her pay. She'd never be truly safe again. Nor would her mother.

Ronan kept his head hung low as he crossed the damp asphalt, past the rusted streetlight, his shoulders hunched—defeated. But his eyes and ears were on high

alert, scanning for any rogue noise on the breeze. He heard nothing except the tapping of his own footsteps, hollow thuds that sounded far too much like heartbeats.

Ronan raised his fist and rapped against her motel door. He was greeted by silence.

He leaned his head against the doorjamb. “Please, Jenny. Just open the door. I know you’re in there.”

A bird shrieked from somewhere in the trees. But the door remained closed.

“I’m not mad at you, baby.” Baby? Just hearing the word from his lips skeeved him out, but he went on, “I know why you snuck out—why you took my wallet.” In fact, she’d just taken his cash, left the wallet itself on the floor beneath the bed, but were those details really important? “Let’s grab some coffee and talk this through. You can’t just run away again.”

But she could—she definitely wanted to. He’d seen the terror in her eyes.

Juliette didn’t trust him to catch this man. She still thought she had to do everything herself.

He was going to prove her wrong.

He knocked again. “Jenny!”

Nothing. His chest was wrapped in a vise, as it had been since he realized she’d left his house. Was this going to get her hurt, maybe killed? Or would it ultimately save her? And why did every situation have to be so damn extreme?

A twitch from inside caught his attention—the curtain? Yes, the edge was still moving, ever so slightly. He craned his neck, peering through the window, but

whatever crack she'd opened between the curtains had closed.

"Jenny!" He banged on the door with an open fist. "Jenny, I see you in there! Just let me help you!"

A latch clicked. Ronan stepped back, but her door didn't move. From the room beside hers, a man poked his face out, red hair three shades darker than Paddy's, a ball cap low over his eyes—Van Halen T-shirt. "Hey, man, shut the fuck up, would you? I'm trying to fucking sleep."

Ronan swallowed hard. "I'm just..." He gestured to the door as if that explained anything. "Sorry. I'll be out of here in a few."

"Yeah, you better be." Far more aggressive than Ronan had expected, but he didn't have time to respond. The man rolled his eyes and vanished back into the room.

"Fine," he said to the door. "I'm going home to check on my broken window. Which you owe me for, by the way."

Those words were not for her—his windows were all fine. But if Daniel was listening, it felt better to make it seem that she'd smashed her way out, Hulk-style.

He shifted to leave, paused, then turned back. "Look... I'm sorry. I really am. I just want to talk to you. Please don't go back to him. I need you to... choose me."

He stood there on the walk, eyes on the pea-green door. "I'm not going to give up on us."

The door remained shut tight. Ronan listened to the squalling birds, a low drone that might have been the television in the neighboring room.

Go, Ronan—he'd been here long enough.

The clomp of Ronan's shoes echoed through the night, louder than they'd seemed just minutes ago. The path across the lot to his car felt lonelier, too. He grabbed the door handle. It popped open.

Had he left it unlocked?

He had.

Ronan slipped behind the wheel, keys dangling from his hand.

“Don’t fucking move,” a nasally voice barked. “I’ve got a gun on your head.”

The elusive Daniel Graves, I presume.

Ronan dropped the keys into the footwell and clenched his hands around the wheel.

“My money is in the glove box,” he said nervously. “You can take the car, too.”

“This isn’t a robbery. Are you some kind of fucking idiot?”

“I... I’m not sure,” he stammered.

“What the hell does she see in you?”

“Jenny?” He half turned, and when Daniel smacked his ear with the gun, he jerked back around to face front. “Who are... Oh, wait. Did you kill Jason Mercer for going out with her? Is that what this is about?”

Daniel chuckled, then coughed, cleared his throat. “Now you’re getting it. A date wasn’t in the job description. And before you get smug, like that was some kind of confession, I pulled the bug out of your visor.”

“Fuck,” Ronan whispered.

“Yeah, that’s right. Fuck.” He laughed, voice hoarse. He still smelled a little like pepper spray—his nearness was making Ronan’s throat itch. “Now drive.”

