



The Way Back Home

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Description: August Cotton shouldn't be here. When a tragic accident calls him home to Magnolia Springs, this returned Veteran adds his parents to the list of things he's lost in recent years, right along with his IED detection dog and his left leg. As the sole guardian of his four-year-old sister, August must rely on his Marine training in raising a tiny hellion who's as stubborn as he is. But the Corps could never prepare him for this. Nor could they prepare him for Olivia Anders, a woman who'll stop at nothing to get her way.

As owner of Paws for Cause, Olivia is no stranger to the broken men and women who return home from war. She's no stranger to broken dogs either. In fact, she's made it her mission to pair the two and enrich both of their lives, but pairing ornery and aloof August Cotton will take some work. The last thing August wants is some pushy southern woman occupying his parents' bed and breakfast and forcing him to open up about the hell he narrowly escaped, but that's exactly what Olivia intends.

They complete one another, and yet they can't stand to be in the same room. Can Olivia make this hardened Marine feel again and finally show his heart the way back home?

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PROLOGUE

August

“MR. COTTON, ARE YOU there?” Mr. White asks. I press the receiver closer to my ear to drown out the noise of the bar around me. It’s too loud. Everything is too loud after the stillness of the woods. The speaker crackles, echoing the panic I feel inside. I wanna leave. I wanna walk out the door and disappear, melt back into the trees and vanish. Instead, I rake my hands through greasy hair and lean against the wood-paneled wall. Three hundred miles. I’d been three hundred miles away from home when it happened. “Mr. Cotton?”

I scrub my hand down over my face and bushy beard. I sure could use a shower, a shave, and a decent night’s sleep. Sleep. Shit, I ain’t done much of that since I signed up for the Corps. “Yeah. I’m here.”

“I’m sorry to do this over the phone. Your parents were good people,” Mr. White says. “They were well respected in this town, and they are sorely missed by everyone.”

“Where was Bettina at the time?”

“She was in the vehicle. She’s alright now—a little banged up, and a broken wrist, but nothing she won’t heal from.”

I glance around the bar. A woman with teased blond hair and a tight animal print dress occupies a stool a few feet away. Her mascara is clumped on so thick it’s as if

spiders are nesting beneath her eyelids. Red lipstick bleeds onto the butt of the cigarette, and I close my eyes, trying to erase the image of blood splattered on the desert floor. The first strains of Patsy Cline's "I Fall to Pieces" blare from the jukebox, and it all feels like some cruel joke. "Where is she?"

"Miss Cotton is in the custody of the State. You should know, your parents expressed their wishes that you be her legal guardian in the event of their passing."

"What?" I stiffen. My ears ring. The music grows louder, and I stare at the peeling laminate on the bar, uncertain I heard him right.

"You need to come home, August. There are affairs to put in order. The coroner has held off from the funeral as long as he's willing to, but as you know, ours is a small town and there isn't a heck of a lotta room in the morgue."

The morgue. How many times did I picture my parents visiting me there on a cold metal slab? Yet here I am, somewhere outside of Bear Creek, wearing my shoes through with the miles I walk every day, completely unaware that my parents lay cold and lifeless in a fucking refrigerator for a week while my baby sister is in the custody of the State. "August?"

"Yeah, I heard you."

"If money is a problem I can wire you the funds for a bus ticket."

"No," I say sharply. I don't like handouts, and I don't like being underestimated. "I got it."

"You'll come home," Mr. White says. It ain't a question.

Home. Why did my blood turn to ice at the thought of that one word? Home. One

word, four little letters, and a shit-ton of regret.

This morning I'd been excited at the prospect of a hot meal and a real bed, and within seconds, my whole world's been turned upside down. My parents are dead. My little sister needs me, and I am going home to Magnolia Springs—the one place I swore I'd never return to.

I don't know the first thing about being a parent. Hell, I'm not even a fucking grown-up most days. I served one tour in Afghanistan—eight months of hell. I didn't even make it a whole tour before I got myself blown up, and I returned home an echo of my former self. I can't deal with crowds, I can't deal with people—even my own mother's pity had been too much for me, and the second my body had healed, I'd been outta that town like a shot. The dust hadn't even settled on my pack. If I hadn't been ripped apart by an IED, I'd have signed up for my next deployment and lost myself in another battlefield, but they don't take invalids in the Marines. I'd been honorably discharged, and it had been a punishment worse than any we could inflict on our enemies because I'd wanted to die a hero, and instead I was living life as a cripple.

Now my parents were dead, and I was going home. Stepping into someone else's life to take care of my sister, as if I could ever fill their shoes. As if I could ever be anything more than broken.

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CHAPTER ONE

Olivia

IGLANCE UP THE ABANDONED platform for possibly the hundredth time in an hour. Aside from the hanging baskets of Silver Bells and a giant clock that ticks loudly and is two minutes too slow, the bus station is empty. Greyson said he'd be here to pick me up at three, but it's ten after four, and I'd bet my last dime that he isn't coming. With a final glance along the platform, I gather up my cases and heft them toward the stairs.

There are a few things that the Cotton's should know about me: One, I devote a good deal of my time to helping others. I rescue dogs from death row, and I pair them with broken Marines. It's damn hard work, but I haven't found a Marine yet who I couldn't fix. The tougher the Marine, the tougher the challenge, and I ain't ever been one to walk away from a challenge.

Two, I'm a southern woman, born and raised. That means I like my clothes pressed, my face made up, and my hair big. Three, my purse contains all the essentials and the kitchen sink. And four, I might have just the smallest itty-bitty obsession with nice lingerie.

I swear on all things holy it's an expensive habit I've tried hard to break, but like my penchant for men who are all wrong for me, Snickerdoodles and Birthday Cake Oreos, I never could just stop at one. I'm a firm believer that a woman should be able to look in the mirror and appreciate her body no matter the size or shape in a nice pair of panties. So, all of this is to say that the cases I'm lugging down the platform steps

are anything but light. I'm not even sure I know how to pack light.

I lug the bags downstairs one by one. There's no one around—not even a clerk at the ticket dispenser. That's Sundays in small towns, I guess. It's the same in Fairhope, and anywhere else you might go in the South. Sundays are for church and family or in my case . . . for making love to my vibrator. After my last failed relationship, I've sworn off men for a while. There are more than a few upsides to this. For one, there isn't anybody there to eat my Oreos. The downside? There isn't anybody to eat my, er ... Oreo.

After working up a sweat with my bags, I make it out onto the street, and surprise, surprise, it's empty. If the apocalypse had torn through here last night, turning all of the good people of Magnolia Springs into zombies who shambled into another town, no one would have known. The buildings are old but well maintained, there are Black-eyed Susans and Purple Dome Aster in the flowerbeds, and there isn't a single building that takes away from the town's old-world southern charm. Magnolia Springs is a community well loved, and one well-kept, as the mayor had promised me on the phone. I don't care how the town presents; I'm more concerned with the occupants of it.

For years, the Magnolia Springs bus station has transported fresh-faced boys and girls off to war, and I am betting more than half of those kids have never come home. The ones who have returned? Well, they're mine now. At least, they will be, given time. The broken, the able-bodied and not-so-able-bodied, and the ones who find themselves here wandering around this modern-day war zone we call life not knowing why they returned or wanting any part of the living. Those men and women are my wheelhouses. They're the reason I'm here.

My shelter, Paws for Cause, has rehomed abused and abandoned dogs, trained them up and paired them with more than five thousand ex-infantrymen. We've saved more lives than any free-standing organization associated with the military. Therapy dogs

work, and I am stupidly excited about bringing the possibility of hope and companionship to the people of Magnolia Springs.

I just have to find Tanglewood, the big old plantation house on the outskirts of town that has been transformed into a bed and breakfast first. Tanglewood will serve as my lodging for the next month until I can get myself sorted with a rental. I booked a room there over the phone months ago, and Greyson, his wife, Pearl, and I have stayed in touch ever since. It's odd that they didn't show at the station, given that when we last spoke, they'd both been real excited at the idea of my coming to town. They have a son who needs my help, and after learning a little about the Marine, I didn't argue with them. He's off traveling around this great and vast nation, but maybe by the time the shelter is up and running, I'll have the perfect four-legged traveling buddy for him.

Right now, I just need a bus, a taxi—hell, I'll even settle for a damn lift from a stranger, because carrying these bags in this heat is murder. After a long bath and a decent night's sleep, I can finally start work on the next chapter of my life.

I pull my phone out of my purse and bring up Tanglewood's address, then I open another browser and punch it into Google Maps, just to see how far I might be walking. Three miles. Too far with these bags. I'm just about to call up a taxi service when my phone flashes its little memory bar at me like a warning too late, and the screen goes dead. Shoot. I didn't bring my portable charger with me. Of course, I have the actual charger in my suitcases, but then I don't see no power point to plug into. It's late afternoon on a Sunday, and there isn't another soul around. None of the businesses are open on Oak Street, so I take a stab in the dark about which direction I'm supposed to be heading, according to the brief glimpse I got on Google Maps. I pick up my bags and start walking.

What feels like three hours later, but is most probably only one, I stumble across Tanglewood Road on the outskirts of town, and find the huge Greek Revival-style

plantation house. It's crisp and white, and has these huge Greek columns with dark green shutters over the French doors, and what I swear is the longest oak-lined driveway in history. I drop my bags at the gate and pull my hair back off my face. I had my best friend Ellie cut and color it before I left. She's a hairdresser, the best in Fairhope, and I don't know how I'm supposed to manage it without her.