Nope, Ronan thought, but he said, “So this is like... a jealousy thing? I mean, I saw her chest. You tried to kill her, and now you changed your mind, decided you want her back? If she’s that important to you...” Ronan’s hand slid down the wheel, and Daniel punched the headrest.

“Hands up, asshole. And that bitch had it coming. Now get your keys and put this fucking car into gear.”

Was that enough of a confession?

Ronan kept his hands on the wheel. “Listen, I don’t want any trouble,” he said. “But from what I hear, you’ve been out of the picture for a while. She loves me.”

“She doesn’t love you. She’s my wife.”

“I mean, she ran away, though.” He sounded like a moron, but Daniel Graves had an ego the size of Texas. Ronan was hoping to use that to his advantage.

“She loves this game as much as I do,” Daniel snarled. “Hell, you still think her real name is Jenny.”

You’re wrong about that, fuck-o, Ronan thought, then said, “Ah, I see. So it’s all an elaborate game of hard-to-get?”

“Seems like you do know her, brother.”

Poke him a little harder, Ronan.

He was running out of time. Daniel wouldn't wait like a sitting duck in the back of the parking lot forever.

"I'm not your brother," Ronan said. "And you're not playing a game. You're stalking her. Holding her mother hostage."

Daniel paused, maybe trying to decide how much Ronan knew. "Her mother is safe and sound at home," he said slowly.

"But not for long, right?"

"No." Daniel shifted. "Not for long." Then Ronan felt cold, hard steel against his temple.

Out of time, out of time. He was going to fail. Shit.

"Yeah, nothing makes a woman love you like killing her family," he snapped. "But I don't think love was ever the point. It's all about fear and overcompensation with you. You're not packing jack shit below the belt, so you've got to make up for it by being the biggest dick in the room."

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The gun pressed harder against his head, and Ronan clenched his teeth.

“I was going to drive you out to that reservoir and kill you, but I changed my mind. Because I saw those curtains move earlier, same as you did. I bet she’s looking right now. And I’m going to make sure that she stays inside while you die—that she watches while they drag your body from this car. I’m going to kill you the same way I killed Sanchez, and she’ll know that I fucking won—that I always win.”

Daniel lowered his voice to a whisper. “I’ll never stop coming for her. She’ll always be mine.”

The safety clicked off. The roar of a bullet exploded through the car’s interior.

Then Ronan heard no more.

Chapter 27

Juliette

The first crack of gunshot stopped her heart. The second made her belly clench so hard that bile burned at the base of her esophagus. But she hadn’t seen a muzzle flash. Shouldn’t she have seen one? Had Daniel shot him in the gut? Through the back of his seat, into his heart?

Oh god. She couldn’t see. Too dark at the back of the lot. It was all so damn dark.

Tears stung her eyes. The officer raised his hands from his spot in front of the door, a

spindly guy with thick fingers and a permanent scowl that deepened when Juliette plowed straight into him. She sidestepped his stocky legs and hit the jamb. He stumbled, reached for her again, but apparently decided better of it as she flung the door wide and escaped into the night.

“Ronan!”

Her scream echoed through the lot. She hadn’t seen any other officers from inside the motel, but they were sure as hell there now, rushing from the other rooms toward Ronan’s car. The redheaded man from the room beside hers was fastest of all, racing past the streetlight as a bright yellow ambulance shrieked around the side of the building, sirens blazing.

“Ronan!” she shouted again, but she couldn’t hear the word over the terrified voice in her brain: Please don’t be dead. Please don’t let him be dead. Please, please, please.

The paramedic parked at the front of the lot and leaped out—tall with dark, curly hair. The ambulance’s headlights were aimed at Ronan’s car, turning the scene into a stark tableau of harsh light and deep shadow. Juliette stopped beneath the streetlight. Why wasn’t the ambulance parking nearer the back? Was it already too late?

Panic froze the blood in her veins. Her face was wet—she felt the dampness on her neck. Oh god, Ronan’s been shot, Daniel killed him.

The redheaded man skidded to a stop beside Ronan’s car—the one in the Van Halen T-shirt. Gun aimed at the window. He flung open the backdoor, shouted something. Then a body was sliding out, birthed from the backseat, slimed with blood.