I walk through the gate, past the little swinging sign that says Tanglewood Bed & Breakfast, and I feel like smacking the damn thing. Walking three miles in the southern heat with more than half your weight in luggage entitles you to a complaint or two in my book. By the time I reach the front porch, I'm practically dragging my suitcases behind me in the dirt. Sweat trickles down my spine, my shoes are covered in dust, and my feet ache like the devil himself done gone and stepped on them. I leave my bags where they are and carefully navigate the stairs, wincing each time the hard leather rubs against my blistered flesh. I need to get these boots off before my feet swell so much I have to cut them free with a pair of gardening shears.

I grab the door knocker and bang three times. Nothing. No footsteps, no "just a minute." Just ... nothing.

I try again, knocking louder this time ... because I want them to hear me, not because I'm almost at my wit's end. I need a long luxurious bath. With bubbles. There had better be bubbles.

"Hello?" I shout to the brilliant white façade of the front door. "Pearl? Greyson?"

Still nothing.

I ring the polished brass bell next to the door, hard. Ding, ding, ding. No answer. I trudge down the stairs, and I'm fixing to lose my shit completely when a beat up white truck pulls into the drive and begins the long descent. It feels like it takes forever for the vehicle to stop in front of the house, and I'm practically accosting the

man inside before he can make it out.

“Hi, I’m sorry,” I say, heading toward the truck. “I’m looking for—”

“We said no visitors.”

I frown and balk at his sharp tone. “Well, okay but I’m supposed to ...”

He climbs out and slams the door behind him. The man is tall and built like a grizzly bear. He stands opposite me, and I thank the good Lord that the hood of his truck is between us because it’s clear that it’s more than just his build that’s grizzly. “What’s the matter with you? You show up here on a Sunday? Today, of all days? Whatever it is you want, whatever they owe, you can wait until they’re—”

“Okay, I think maybe we got off on the wrong foot here.” I hold my hands out in a warding gesture, and I’m sure my eyes are as round as dinner plates. “I’m Olivia Anders. I’m supposed to—”

“Lady, I don’t give a shit who you are,” he says, leaning over the hood. “Now if you don’t get off this property I’m gonna call the sheriff.”

“Whoa,” I say, backing up a step. “Okay, big guy, I don’t know what your problem is, but I need to see Pearl and Greyson. I was told there would be a car waiting at the station to pick me up. I paid for that service, along with my room a month in advance, so I’d really like to speak with the owners of this house.”

“Then you’re gonna have to visit the cemetery,” he says slowly and clearly, as if I were a child who had trouble comprehending plain English.

“Oh, lord, it’s not their son, is it? Greyson said he was troubled. I’ve known plenty of vets who couldn’t be around their family after returning home. War is traumatic,

and—”

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“What do you know about it?” he says.

“Plenty, actually. It’s what I do—work with Marines. I pair them with service dogs, and from the sounds of things, he could really use my help.” I tuck my hair behind my ears because it’s a hundred degrees out and the tousled waves that I’d created this morning are practically sticking to my forehead like wet noodles. “I’ve dealt with a lot of men and women in denial about their post-traumatic stress disorder, but from what Greyson has told me, their son takes the cake. I’m itching to get my hands on him.”

“Their son’s just fine,” he snaps.

I frown. Lord. This guy needs to eat a Happy Meal or two. I make a study of where my bags are at, preparing to run as fast and as far as I can and get the hell outta here, devil feet or not, but a soft voice calls from the passenger seat, “Auggie, who’s that lady?”

Something about that name sounds familiar, but before I can put my finger on it, the jackass here is coming out from around the truck. Despite the heat, he’s wearing a clean, white button-up and a pressed pair of slacks. He walks toward me with an uneven gait and stops just inches from where I’m standing.

“That lady is leavin’,” he says to the little girl, only his eyes never leave mine. They burn with anger and impatience, and then it hits me like a sledgehammer to the face.

“Auggie?” I whisper to myself more than to him. Crap on a cracker.
“Wait, you’re August Cotton?”

August is Greyson and Pearl's son. Holy shit. August Cotton is standing before me, his dark blue eyes narrowed, his brow furrowed, and his mouth set into a hard line. Oh shit, oh shit. This is not how I wanted our first meeting to go.

"I'm August Cotton," he says, folding his huge arms across his chest. I swear, if the baked Alabama earth would just open up beneath me, I'd gladly dive right into the fiery pits of hell to avoid the way he's staring.

"Oh." I clear my throat and smile sheepishly up at him. "I didn't—"

"Mean nothin' by it?" he finishes, sarcastically. And although I know I put my foot in it, this is not at all how I wanted to introduce myself to a potential client.

"Look, I'm sorry. I'm sure today has been a bad day for everyone, but I just walked three miles to get here in a new pair of boots, so if you could just call the Cottons on your phone we can straighten all this out. The sooner I can get that sorted, the sooner I can relax in the bubble bath and just forget about this whole thing."

He wets his lips. "Well, I'd love to help you into your bubble bath sooner, Miss Anders, but my parents are dead. We buried them today, not more than a half hour ago to be exact."

"What?" I say, my brow knitting in confusion.

"Car accident, two weeks ago." He lowers his voice. "Killed them both."

"Oh my God." My heart sinks, and my eyes well up. "I'm so sorry. Here I am raving on about having to walk a few miles, and you just ... oh hell, I feel terrible. I'm so sorry for your loss."

He holds his hand up. "I don't want your pity, and I definitely don't need your help."

“I understand ... I’ll just ...” I peter off, and with a deep sigh I pick up my luggage, even though my shoulders burn with the strain.

“Auggie,” the little girl says, and he pushes past me to get to her side of the car.

My feet ache. Tears come freely as I remember the countless hours I spent talking to the Cottons about Tanglewood and their son, and how excited they were about the prospect of Paws for Cause coming to town. With tears clouding my vision, I stumble on one of the tuberous oak roots peeking up through the pavers. I feel August’s eyes burning into me from behind.

The salt water coursing down my cheeks might seem like an overreaction considering the Cottons and I have never met face to face. But it isn’t just the news of Greyson and Pearl’s death that has me so upset—it’s everything, from these damn bags, my poor pitiful feet, and the fact that I have nowhere to go. It’s another three miles back to the station, I know there’ll be no more busses running this afternoon, and I don’t know where I’d go even if there were. I am royally screwed. And to make matters worse, August Cotton is a jerk. A hot jerk, but a jerk none the less.

When I finally make it to the end of the drive, I drop the bags. I can still feel August’s eyes on me, but I can’t hold the weight any longer, not even to save face in front of an angry Marine. He’s probably standing there laughing at me right now because I can’t carry three suitcases without throwing out my shoulder, but I don’t care. The last six yards of the driveway I shove and kick and practically throw my bags, so they’re no longer on Cotton property—okay maybe they are, because I’m pretty sure they own the land on either side of the house too, but that don’t matter. I’m officially no longer in their driveway. I move a little left of the gate and dump my large case, and sit down on it, wondering what the hell I was thinking bringing so many sets of matching bras and panties. They don’t weigh much, but the storage cases I keep them in do. I’m not messing up my La Perla for anyone or anything.

I take off my boots and rub my sore, blistered feet. Sniffing back tears and snot, I try to breathe, but my head swims. I liked the Cottons, but I do not like their son one bit. I kick the case nearest to me until it falls over in the baked grass.

“Stupid asshole, Marine.” I kick the other bag. It’s idiotic, really, because it hurts my feet like hell. That doesn’t stop me from jumping up and making that luggage pay. When my feet are numb, and I’ve successfully taken out all of my frustration, I turn around and about leap out of my skin when I see August Cotton standing there.

“You ’bout done?”

“What? Am I not far enough off your property?” I snap, folding my arms over my chest. I may be a little embarrassed at my outburst, but I don’t want him to see that.

“Bettina told me about the mix-up,” he says impatiently.

“Bettina?”

“The four-year-old in the passenger seat of my car.”

“Oh.” I sniff. “That’s little Bettina? She’s just as pretty as Greyson said she was.”

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He nods. “With everything going on, I didn’t check the log books. I didn’t know we had a guest staying.”

“I didn’t know about your parents,” I say. “If I had, I would have booked somewhere else.”

His jaw ticks. “There is nowhere else. Unless you wanna walk the six miles to Foley.”

“Great,” I say sarcastically. My shoulders fall in defeat. “Just great.”

“So, if you’re done kicking the crap out of the case, I’ll take it into the house for you.”

“I’m not staying here,” I say.

“Well, suit yourself, but it gets kinda cold out here at night.” He shrugs. The gesture looks odd on someone so big and stoic. “You’d get eaten alive by bugs.” The corner of his mouth turns up a fraction of an inch. “If the coyotes didn’t chew off your toes first.”

“Fine, but I’m staying only for the night.” I fold my arms across my chest. “You can return my month’s deposit, and I’ll find a rental first thing in the morning.”

“Tomorrow’s a town holiday.”

“What?”

“Fourth of July,” he says impatiently, as if this is something I should know.

“But it’s only the first tomorrow.”

“Yup and the whole town closes down for four days.” He bends and grabs my two largest suitcases, hefting them with ease. Bastard.

Magnolia Springs isn’t that far from Fairhope. I could have stayed at home and driven the half hour each way to the shelter, but I’d wanted an adventure. I was restless and wanted to oversee every aspect of our new expansion. I already rented my house out to one of my employees, and I know staying in Fairhope won’t be tackling the problem from the ground up. They say it takes a village to raise a child—the same is sometimes true for healing a veteran. They need support, they need people in their corner, and I can’t be the person they turn to when I’m thirty minutes away and they have a gun to their head, ready to pull the trigger. I could always call Ellie or Jake to come get me until the Fourth of July holidays have passed, but I know how tough this holiday is for them, and with Spencer and little Maybelle, they have enough going on. Besides, I’d be right back to square one. I made my bed, and now I have to lie in it, even if it means living with the angry Marine for a few days. I’ve lived through worse.

“Come on. You ain’t going nowhere sitting here kicking your suitcases,” August says.

I scowl at him, but a pang of guilt worms its way through my chest. I’m not really mad at him. I’m angry at myself. Not only had I opened my big fat trap and insulted the man in perhaps the worst cause of foot-in-mouth syndrome I’ve ever displayed, but I was also stupidly selfish. August and little Bettina buried their parents today, the Cottons had lost their lives, and here I was crying over a few blisters and the thought of having to stay with the jerky Marine until this jerky town decided to open its businesses again.

August is already halfway down the drive when I grab the third case, the one that contains my super special La Perla that I keep for days when I'm feeling down. What I do has its shortcomings—aside from the shoveling of dog shit from the kennels, that is—but some of the Marines I work with have torn my heart out with their stories. And for a woman who hasn't always been the happiest person walking the planet, for someone who spent a lot of time researching the best ways to kill herself, I can relate to their despair. I sometimes find it hard to leave work behind. Working with the dogs helped me, and now I help others, but it wasn't always the case, and life wasn't always easy. Life isn't always easy. You wouldn't know it to look at me, but I've battled in my thirty years. I battle every day with who I am, with the woman I see in the mirror. I might not have been through combat, but I fought like hell to get here, just like our returned soldiers.

I watch August as he walks on ahead of me, carrying my cases as if they weigh nothing. His gait is pretty good for an amputee, which means he's either had a really great physiotherapist, or he's worked his ass off to make it that way on his own. He definitely has a limp, but to the untrained eye, it's not obvious right away. I'd be willing to wager good money that the average person would never guess, unless he was wearing shorts. Of course, I'd be willing to bet everyone here knows about it. Everyone knows everything in a small town. Especially when there's tragedy surrounding it.

It doesn't make him any less of a man in my eyes, or any less gorgeous, unfortunately. Thankfully, he's not a complete asshole. He could have left me out here to fend for myself. First thing Friday I am out from under his feet and into a rental. Hopefully.

August waits at the base of the stairs for me. His expression is stoic, but I'm pretty sure he's mocking me on the inside, and though it kills me, I pick up the pace so he doesn't have to wait too long. When I reach the stairs, Bettina sits on the stoop, just a few feet away. She eyes me warily for a minute. "You havwe wots of bags."

I attempt a smile. “I sure do. I don’t like to travel light.”

“I nevwer been outside Madnowia Spwrrings,” she says, and I can’t help but smile because her little lisp is the sweetest thing.

“Well, I haven’t been a lot of places either, really. I mean, there was that trip I took with my ex to Dallas, though that’s not much fun, and it wasn’t much like a vacation.” I’m rambling. August clears his throat.

“Mamma says you was stwirting up a dwog kennel.”

“Sort of. I help pair soldiers with assistance dogs.” I slide my gaze to August whose jaw is tight as he looks above my head, and down the drive. He’s probably thinking I talk too much, and wishing he’d left me outside the gate with the coyotes.

“I like dwoggies,” Bettina says, toying with the hem of her midnight-blue dress. She looked adorable with her peter pan collar and little cap sleeves. Her long chestnut hair falls down to her waist and is pushed back from her face with a headband adorned with a huge bow. This girl is going to break some hearts. A few more years and August is going to have to get real friendly with a shotgun again to ward away the boys. “Mamma says we can’t hawe one, ’cause all da people who stwayeded here might be allwergict.”

“Bett, go on inside and change out of your good dress,” August says.

“Bwut I don’t wanna.” She stands up and folds her tiny arms across her body—it must be a Cotton thing—and I know I shouldn’t encourage her, but I chuckle because she is the spit out of her brother’s mouth. August shoots me a disapproving glare, and I quickly shut up. “I wike this dress.” She stamps her foot and tears of indignation well up in her eyes. “And Mamma wiked it.”

“Now,” August orders, so that we both snap our heads toward him. “And hang it up. I don’t wanna find it on the floor of your room where you stepped out of it.”

Bettina screams, “I hate you!” and bursts into tears, running across the porch, inside and up the stairs, where a door slams. I cringe. I’m no stranger to meltdowns. Ellie’s son Spencer is autistic, and he has one every other minute, but it’s hard to watch any child’s feelings getting hurt.

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“She’s taking it kind of hard, huh?”

“Her parents just died. What do you think?” August pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs, and then he turns his rigid body toward me. “Come on upstairs. I ain’t much good at cookin’, and I guess that’s what was included in your board. I’ll happily refund that money and you can feel free to use the kitchen. I could run you into town tomorrow to pick up some supplies, though nothing’s opened but the diner and the gas station, and even then, they’ll be shuttin’ up shop at midday.”

I don’t know what to make of his generosity. I feel terrible that I judged him so harshly, and I don’t like that either one of us are in this situation. “That’s kind of you to offer, but I don’t mind walking.”

I really do mind. I can’t think of anything worse, but I don’t want to burden him anymore than I already am.

“Well, suit yourself,” he all but grunts as he picks up my bags and I follow him up the stairs and into the huge plantation house. It’s as gorgeous inside as it is out, with antique furniture and heavy damask silk curtains in robin’s egg blue. The sweeping staircase greets us, and off to the right there’s a formal dining room, and a sitting room off to the left. My greedy gaze catalogs everything, and I’m disappointed when August makes a gesture toward the staircase, indicating I should go first. I always loved these old antebellum houses; that’s what drew me to Tanglewood in the first place. With another glance at the ever-impatient Marine, I decide not to push my luck and I climb the stairs ahead of him.

I don’t turn to look back at him as he ascends the steps a few beats later, because I

figure that will only make him uncomfortable. Stairs can be difficult at the best of times for amputees, but I guess he'd be used to these by now, given that he probably grew up here.

“Obviously, the bed isn't made up, so I'll need a few minutes to do that for you.” He moves ahead of me and stops outside of a room with a polished oak canopy bed with pink linens and upholstered chairs. There's an antique dresser in the corner and French doors that lead out onto a balcony that wraps around the entire house.

“Oh, I don't ... are you sure this is the right room?”

“What? It's not big enough? Sorry, princess, we're fresh out of presidential suites this week.”

I frown. “I didn't mean for that to come out the way it sounded. I just meant, I don't need anything this fancy—just a bed and a locking door.”

He tilts his chin toward the bed and then reaches around and flips the lock on the back of the door, with a smirk on his infuriatingly handsome face. Smartass.

I set the case down on the floor and walk over to the French doors, peering out through lace curtains onto the balcony. Beyond that sits a huge yard, surrounded by trees. While I can't see the whole porch, I'm secretly hoping that there's a place to sit with my morning coffee and take in the view of the grounds. Assuming August doesn't chase me off the property before the morning, that is.

When I turn around, he's struggling to fold the heavy silk bedcover. Like everything in this house, it has an old-world charm and is indicative of the period in which this house was built. I'd bet good money that August's bedding isn't as complicated as this.

“I’m capable of making my own bed,” I say, watching him struggle some more with the four different panels. “Been doing it the last twenty-five years or so.”

All I get in response to that is a chin lift and a nod. No grunt this time, but no conversation either. August leaves the duvet cover on the bed and heads for the door. “Bathroom across the hall is mine, but I’ll share Bett’s.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that.”

“It’s the only bathroom with a tub.” It’s my turn to nod, and I stare at August who stares stoically back. “All I ask is that you keep it free from five until six; that’s when Bettina has her bath, and the people at child services told me to keep to her regular routine as much as I could.”

“Got it.”

“I’ll get you some sheets, but towels are in the linen closet down the hall. Use as many as you want.”

“Thanks.” Another nod and then he’s gone, out the door as it closes behind him with a soft snick. I sit down heavily on the bed, wincing as it squeaks beneath my weight. I kick off my shoes and lie back on the soft mattress and just breathe. What I wouldn’t give for a warm bath with bubbles and a pound of Birthday Cake Oreos right now. Oh, and a map to figuring out the angry Marine would be good too.

CHAPTER TWO

Olivia

IDON'T VENTURE OUTof my room for some time after that. In fact, I'm so exhausted from all the walking that I close my eyes for just a second and wake to moonlight spilling through the curtains. Someone knocks on my door.

"Come in," I say, smoothing my hair down, which no doubt resembles a bird's nest right now. The door opens, and I'm blinded by the light in the hall. A huge silhouette of a man fills my doorway. I can't see his face clearly, on account of the light being behind him, but I'm betting his expression is as angry and exasperated as it has been all afternoon.

I clamber to my feet, only I forget about the boots I kicked off earlier at the base of the bed, and I go down, hard. This isn't a little stumble. I wind up splayed on the floor in front of him with my dress around my waist and my ass on display. August Cotton now has a front row seat to the gallery showing my wares.Jesus, kill me now.Please?

I'm starting to think that the coyotes were a safer option, and a part of me just wants to crawl away from him in my mortification and hide behind the bed, but though August Cotton may be a jerk, he's a gentlemanly one, and he moves toward me. Grabbing hold of both my elbows, he lifts me and sets me on my feet. And now I'm forced to look him in the eye and pretend I'm not dying of humiliation.

I inhale, and I'm struck with how good he smells, not a synthetic cologne but a

genuine outdoorsy scent, earth and hard work, and a faint hint of sandalwood, as if it came from a bar of soap rather than an expensive bottle. He's no longer wearing the button-up and slacks but is dressed in a flannel, jeans and work boots, and he looksgood. I have the strangest urge to run my hands over his beard to see if it's as prickly as his disposition. I don't, of course, because even I'm not that freaking nuts. But I won't lie, I'm tempted, if for nothing more than to rattle him, and get some sort of a response that isn't a grunt. As if he can sense my thoughts—and very much does not want to be a part of them or anything they might produce—he releases my arms from his grip and takes several steps back.