Even from here, she could tell that his right arm was wounded, a massive chunk of flesh missing above the elbow. Gore covered the right side of his shirt from ribs to shoulder. But his face was still aimed at the asphalt.

Her lungs filled with acrid air, her jaw releasing, but her heart was throbbing so hard that she could barely breathe, definitely couldn't swallow. She watched as the officer grabbed the man on the asphalt and clipped the cuffs onto his wrists, injured arm be damned.

The redhead finally flipped the man onto his back. "You have the right to remain silent..."

The officer went on, but she could no longer hear him. Daniel.

His face was splattered with blood, but it was definitely him. She'd recognize that scowl anywhere.

"Get the gurney," someone called across the lot just as the front door opened. Her breath caught.

"His legs ain't broken," Ronan said to the redheaded cop, emerging from the driver's seat. "Make him fucking walk."

Relief flooded Juliette's body, turning her legs to jelly, but she stumbled closer as if to verify that what she was seeing was real, that her eyes weren't deceiving her.

He's alive. He's alive. Oh god, he's really okay!

"Also... 'Yeah, you better be'?" Ronan rolled his eyes about the officer's earlier comment, and this made the redhead smile as Ronan kicked his door shut.

Daniel was still lying on the asphalt, eyes staring at the sky or perhaps at the medic, who was now kneeling at his side. The redheaded officer waved her off and jerked Daniel's shirt, hauling him to his feet.

Daniel groaned, and a high-pitched bark of laughter burst from her core—years of pent-up fury and terror exploding in a single moment of pure joy. The medic glanced over, eyes wide. Juliette clapped her hands over her mouth.

He could still get away with it. But she didn't think he would. Daniel had spent years breaking her spirit, making her feel helpless, worthless, and Ronan had stoked what little spark of hope she still had into a full-fledged wildfire. Daniel was fucking finished. She'd never been so certain of anything.

Juliette stepped nearer, fear dissolving as she approached the front bumper. Daniel glanced over. His eyes narrowed. Then his lips peeled back in a snarl, and he lurched forward, spitting and cussing.

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Juliette's muscles tightened, ready to fight, ready to kill him if it came to that, but the redhead jerked him back, sending Daniel crashing to the ground. He landed on his ass.

"I told you—he's fine," Ronan said, stepping on Daniel's fingers as he made his way around the car, pulling another round of spitting and howling from Daniel's lips.

She couldn't tell if it'd been purposeful. She hoped it was.

Daniel was still snarling at her as Ronan popped the trunk. Juliette raised her hand. Then her middle finger.

"Jesus fuck." The heavy Irish drawl boomed around the open trunk as the officer climbed from inside. Short and stocky, bright orange hair. Ronan's partner.

They'd used Daniel's own trick against him—shot him through the backseat from the trunk. And this had been the most logical place for Daniel to come—the only place he might believe he could take care of Ronan quickly and quietly.

But narcissistic villains never skipped the opportunity to tell you how smart they were—she hoped that meant he'd confessed. Though they'd had to dismantle Ronan's trunk to make it work, added a metal panel behind the driver's seat, she had the feeling Ronan didn't care one bit.

She couldn't suppress a smile as Ronan headed back around the car toward her. Her heart was still throbbing against her ribs, but slower, calmer now that Ronan was in her line of sight—now that she knew he was safe. But he glanced away as another

man approached.

“Did you get it?” Ronan asked the officer—no. The badge on his chest was different. The chief?

The gray-haired man nodded, one hand resting on his thick gut—not cheeseburger thick. Muscular thick. “Damn right we did.” He cut his eyes at Juliette and her hackles rose—was he going to arrest her?—but then he turned away and headed off into the dark beyond the ambulance.

Ronan raised a hand to his head, rubbing at his ear. Probably half-deaf after that gunshot at close range. No wonder he’d been talking loudly enough for her to hear from across the lot.

“Hey.”

She resisted the urge to fold herself into his arms and gestured in the direction the chief had vanished. “So... what did you get?”