“I heated up some pizza. It's not good, but it's food, and should tide you over until mornin'.” With his lips parted as if he's preparing to say something more, he hesitates, and I think for sure he's about to comment on my blushing, or the fact that he just got his very own peep show for the bargain price of my humility, but he turns abruptly and walks away. “It's downstairs when you're ready.”

I flop back on the bed for the second time today and wonder what the hell to make of August Cotton. After taking a minute to catch my breath, I head downstairs to eat, absorbing as much of the grand house as I can along the way. It's beautiful, with its high ceilings, decorative molding, and glossy dark wooden floors. The Cottons had looked after this beautiful old house—that much was plain to see. Everywhere I turn there's another new treasure, whether it be furniture or some exquisite piece of history in the walls or ceiling. Tanglewood is the kind of house you see only in Hollywood classics.

I make my way past columns and corbels, sideboards and portraits hanging on the walls. I make a mental note to come back and study those later as I head into the kitchen where Bettina and August sit silently at a small table, their eyes focused on the untouched pizza before them, both of the Cottons look pale and exhausted.

“Auggie, do we have to eat pizza, again?” Bettina asks.

“I’ll go shopping soon, kid.”

Her quiet sigh fills the room. “I miss Mamma’s cwookin’.”

“I know,” he says, tossing a slice onto his empty plate. “Me too.”

“I miss Mamma.”

“Yeah.” He nods.

When Bettina’s little watery eyes flit over to me, she brightens some. August doesn’t brighten. His shoulders stiffen, and he doesn’t turn to look at me, but I know he knows I’m here, and clearly, he’s not happy about it.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt,” I say.

“What hwappened to your hwair?” Bettina says, scrunching up her nose and managing to giggle at the same time.

My hands fly to my hair and meet matted strands sticking up at all angles. “Oh, I ... er ... fell asleep.”

“You can wuse my bwush if you want? It’s sparklwee,” she announces with pride.

“That’s okay. I brought my own.” I make a funny face and sit down in the seat between her and August. “I just have to dig through my suitcase to find it.”

“Bett, go brush your teeth,” August says sharply, and from the way Bettina flinches, I can see he’s startled us both. “I’ll be in to run a bath as soon as you’re done.”

“But I wanna twalk to Owivia.” She draws out my name as if it were eight syllables

and not four. She's so cute, my heart hurts just looking at her. Big blue eyes like her brother, the same warm brown locks, and the fullest lips I've ever seen on a child. I am betting her brother's lips are as full and pillowy-soft without all that facial hair in the way.

"I'll be here tomorrow," I supply, but August shoots me a look, and I quickly shut up.

"The rebwervations book says you is here for a whole month."

"Ah—"

"That's a mistake," August tells his sister, pushing back his chair and coming to his feet. He crosses the room and throws his half-eaten pizza in the trash before dumping his plate in the sink. "Miss Anders isn't staying that long with us. Now go on upstairs."

Well, that's that, I suppose. Glad he made that clear. With her little shoulders slumped, Bettina hops down off her seat and trudges out of the room. I rise from my chair because I can't stomach sitting at his table when I'm clearly not welcome, but August's deep voice comes at me from across the room and halts me where I stand. "Sit. Eat. I lost my appetite anyway."

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I glare at him. “I know today was difficult for you, but you don’t have to be such an asshole. Neither one of us want me here, and I assure you I won’t stay longer than absolutely necessary.”

“Difficult? You think that’s what burying both your parents on the same day is ... difficult? You don’t know the half of it, lady.”

“Don’t presume to tell me what I do and don’t know. You don’t know shit about me, Cotton,” I snap, and for the briefest moment I think I see a smile tug at the corners of his lips, but then it’s gone, and so is mine along with it.

“Don’t want to either.”

Ouch. I shove past, my shoulder bumping his side as I stalk out into the hall and up the stairs. Bettina is brushing her teeth in the bathroom across from my room, and I have to fight to remove the scowl from my face to smile down at her. The poor girl has been through enough, and with a brother like August Cotton, I’m sure the hardest times are still yet to come.

CHAPTER THREE

Olivia

THE CHURNING OF MY stomach wakes me. I know, that’s as nuts as it sounds, but I am not a girl accustomed to not eating. I need three square meals a day and usually a cookie or two before bed. It really is a wonder I’m not the size of a house. That’s not to say I don’t have days where I wish the docs from *Botched* would come perform

their magic on my ass with their lipo wand thingy, but for the most part, I'm comfortable in my own skin. It's the only one I got. I have curves, but I'm not ... fluffy, so to speak. Then again, I'll likely never make theSports Illustratedswimsuit issue, either.

I blink at the God-awful light coming from the sheer lace—I forgot to close the actual curtains over the French doors last night—and I climb out of bed, wrap a nude-pink silk robe over the top of my Carine Gilson chemise and hop across the room. I'm terrified I'm going to pee my pants. I fling wide my door and skip across the hall to the bathroom, where I bust in on August with his sweatpants hung low on his hips and his hand fisting his hard cock. I stagger back, trip over the doorjamb and land smack-bang on my ass. My robe and chemise are pushed up around my middle, and for the second time in as many days, my panties are on display for a man I hardly know. And even worse than that, I'm still staring, slack-jawed and wide-eyed at the erect penis in my face.

“Holy hot co ... Lord, is that ... um,” I say. It just slips out. I have no control over my mouth right now. Heat rushes up my neck, over my chest like a wave spreading across my skin and leaving behind a tide of blotchy ugliness. That's when I notice the twisted flesh of his abdomen and hip.

“You don't knock?” August sneers, tucking himself back into his pants.

“I'm sorry,” I say, attempting to get to my feet, but slipping on the smooth tiles. In the end, I decide it's best just to stay where I am. It seems the safest bet with an angry Marine bearing down on me. I do rearrange my robe, though. “I just ... I needed to pee. I didn't know you were in here. Besides, you didn't lock the door.”

“There are no locks.”

“What?” I glance in horror at the door in question. I can't have someone barging in

on me while I'm in the bath, or worse, on the commode. What kind of bed and breakfast is this?

August eyes me suspiciously as if I meant to walk in on him. "You didn't notice that last night?"

"I used the bathroom down stairs last night. I didn't think you were going to use this bathroom anymore."

"Well, by all means, allow me to get out of your way, princess."

I huff, exasperated. "Princess?"

"It's what you look like in your lacey little rich girl panties down on your knees, just willing to make everything better. You wanna know how to make it all better? Stay the fuck outta my way."

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Lordy, were my first instincts right. August Cotton is a big jerk. I slowly stand up in front of him. “You know what? I’ll make things better when you can start acting like you deserve it.”

“You don’t think I deserve better than this?”

“That depends on what you’re referring to, now, doesn’t it? I know you fought for our country; I know you lost something there, but at least you came home.”

“To what?”

“Auggie?” Bettina’s little voice comes from the end of the hall, and we both glance down at her. I hadn’t realized my chest was pressed against his and though my face is red with anger and frustration, I’m practically panting. His breaths are even and not labored in the slightest, and I curse his stupid Marine training for helping him be so calm in the face of conflict. Though I’m sure with where he’s been, I seem like an angry gnat in comparison.

He brushes past me, and I grab his arm to stop him from walking. It’s a reflex, and a stupid one, because in a heartbeat I’m thrust up against the wall with his hand at my throat. His eyes are completely vacant as he glares at my face without appearing to even see it. I scramble for purchase, clawing at his thick fingers. I can’t breathe, his grip on me is too tight, and I can feel how easy it would be for him to end my life right now, right here in front of his little sister.

Bettina screams, and then he blinks as if he can’t figure out what the hell he’s doing here with his hand at my throat. He lets me go, and I drop to the floor, my own hands

flying to my bruised flesh as I cough and struggle to suck in a breath. But when I glance up at him, the horror in his eyes damn near breaks my heart. It outweighs my fear. Call me stupid, but it's always been that way. I'd go through hell and back just to save a life—it's the least I could do for the torture my veterans endure every day, and that look in his eyes tells me there's something here worth saving. August Cotton hasn't given up his humanity yet.

"Don't touch me," he says, and by the way his jaw ticks, I know I'm not the only one who noticed how his voice trembled. "Don't ever fucking touch me."

He storms down the hall and slams his door, and then I collapse against the wall and cough, breathing heavily as I try to get my heart to return to normal. A sob draws my attention. Bettina stands in her doorway at the end of the hall, holding a stuffed piglet as she cries. I slowly rise and take a step toward her, but she squeals and slams her bedroom door. I let out a heavy breath and sag against the wall, wondering for the first time in my career if I've bitten off more than I can chew. The Cottons need me, I've never been surer of anything in my whole life, and this is exactly what I came here to do. I just hope it doesn't kill me first.

CHAPTER FOUR

Olivia

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, when the house is still enough to hear the walls expanding from the heat of the day, I decide to head downstairs to see what I can rustle up for supper. There's an endless supply of casseroles in the giant freezer, many with names written on the Tupperware, and I wonder why August hasn't fed any of this to Bettina in place of the frozen pizzas she complained about last night. Pity casseroles. Likely from well-meaning neighbors and townsfolk. I decide not to touch any of them. There's enough food here to feed an army, but whatever August's reasons were for not eating it, I'll respect them and leave them be.

Instead, I start taking inventory of what he does have in the cupboard and fridge, as well as the freezer. There are vegetables fresh enough, and an uncooked pot roast. Two hours later when August comes back inside from working in the yard, he makes his way to the kitchen to find me, his mother's apron on, all four burners on the stove going, and the scent of home cooking filling the large house around us.

He's annoyed. That much is evident by the furrow in his brow and the midnight eyes that narrow on me when I turn to face him, but he bites his lip, likely to keep from saying whatever bitterness is on the tip of his tongue.

Bettina comes traipsing into the kitchen and stops dead, staring at me by the stove. "Are you a fairy gawdmother?"

I smile at her, but before I can say anything in the way of reply, August snaps, "Bett, go wash up."

"But—"

"Go," he commands, and the little girl pouts and drags her stuffed pig along the ground behind her. I watch her leave with a sad smile. When she's no longer in hearing distance, he turns on me.

"Are you stupid or somethin'? A man strangles you, and you make him supper?"

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I shrug one shoulder. “Believe it or not, it wouldn’t be the first time.”

He looks alarmed at this, and he stares at me for a beat too long. This is what I do in my line of work. I fix broken men. Sometimes that means I wind up with a bruise or two that I wasn’t expecting, and sometimes I wind up with a Marine who’s just found his will to live. There have been those cases that went awry, when no matter how much training we did with dog and man, the man didn’t make it. My friend Jake was almost one of those cases, and now he’s married to the love of his life with a beautiful baby girl and an adopted son. Not every day is hunky dory, he still has as much shit to wade through as any returned soldier, but wade he did, and he came out on the other side stronger for it.

It won’t take long to break August Cotton. I just need to find that thing that makes him tick—the one reason he hasn’t tried to kill himself already. And find it I will. I’m going to wear this man down until he can’t stand the sight of me, and then I’m going to build him back up again until he wonders how he ever did without me.

“What wouldn’t be the first time—you walking into a stranger’s house and sticking your nose where it don’t belong?” August finally says, snapping me out of my reverie.

I smile, just the hint of my mouth turning up in the corners. “Making a man supper after he’s strangled me half to death.”

“What’s wrong with you?” he bites out. “You think this is funny?”

I don’t reply, just give him a stern look and turn back to mixing my gravy. “Supper

will be ready in thirty minutes. You best go wash up.”

August is at my back, his body towering over me from behind, his hot breath on the nape of my neck, making my hair all stand on end, but I hold my head high and don’t let on how much he unnerves me. A beat later, he scoffs and walks away. I exhale a huge breath and sag against the counter in relief. I might have a decent poker face, but I can’t ignore the pounding of my heart or the quaking in my legs as I step away from the stove. August Cotton scares the shit outta me, but I’ll be damned if I ever let him see that.

WITHIN THIRTY MINUTES, I have both Cottons sitting at the small kitchen table that Bettina helped me set, and thank goodness because I had no idea what Mrs. Cotton considered good china and what she didn’t, and I’d hate to put another foot wrong in front of August. We eat in silence—or I eat in silence. August and Bettina scarf down the creamy mash, green beans and pot roast with gravy as if it’s their first real meal in weeks. I watch them both for a moment and smile before I take a bite of my own food. Both fill their plates with seconds, and I laugh when August even goes back for a third time.

He glares at me. “What?”

“Nothing. Just wondering if you got yourself some hollow legs there?”

He narrows his eyes. “Is that supposed to be a joke?”

Bettina pipes up, “Auggie got his leg blowed off in the war.”

August’s jaw tightens, and he stands and slams his fist down on the table, “Enough, Bettina.”

The little girl squeals and shoots up from her chair, running out of the kitchen and up the stairs where she slams her bedroom door.

“Goddamn it,” August shouts, and picks up his plate, tossing it into the sink where it shatters against the chipped porcelain. He swallows the steps to the counter in a single stride and rests his arms against it. He bows his head. His shoulders hunch; every muscle in his large body is pulled taut as a bowstring.

“I didn’t mean nothing by it,” I whisper.

“Course you didn’t,” he snaps.

I rise from my seat and remove my plate from the table, taking it over to the sink where I place it beside his hands. “You ever talk to anyone after you returned home?”

“Christ.” He shakes his head. “I bet you’re just lovin’ this, aren’t you? What was it you said? That you were itching to get your hands on me? To fix me?”

I nod and level my gaze on him. “I shouldn’t have said anything. It was unprofessional of me, and it was out of line, but I—”

“You’re damn right it was,” he says, taking a step toward me. “And for the record, I have no intention of talking to you or anyone else, so get that out of your pretty little head right now.”

“That’s your choice, but who’s talking to Bettina?”

“If you know what’s good for you, Ms. Anders, you’ll keep your nose out of our business.”

I fold my arms across my chest and glare up at him. I know attacking him isn’t the

way to go about earning this man's trust, but it's as if everything I know, all my training as a psychologist, has just flown out the window.

"She just lost her mamma, August. She's a little girl who's scared outta her mind, and her brother? The man who's supposed to do everything in his power to protect her and make her feel safe, shuts her out and screams and loses his temper like a child, and makes her feel like a burden."

August reels back as if I just dealt him a physical blow, and for the first time since my arrival, I feel something other than anger or annoyance from him. I'm tempted to quit while I'm ahead, but I never was a quitter, and I wouldn't be doing either of us any favors if I did.

"Now, I'll be out of your hair the first chance I get, but that little girl is going to be with you for the next eighteen years of her life, so I think maybe it's time to do something about that rage you been hanging onto."

"You don't know shit about it," he says, quietly, and if I weren't staring at his midnight eyes I might mistake his tone for sadness, but August isn't sad. There's a much more destructive emotion playing on his features. "You don't know a goddamn thing about what it means to be back here."

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“You’d be surprised, Cotton.” I glower up at him. All I want to do is run. Every bone, every muscle and every nerve in my body are telling me to put as much distance between us as possible, but I stand my ground despite my better judgment. “Just because I never donned a uniform doesn’t mean I haven’t fought a war all of my own.”

“What war? Black Friday at the mall?”

I laugh. All the anger drains from August’s face. “Some of us have battle scars in places others can’t see. Bettina will be one of those people. She’s already got the worst of it etched on her heart after losing her parents—do you really want your suicide to be another scar she can’t erase? Just think on it,” I say and walk away, up the stairs where I close my door.

I wait for the thundering of his footsteps that never come. Even though I want to, I don’t go to Bettina, because I think I’ve pushed August far enough for one night.

People end up in my program because at any given moment they’re seconds away from pulling the trigger, and they’re brave enough to admit they need help, but August is different. He’s not asking for help, and I get the distinct feeling that he won’t pull the trigger yet because he’s happy tormenting himself. His penance is a life of emptiness. It’s a debt many veterans believe they must repay for making it out alive when so many of their buddies didn’t, and until he believes that he deserves more than that, more than a lifetime of horror and nightmares, loneliness and torment, he’ll continue to push everyone around him away. When he can learn to love himself again, to forgive himself, then he’ll be ready, and not a second before. At some point, that moment of clarity comes for all returned soldiers, or death does.

It's my job to ensure that pulling the trigger is no longer an option for August Cotton.

CHAPTER FIVE

Olivia

EVERY FOURTH OF JULY I take a walk along the shores of the Gulf Coast and remember my daddy. This year, it's something I'm struggling with. I wasn't that far from home, but in many ways, I was the farthest I'd ever been. I'd grown up a military brat, first in Georgia, then Arizona, California, North Carolina and finally Alabama. Though we'd moved an awful lot, and it seemed I'd switched schools more often than I changed clothes, I had a good family, with two parents who loved me, even though one of them had been deployed for more than half of my life.

My daddy was a Staff Sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps, and even though he was gone for much of my childhood, I worshiped the ground that man walked on. I'd about lose my mind when he came home from deployment, and I'd cry myself to sleep every night for a month after he'd leave again. Before that last deployment, life was good, my childhood was good, but then Daddy never came home, and everything turned to shit.

I don't like to think on it too much, but every Fourth of July I lose myself to a little of that darkness that came and swallowed us up after his death. This year there appears to be enough misery at Tanglewood already, and I decide a walk into town to celebrate with some of the locals is just what I need. There's nothing like feeling lonely when you're surrounded by a crowd.

The Magnolia Springs parade hasn't started by the time I weave my way through the throng. The gathering is small but so sweet, and as I stand beside strangers to celebrate our servicemen and women, I catch a glimpse of a tall, dark and angry Marine leaning against one of the old oaks that gave this street its name. His eyes are

downcast, and I can tell he doesn't want to be here, but then I guess his four-year-old angel wasn't exactly going to drive herself to the parade, now was she?

At breakfast this morning, Bett had mentioned that she was participating in the march. August hadn't said a damn thing, but then ever since our conversation the other night, he'd hardly said two words to me. I've been trying my best to stay out of his hair by keeping busy at Tanglewood, making phone calls about the shelter, cleaning and baking way too many snickerdoodles. August had even let Bett help, and while her older brother may not love having me in their house, Bettina sure seems to.

A little old lady comes and plants her chair practically on top of me, and I move to the left a fraction of an inch and shoulder barge the man standing next to me by accident.

"I'm so sorry," I say.

At the same time, he says, "Pardon me, miss."

"No, that was my fault. I wasn't watching where I was going." I smile up at the man. He's tall, not quite as tall as August, with a very Matt-Bomer, all-American-man thing going on, only his eyes are seafoam green, not blue. Everything about him, from his tan leather shoes to his navy blazer, screams old-money.

"You're fine," he says, and then chuckles, probably at his word choice, but there's every chance he's laughing at me because I'm probably gawping at him with drool trailing down my chin. "Are you just in the area for the holiday?"