Ronan grinned. “Enough to put Daniel away for Waylon’s murder, for one. He even showed his face to the traffic cams after you almost burned out his retinas.”

Her heart sank. “Even if the cameras show he was there, you can’t convict him on circumstantial?—”

“Between your testimony, Eli Dawson’s statement, what Ortega found, and the confession we got from a second bug embedded in the seat...” He said the last part extra loud.

Daniel, now halfway to the ambulance, jerked around and tried to lunge out of the redhead’s grasp once more. The officer yanked hard, and Daniel took another

stumbling step toward the gurney.

“Stop antagonizing this dickbag,” the redhead shouted. “He’s got two bullets in him.”

“You never let me have any fun,” Ronan fired back, but he was still smiling when he turned back to Juliette.

“What did Ortega...” She shook her head. “It doesn’t even matter. Are you telling me that it’s over? Really over?”

“You’ll have some things to answer for, but I’ve already talked to the authorities in Ravenbrook. They aren’t interested in prosecuting you—they’ve got egg on their face with their own sheriff being a killer. They’ve also agreed to allow Ortega to examine the body they found this morning under your mother’s porch.”

“Sanchez?” she asked, but she knew the answer before he nodded.

“Yo!”

They both turned as Ronan’s partner clapped him on the back—Paddy, right?

“Welcome back to the force.” The man winked.

But Ronan looked at Juliette. “Speaking of that... I think it’s time for me to shift gears.”

Paddy’s jaw dropped. “Seriously? After all that? I mean, you’ve got a pension coming, brother. Just twenty more years and you’re home free. If you end up with too much spare time, you’ll grow hair on your palms. Take it from me.”

Paddy clapped his back again, but Ronan didn’t flinch. His eyes never left hers, the

liquid heat in his gaze warming the space around her heart—the place where only panic had lived for so long.

Ronan smiled. “That’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

Chapter 28

Ronan

The wraparound screens in Ronan's office reflected the early morning sun. Not even seven o'clock, but he'd been at it for two hours already.

The private investigation firm he'd founded felt far more suited to his skill set. He didn't want to be in harm's way, not when he had Juliette to take care of, and he'd always been one to work in somewhat unconventional ways. But the real freedom was working outside the confines of the legal system. He didn't want to do anything illegal—he just didn't want anyone higher up to shut his investigations down.

He was tired of trying to cut through red tape. Using his newly acquired traffic cams, he'd even managed to find the sixteen-year-old girl who'd run out of Waylon's office just after the killing. She hadn't seen Daniel, just a shadow, but she had seen more than enough of Waylon. Ronan had wanted to be wrong about the man, but at least Waylon had already gotten what he deserved. And the girl was getting help. It didn't feel like enough... but it was a start.

The club itself was now under new management. The women there didn't want to leave—most of them had nowhere else to go, and some of them genuinely liked the work. After discussing with Juliette, he'd purchased The Velvet Cage in her name and made the dancers shareholders.

There were some caveats—no substance use was allowed, and an arrest voided your stake—but there were no bosses, just a few members of his team that popped in to discuss the needs of the business and collect the rent. He'd offered to put all of them through business school, but so far, only Desire had taken him up on it.

With Juliette's urging, he'd also purchased three other businesses along that strip and set up similar management structures in each. The women had already turned the massage parlor into a thrift store. They were talking about making the other club into a holistic health center... whatever that meant.

It might not be a perfect solution, but it was better than it had been before with Waylon at the helm. And though Charles had taken to calling him a "sex-trepreneur," he felt pretty good about his stake in businesses that would help get women back on their feet.

If they wanted out, they could always sell their shares back to Juliette, and she'd give them to someone else who needed a break. He'd even brought Juliette in on his safe house project, reunited her with Shonda. They couldn't help everyone... but they made a damn good team.

Paddy had decided to get in on the action, too—the Irishman had asked to join him as a private investigator the month after Ronan left the force.

A soft knock sounded on the door, and Ronan looked up to see Juliette poke her head inside. Light brown hair, not the platinum with blue tips she'd been sporting when they'd met, but her hazel eyes were the same, save the lack of fear. He hoped he never had to see that kind of fear in her face again.