"Oh no." I finally quit staring and close my mouth, only I realize I'm coming off a bit like a brain-dead redneck, so I quickly add, "I just moved here."

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“Really?” he asks, studying my face closely. It’s unnerving, and I’m beginning to wonder if I’m wearing remnants of my breakfast when he says, “How are you finding our beautiful town so far?”

“It’s nice. Of course, this is only my fourth day.” I lean in so the woman and her trio of friends who’ve moved in beside me won’t hear. “But the most beautiful roses often have the sharpest thorns.”

“Meaning?”

“Well, I’ve heard a lot about this town’s southern hospitality, but I’m yet to see it. So far, I can’t tell if you wanna run me outta town, take me back to your cabin in the woods and chop me up into itty-bitty pieces, or if you’re just genuinely being polite.”

“Well, I was aiming for polite, but I apologize if I’ve come off like a serial killer. While I do own a cabin in the woods, I assure you I’d likely only take you there for a quiet weekend away. I’m not one for killing things.” He winks. “Too messy.”

“I’m sorry,” I say with a smile, glad that not all the men in this town are as serious as August. Then again, I suppose not all the men in Magnolia Springs have lived through a war zone.

“Jude du Pont,” he says offering his hand. “They’ll come around. Give it time.”

“Olivia.” I reach out and shake his hand, but then the parade starts, and silence falls over us only to be completely eradicated by hoots and whistles. There’s a small regiment of soldiers, scouts and cadets that file past on foot or in wheelchairs, and a

tractor or two, and then little Bett's daycare center comes along, their teacher proudly holding the banner and the children are all dressed in their finest, despite the heat.

Bett's wearing the midnight-blue dress she wore the first day we met. A ribbon bar and a purple heart medal are pinned to her dress. I dare a glance at August, who seems to have moved forward into the crowd now that it's almost over. He watches his sister carefully, and then when she screams my name and breaks away from the parade, barreling into my legs, I wrap my arms around her and give her a tight squeeze, though my eyes never leave August's and his never leave mine. Bettina's teacher calls her name, telling her to keep up, and I give her a wave as she skips back to her place in line. I glance back at August, but he's melted away from the crowd and is nowhere to be found.

"Friend of yours?" Jude asks, nodding to the little ones as they march past with swinging arms and eager faces.

I don't know if he's talking about Bettina or the man I can't take my eyes off of, but I smile and say, "Yeah."

Of course, I'm lying through my teeth. While Bettina may want to be my friend, her brother appears to outright detest the idea. I'll talk him around, though. I'm sure of it.

"You're staying at Tanglewood?"

"Uh-huh," I say, clapping as a farmer slowly putters past on his tractor. Red, white and blue streamers tied with aluminum cans trail behind him and make a godawful racket. My gaze darts all around the parade, but I can't find August anywhere.

As the fire brigade slowly drives down the road with its lights flashing, and its siren whooping loudly, people start packing up their belongings and head along Oak Street behind it. A woman with perfectly coiffed auburn curls and bright red lipstick sidles

up to Jude and says, “There you are, I been looking for you all over.”

“Hello, Ruby,” he says, and the rest of their conversation is lost to me because as the crowd pushes forward, I get separated from the couple. I don’t mind too much. While Jude may be gorgeous in a southern gentleman kind of way, I’m too busy wondering where August went to pay the man any mind.

I follow the herd, and it isn’t long before I find myself at the fire station. It sits on the edge of Magnolia River and is surrounded by trees. Beside the big old brick firehouse there are stalls on the manicured lawns decorated in red, white, and blue selling hotdogs, cotton candy, cold drinks, and more American flags than you can poke a stick at. I’m a little lost at first, but it doesn’t take me long to find my bearings. It doesn’t take long for curious minds to start talking either, if their furtive glances are anything to go by. God bless small towns.

Once I collect a Coke and a hot dog, I’m set upon by a group of women—all about my age—who practically drag me away from the hot dog stand and force me to lose my appetite with their horrified looks at my supper of processed meat and carbs.

“We heard you’re new in town,” a woman with a shock of strawberry blond curls and pale pink lipstick says. She looks like she just stepped off the set of *The Stepford Wives*. I cast my gaze around the group of well put-together women. They all appear to be from Stepford.

“Sure am,” I say, setting my pop down on a nearby picnic table and wiping the condensation from my palm onto my sundress.

The woman thrusts a dainty manicured hand out in front of me and says, “I’m Katherine Abernathy.”

I take Katherine’s proffered hand and shake, wincing when she glances down at the

ketchup I just smeared over her milky white skin. She retrieves a God's honest handkerchief from her purse and wipes away the mess as if a toddler had just attacked her with sticky fingers.

"Olivia," I say sheepishly.

"Well, Olivia, this here is Elizabeth, Georgia, Della, and Alice." She points to the women gathered around me as if she's a hostess on a game show.

"Hi," I say, choosing not to shake hands after the way Katherine looked at me. I nod to each woman respectively and become a little more nauseated by their beaming smiles and perfect hair and makeup. By the time I've reached Alice's overly cheerful face, I feel small and grubby, like a rat scurrying around their feet, desperate for a way out. My God, you couldn't even make these women up.

"I saw you talking to Jude du Pont at the parade," Alice says, flipping her long blond hair back from her shoulder. "Do you two know each other?"

"Oh, no. We just met today."

"Well, isn't that nice?" Katherine says, her laser focus zeroing in on my cowboy boots and cornflower blue dress.

"I'll say," another woman—Della, I think—pipes up. "Some of us have been living right under his very nose for years, and he's never uttered a word."

I grimace and cast my gaze toward the rest of the townsfolk, longing for something ... someone to come and save me.

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“Are we keeping you from someone?” Katherine asks.

“Oh, no. I was just looking for ...” I roll my gaze over the crowd one last time and spot the man who I believe brought me here in the first place. “Is that Mayor Winkler?”

“You know the mayor too?” Georgia says, brightly.

“My, my,” Katherine says with a malicious smile. “You just got here, and it seems you know everyone already. Oh, Mr. Mayor?”

“We haven’t met yet,” I say, but no one appears to be listening to me because Mayor Winkler waddles toward our group, and it’s as if the Dead Sea itself is parting.

“Ladies, lovely to see you today,” Mayor Winkler says. The group fawns all over the man as if it’s the second coming of Christ, and I resist the urge to roll my eyes. “Now, I don’t believe I’ve met this pretty little angel. How do you do? I’m Mayor Winkler.”

“Olivia Anders.”

“Olivia?” he says, and his dark brow glistens with sweat. He blots it away with a handkerchief. “Doesn’t this town ever use Kleenex? “Well I’ll be damned. Welcome, young lady, welcome.”

“Thank you.” After all this time, I’m finally meeting the man who convinced me that setting up a shelter here was the best thing for everyone, and given that the last few

days have been nothing short of hell, I don't know whether to kiss or slap him. I settle for a handshake instead.

Mr. Mayor asks if I've had a chance to meet Dalton Brooks yet—another veteran who returned to Magnolia Springs a different man than the one who went away to war. I hoped he'd be here today, but I understand that crowds aren't always every Marine's cup of tea. He doesn't mention Jason Lambert—an eighteen-year-old kid who shot himself in his childhood home just last spring. I'd already done my research, though. Jason may be buried six feet under, but he's what brought me here, and I intend to make sure that Magnolia Springs doesn't lose any more veterans.

I'm mid-way through telling Mayor Winkler when he can expect Paws for Cause to open when a familiar voice bursts through the crowd.

"Wivvie, Wivvie," the little girl shouts, and I whirl around to find Bettina barreling toward us. August walks at a clip behind her to keep up. "Did you see?"

I squat down to her level. "I sure did. You looked amazing walking in that parade. I'm so proud of you, sugar bean."

August approaches us cautiously, his gaze scanning for danger the way a lot of Marines do. Our eyes meet over the top of Bettina's head and I smile up at him. "Hi."

He nods his chin in my direction and I know that's all the greeting I'll get, but he surprises me by coming a little closer and saying, "We're not staying. I just wanted to know if you needed a lift back?" I flinch, waiting for the other shoe to drop, and August frowns and runs a hand through his hair. "You know what? Never mind."

"I'd like that," I say, quickly, terrified of being swallowed up by Stepford and spat out the other side the carbon copy of Katherine and her friends.

August clears his throat. “Alright then, well, we were going to head off before the fireworks start.”

“Okay, just let me say goodbye to the mayor.”

“You don’t have to come, you know?”

“I said I would.” I frown at him. “Didn’t I?”

“Auggie dwoesn’t like the fiey works. Boom, boom, boom,” Olivia shouts and skips away from us, so I’m left staring at her brother.

“Seen one firework, you’ve seen them all, right?”

“Right,” he scoffs, and I know his distaste for them isn’t because he dislikes the thing itself, but because of the noise they make, and the memories they dig up. As part of our training, we have to recreate certain situations that may be a trigger for the soldier and the dog, so that the canine knows what to do. Fireworks are often a trigger for anyone who made it out of a war zone.

August walks away to wrangle his sister, and I turn back to the mayor to say my goodbyes. Everyone is glaring at me.

Mayor Winkler yanks on the hem of his vest, pulling it down over his rotund belly. “I didn’t realize you’d be staying at the Tanglewood residence. Especially not so soon after the Cottons passed, God rest their souls.”

“I didn’t know they had passed, and since everything is closed until tomorrow, I had nowhere else to go.”

“My dear girl,” the Mayor says, grabbing my hands and enveloping them in his

sweaty grip. “You should have called me.”

I smile politely. “No need. Tanglewood has been just fine, and I’ll go and see about finding a rental tomorrow.”

“Oh, I work at the realtor in town,” Georgia says. “You come see me, and we’ll find you something just perfect.” Katherine shoots her a look filled with so much venom she’s practically hissing.

“What a great idea. Miss Georgia will sort you out with something more suitable,” Mayor Winkler says. “She’s more than just a pretty face.”

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“Oh, Mr. Mayor.” She blushes right to the roots of her hair.

“It’s for the best, dear,” the man says, patting my hand as if in commiseration. “Mr. Cotton, well, he’s part of the reason I wanted you to come, but given his accident, I’m not sure Tanglewood is the best place for you, and we’d hate for anything to happen.”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, it’s just that he’s a somewhat volatile member of the community and—”

“I heard he was dishonorably discharged for gunning a man down in Iraq,” Alice says.

“He was in Afghanistan.” I shake my head impatiently. “He has a purple heart.”

“Oh God,” Alice places a hand against her chest. “Is it serious?”

“He wasn’t dishonorably discharged; he was discharged because he lost a leg in an IED explosion. That’s why he has a purple heart.”

“He lost his leg and has a heart condition?” Georgia asks.

“August is just fine,” I snap, done with this whole damn town. While what the mayor said about August being volatile may be true, this kind of prejudice and stupidity is why a lot of veterans feel ostracized from the community. “Thank you for your concern, Mr. Mayor, but Mr. Cotton has been nothing but hospitable toward me since I arrived. I wish I could say the same for everyone else. Perhaps you just haven’t

gotten to know him well enough.” Oh God, I am going to hell for being the world’s biggest liar.

The mayor chuckles. “Perhaps you’re right, but he don’t do a lot to try to fit in or make it easy for people to accept him.”

“Forgive me, but he fought for our country. He fought for the freedom that this town enjoys today, so I don’t feel he should have to do anything to make people comfortable,” I bite out each word as if it were poison in my mouth. Mayor Winkler shakes his head, his jowls wobbling like a turkey’s wattle, and he seems to be looking over my head as I speak, which is just plain rude. “In fact, I’d say August Cotton has done more than enough to make you people ‘comfortable.’ Enjoy your celebration, Mr. Mayor.”

I turn on my heels and smack right into a solid wall of muscle. I guess I know now why Mayor Winkler was shaking his head at me as if he might pry something loose. “Shit.”

August’s hands grip my shoulders to stop me from falling. “Nice speech.”

“Shut up, Cotton.” I wrench free from his grasp and stalk around him on my way to the parking lot.

A beat later, he follows, and when I reach the passenger side of August’s truck, Bett hangs her head out the window and squeals. “Wivvie.”

“Hey, sugar bean.” I give her a bright smile. I know her brother is standing right behind me, and I know my little outburst back there is going to cost me something, but Bettina doesn’t need to get caught up in the middle.

He leans an arm against the top of the door so I can’t open it. “You know you didn’t

have to defend me, back there.”

“Well, they didn’t have to be such assholes about it,” I say, and then balk when Bett giggles.

“You swore.”

“Yeah, I swore. Now scooch over, missy.”

“Thank you,” he whispers and walks around to his side of the truck.

“You’re welcome,” I reply with a grin, and I open my door and climb in alongside the most adorable four-year-old in the entire world. I suppose both Cottons have their charm. Yep, one big charismatic family.

Hell, and damnation.

CHAPTER SIX

Olivia

POP. POP. POP.

I jolt awake and sit upright in bed, my heart hammering and sweat pouring off my body. I'd been dreaming I was back in the trailer I shared with my mamma. The screen door was slamming with the wind that howled up against the thin aluminum walls, and the afternoon sky outside was the burnt amber of a sunset through steel gray hurricane clouds. I glance around the room, which is lit up by the brightly colored starbursts in the sky. Though the fireworks from the parade are long since finished, just about every man and his dog sets those suckers off on the Fourth of July. Clearly, Magnolia Springs doesn't like to be outdone because some fool is letting off a whole bunch in the field not too far from us, if the explosions over our roof are anything to go by.

A man cusses outside my door, and I throw on a floral kimono robe that falls down to my ankles, and step out onto the balcony. At first I think I'm alone but then, as another bright starburst illuminates the sky, it also lights up the man bent at the waist, leaning his big body over the railing. His hair is mussed and his head sags between his heavily muscled arms. The sharp staccato beat of the fireworks continues to pop all around us. More colors explode in the sky, and August's whole body quakes with every bang that rings out like gunfire.

"August?" I ask quietly, so as not to startle the man. "What are you doing out here?"

All six-foot-something of him turns to me with wide pleading eyes. He's shaking like a leaf, but I don't dare touch him. I just lean up against the railing alongside him. "Every year I think I'm gonna get used to it."

"The sound reminds you of war." This isn't a question—I can already tell from the sheen of sweat on his brow and the way his whole body trembles that he isn't here on this balcony with me right now, but is right back there in that desert.

"Everything reminds me of war," he whispers.

I inch closer, but I'm afraid to reach out and eliminate the distance between us. I'm frightened he'll reject me. Instead, I lean my weight back against the railing and watch the colors explode in the sky and illuminate his face. I could easily slip beneath his arm and find myself pinned between the railing and all that thick rigid muscle, and for a moment I contemplate doing that very thing, but I don't touch him. We stand in deafening silence, too afraid to show one another all the things that make us vulnerable. Just when I think he's going to walk away, leave and sever this fragile new truce, he looks directly at me. He studies my face in the bursts of light.

"Every day I wake up and expect that I'll be a new man," he whispers. "Every day I lie to myself because I know I ain't ever changing, but I still need to tell myself that to make it through." August shakes his head and lets it fall between his arms again. "Jesus. I don't know why I'm tellin' you this."

"Because telling me is therapeutic. Talking is good for the soul, August."

"You tryin' to shrink my head?"

I give him a coy smile. "No, just stating a fact."

"You can't fix me. No one can."

I lean my weight on the railing behind me, my hand just inches from his, so close the heat burns me like a brand. “I want to help you, give you the tools you need to make it through everyday obstacles like this.”

He laughs, but there’s no humor to it. “That’s the really screwed up thing; it’s just a bunch of fireworks.”

“It is, but to a Marine who was stationed in Sangin, it’s as if you’re right back there.”

His gaze snaps to mine. “How’d you know where I was stationed?”

“Call it a hunch.” It wasn’t a hunch. Greyson Cotton had told me what little details he knew about his son’s deployment, but Sangin in the Helmand Province was arguably the most dangerous province in the country, and those that made it out of there alive had some of the worst cases of PTSD I’d ever seen.

“Sangin was like being posted in the very jaws of hell. Every day was a firefight, another IED, another post hit. You know when you put a shell against your ear and you can hear the ocean?” he asks, and I nod. “Now imagine that sound is an RPG going off in your head, your buddy’s screaming as hot metal tears through his flesh, blood bubbling up his throat to choke him, the smell of burnt fur sticking to the inside of your nose, and debris is raining down all around you, only you don’t need no shell to hear it. The sounds of war never leave you.”

We fall silent after that, because what can I say that makes any of it okay? Nothing, but as the fireworks die out and the sulfur and thick smoke waft by on the tepid Alabama breeze, I realize I have to say more. Though our stories are vastly different, the end is the same. August and I are like everyone else walking this Earth: we hurt, and we bleed and stumble through each day alone, seeking salvation in things: shoes, booze, drugs, lingerie, or in his case, solitude. “You’re not the only one who lies to make it through.”

“What?”

“Every day I tell myself I’m brave, I’m strong, that the past does not dictate who I am or the woman I’ve become. I keep hoping that one day it’ll stick.”

“Ain’t we a perfect pair then?” he says snidely. “Just a couple of liars.”

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“Maybe one day we can tell each other these things until we start to believe them.” I turn to him. “What’s that they say? That the more people hear something the more they start to believe it? Can’t hurt, can it?”

August straightens and walks away from me, toward his room. “Good night, Olivia.”

“Night, August,” I say with a sigh when he’s out of earshot. For a long time, I stand there, listening to the crickets humming in the long grass, ignoring the weariness in my bones with a sleepy smile tugging at my lips. While I’d give anything not to have a veteran cower and tremble that way, he made great strides tonight. Of course, tomorrow is a new day and I’d wager that as the sun rises so too will his disdain for me again, but tonight he opened to me. For a moment, I saw a hint of the man beneath the wall, and even if it kills me, I’ll find a way to sneak a glimpse of that August again. I’ll make sure he doesn’t stay buried for long.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Olivia

COME FRIDAY, I’M UPat the ass-crack of dawn, donning a pair of sensible flat shoes and a nice dress as I head into town. I want to hit the realtor bright and early because I know being in August’s hair isn’t doing me any favors.

I’m around two miles into my journey down Oak Street when August’s pickup pulls up alongside me.

“Wivvie,” Bettina says, and I turn and smile at her.

“Well hi, sugar. Where are you off to today?”

“I have daycare, silly.”

“You do? Well that sounds like fun.”

“Auggie says we cwouldn’t stop because we’re gwoing to be late.” She leans out the window and whispers conspiratorially, “But I twold him he hawd to.”

“Bettina,” August chides.

I smile at him. “From the mouths of babes, huh?”

“You want a ride or not?” he asks.

I smile, sweetly. I have no intention of getting in the car with him. “No thank you, I’m just fine walking.”

“What kind of man would I be if I left a pretty lady by the side of the road?”

My brow shoots skyward, and I start walking. “The kind that’s late.”

The truck screeches to a halt, and Bettina yelps as her tiny body is flung back against the seat.