She smiled when he met her gaze. "Strawberries, bananas, and spinach," she said, holding up a glass full of greenish-pink goo.

"It looks... weird. No kale?"

She passed it over. "No kale. I know you hate it."

He narrowed his eyes at her but took a sip and frowned. Definitely kale.

Juliette saw his face and shrugged. “Can you really blame me for trying to protect you?”

“That’s my line.”

“One you’ve used enough to last a lifetime.” She took his cup, set it on the desk, then straddled the chair and lowered herself into his lap.

He wrapped his arms around her back. “Did you come in here for a little morning delight?” he asked, dragging his lips over her throat.

“I have to be at work in thirty minutes.”

“All I need is three.”

She laughed. “When I get home tonight, I want an hour. You hear me?”

He planted a chaste kiss on her lips. “Yes, ma’am.”

How strange that he was staying here while she headed to the precinct. Juliette had started working with Ortega four months after Daniel Graves’ arrest. The Ravenbrook prosecutor had taken one look at that scar and decided no jury would blame her for trying to light Daniel on fire. Especially after Ronan shared the rest of the evidence he uncovered in the weeks following the shooting in the motel lot.

Prior to the sting at the motel, they hadn’t had time to dive into the depths of Graves’ crimes—their goal had been to prevent any more death, apprehend a killer. Keep Juliette safe.

But in the aftermath, he and Paddy had uncovered decades of corruption. Juliette was not the first to be tortured by Daniel, though she might have been the first to survive.

Ronan had found three female informants connected to Daniel that had all gone missing over the last fifteen years. They could be running the way Juliette had, but he suspected they'd met the same fate as the deputy buried beneath Juliette's mother's home. They had Daniel dead to rights on that murder, thanks to Ortega.

But Daniel would never see the inside of a courtroom.

Daniel Graves had been stabbed to death with a sharpened toothbrush two months after his arrest. Cops didn't tend to fare well in prison—especially the dirty ones. The violent ones.

Ronan didn't feel bad about it. In fact, his death was one of the few things that helped him sleep at night. But it was far from the only thing.

Ronan blinked. Juliette was still watching him, her brow furrowed.

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“What’s wrong?” Her worried eyes bore into his. “Are you looking into your brother again?”

They’d made a pact never to hide anything else from one another. Thus far, it was going smashingly... outside of the occasional leaf of kale.

“I just want to do the right thing. And not knowing... it’s eating at me, you know?”

“I understand.” She kissed him between the eyes. “But what exactly is the right thing here?”

He drew his gaze beyond Juliette’s back, squinting at the dead man on the computer screen. Strange how his father looked like he was sleeping. But Ronan was certain it was a crime scene photo—not a snapshot of a natural death.

Charles’s voice echoed in his head: You really want to go down this road, brother?

He didn’t want to, not really. If he investigated this, confirmed that Charles had killed their dad...

What’s it going to be, Ronan? Hypocrite or accomplice?

Ignorance sounded like the far superior option.

But Ronan was holding a thread in his hand. He’d never been one not to pull it, even if it might yank the whole rug from beneath his own brother, his sister—his mom. Even Juliette, now that she was connected to him and his wealth, though he knew that

wasn't why she was here.

He didn't want to hurt his family—wouldn't without good reason. But this was far more than a matter of knowing for knowing's sake. This was a matter of risk.

Could he really be sure that Charles wouldn't hurt anyone else?

He wasn't—not at all. He wished he could say that Charles didn't have it in him, but his gut told him otherwise. And he knew how easy it was for men to hide what they did in the shadows. Even Waylon had managed to keep his wrongdoing under wraps for years. And he wasn't a damn billionaire.

“Ronan?”

He drew his gaze back to Juliette's, and she laid her hands on either side of his face.

“Are you okay?”

“I really don't know,” he said, the warmth of her touch steadying his nerves. “But with you here... I know I will be.”

Have you already read the rest of the Filthy Rich Bachelors series? Don't worry! I've got plenty more for you! Claimed by Outlaws has all the powerful men you can handle with a spicy reverse harem biker twist. Start the series with Taken.