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“Stay in the car, Bett, and put your belt on,” August says. He climbs out of the vehicle and catches my shoulder, pulling me toward him. “Look, about the other day, when I ...” He sighs. “Well, I know we haven’t really talked about it, and I owe you a proper apology. So, I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking, it was just in—”

“Instinct? I know. I told you this wasn’t my first time at the rodeo.”

His expression is stoic, but the way his eyes narrow give everything away. “How many others?”

I level him with a sharp look. “Too many to count.”

“Then why do you do it?”

“Because what I do saves lives. Because too many good men and women who fought for our country are forgotten about when they return home. Because wounds on the inside can be so much harder to heal than those of the flesh. That’s why I do it.”

His brow is furrowed and he stares at our feet for a long time, likely telling me to shut up inside his head. A beat later, he lifts his gaze to mine and says, “Please get in the car.”

“It’s better if I walk.”

“Oh, you’re stubborn, ain’t ya?”

“I guess we’re both too stubborn for our own good.”

“Fine.” He stalks back to the car. “Don’t say I didn’t ask.”

“Wasn’t gonna,” I say and set off again. The door slams and the idling engine coughs and splutters as it takes off and zooms past me in a cloud of dust and heat.

In town, though my feet hurt and I’m craving a coffee, my first stop is Renoux Realty. Georgia smiles widely as I set foot in the door, and then the smile vanishes when she recognizes my face. I take it the Stepford Wives didn’t appreciate my outburst yesterday.

“Good morning, how may we help you today?” she asks with a pasted-on grin, as if we didn’t have a conversation just yesterday about my needing a place to live.

“Well, for one, I need to pick up the keys for the shelter I purchased out on Highway 98 and then, hopefully, you can help me find somewhere to live in Magnolia Springs.”

“You bought old man Tinker’s shelter?” Georgia asks.

“Yep.”

A crease forms between her brows. “Why?”

“Because I run a program for vets and dogs.”

Georgia makes a face. “You know what? It’s none of my business. Let me go get your keys and a copy of your paperwork.”

And this is exactly the reason why Magnolia Springs needs Paws for Cause, because no one here is interested in the welfare of their veterans. In fact, after the way Mayor Winkler spoke about August yesterday, I’m wondering why he even sought me out in

the first place. Unless there was some hefty government bonus awarded to his town that I didn't know about. Which just might break my heart, so Winkler better hope and pray that I never find out about it.

Georgia comes back a few minutes later with the paperwork, but I can't help noticing she's not holding any keys. "It appears that Mr. Renoux sent them off to Elberta to make a copy a few weeks ago—his brother owns a key cutting business over there—but we don't seem to have them back yet."

"But I didn't ask for a copy to be made." I'd told Mr. Renoux that I'd pick up my keys when I came to town. What I'd failed to do was make sure his office was opened when I arrived. That was a small oversight on my part that saw me twiddling my thumbs, cleaning too much and baking enough cookies to feed the Cottons for a month.

She waves that away with a lazy hand gesture. "Oh, Mr. Renoux is just thoughtful that way."

"Well, I appreciate that," I say. "But do you think he could be thoughtful enough to drive on over there and get them back for me?"

Her lips turn up in a tight smile. "He's out of town at a conference for the rest of the week."

"Of course he is," I say with a sigh. I may have to bribe August to drive me to Elberta, because I have a shelter to resurrect, and I'll go crazy sitting around Tanglewood for another week.

"I can call you as soon as they come in though."

Or I could just have a locksmith come over and change the locks. She has just given

me the title to the property. Keys or no keys, that shelter is mine. I flash her an unfeeling smile. “Sounds great. Now, about those rentals.”

Georgia taps away on her computer. “I’m sorry. We don’t have any listings right now.”

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“But I haven’t told you what I’m looking for yet.”

“We don’t have anything at all.”

“Really?” I ask in disbelief.

“Mmhmm, no rentals at this very moment, but there’s a little hunting shack about five miles out of town that’s coming up for rent in a few weeks’ time. If the current tenants don’t sign on for another year, that is, you’d be welcome to come look at it then.”

My heart sinks. “Well, if you hear anything, will you let me know?”

“You got it, girlfriend,” she says, overly bright as I stand and head toward the door. The sting of it hitting my ass on the way out hasn’t even subsided before she’s picking up the phone. Probably calling Kathy Abernathy.

This is a huge blow. Not Georgia activating the gossip tree—I could care less about that—but my lack of an apartment. It means I’m stuck at Tanglewood far longer than August and I expected.

Still, I’m determined as ever. This town needs my help. August Cotton needs my help, and I’ll be damned if I let a little thing like a roof over my head stop me from doing my work. Paws for Cause is stronger than ever, and if I can get enough of the community’s support behind me, I can make this work. Though that may prove difficult now that I’ve given the mayor and all of Stepford a serious tongue-lashing.

My feet ache as I walk through town. I need a mode of transport that doesn't involve them carrying me six miles a day. Before long I'll need a car, but seeing as there's no dealership here I'll have to head up to Mobile and find my own way with something secondhand. I left my van behind in Fairhope because Paws for Cause needed it to transport animals to and from nearby shelters and veterans who aren't mobile, so I'm left with one option: walking.

I'm tempted to head out to the shelter right now, but it's the middle of the day and walking another two to three miles out of my way doesn't hold that much appeal. Besides, it's not like I have a set of keys to get in. Instead, I buy a bottle of water, some sunblock, and a wide, straw-brimmed hat from the local market before I make my way back to Tanglewood.

I'll likely be the color of a lobster by the time I hit the Cottons' long drive, but there's nothing to be done for it. As I walk down Magnolia Drive, I come across a yard sale and decide to stop in because the lawn is shaded by a beautiful big old live oak, and it's at least ten degrees cooler in the shade. I pick over chipped china, baskets full of costume jewelry and knick-knacks that I have no intention of buying, and then I see it: the answer to all my prayers—or at least all my prayers right at this very moment. A bike for sale. It's powder blue, well loved, and has one of those little baskets on the front covered in flowers. It also has a flat tire and a busted chain, but I pull out a few dollars from my purse and pay the woman for it anyway. She tells me it was her mother's bike, and she wishes she could sell it to me in better condition, but that no one has been looking after it for all this time. I'm not fazed by this. I'm a single woman who's lived alone for most of her adult life. I'm self-sufficient when I need to be, and I'm not afraid of getting my hands dirty. I've fixed all kinds of things, and a rusted old chain and a flat tire won't stop me.

I push it out the front gate and along the road, and Lord have mercy if I don't lose my shit and nearly toss the thing several times on the way back to Tanglewood when the chain seizes and the wheels stop turning and I practically have to drag it through the

sticky summer heat, but make it to Tanglewood I do. Shortly after I've walked up the drive, I throw the damn thing to the ground and kick it some, just to make myself feel better, and then I take a deep breath and look up to find Bettina watching me from the balcony. I shrug and give her a "What are you going to do?" face. She giggles and scurries away from the landing.

I wipe the sweat from my brow, and I'm just about to head upstairs to change my clothes when my gaze lands on August standing on the front porch, watching me closely.

I frown. He frowns, and I start up the steps. "That Miss Maple's bike?"

"Yep, her daughter sold it to me."

"It's a damn wreck. You woulda been better buying a new one."

"I can fix it," I say through my teeth.

"You can, huh?" He smiles.

"Sure, I can. I mean, how hard can it be?"

"You tell me," he says. I push past, careful not to touch him in the slightest and stalk up to my room, flinging my hat down on the bed along with my sunblock. That man is so infuriating. I quickly change into a white tank and a pair of jean cut-offs that I had no intention of wearing in front of others, but it's hot outside and I'll be damned if I'm going to fix this bike in a nice dress. Besides, it's not like anyone here is looking.

When I head back outside, August is looking the bike over. He straightens and turns to face me. His gaze rolls over my body from head to toe. His shoulder's slowly rise and fall, as if he's taking in a deep breath. He wets his lips, and my own breath

catches in my throat because it's been a long while since I had a man look at me that way. I dated a guy from Monroe a little more than a year ago, but it was an odd pairing, and he certainly didn't look at me the way August is now.

August doesn't say a word, just shoves the bike toward me by the handlebars so I have no choice but to take it or have it fall on my feet, and then he stalks up the front steps, and I'm left there wondering how the hell I'm supposed to get through to this man when he can't even look at me without wanting to push me away.

I push the bike over to the garage that sits off to the side of the house and stand it up in the shade, then I get to work. Only, I've never fixed a bike before, and I don't have the faintest idea of what I'm doing. After staring at it for a good twenty minutes or so and hoping that the solutions to my problem will just automatically manifest in my mind, I take the liberty of using a screwdriver from the tool box in the shed and I pry the chain off. It snaps and comes away in two heavily rusted greasy pieces.

"Goddamn it," I shout to the empty room and throw the chain over my shoulder. One lands with a thud against the concrete, but I spin around to check the other, terrified I've hit something important. Not something, but someone, it seems. August stands behind me holding the grimy piece in his hands.

"You'll need a new chain now."

"No shit, Sherlock," I say, and then I feel bad because I did just throw a bicycle chain at him. "I'm sorry I hit you."

"You didn't."

"You caught that midair?" I glower in disbelief and mutter under my breath, "What are you, a ninja?"

“Marine, actually.” He laughs. I give him a stern look, and he wanders across to the other side of the garage. “I think I have one here somewhere. Can’t do much about the brakes though, sorry.”

“What’s wrong with the brakes?”

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He chuckles, as if what I just said was hilarious. “They don’t work. I can fix them, but I’ll need a part.”

I frown. “I don’t need your help.”

He turns to me with an eyebrow raised. “You one of them feminists? I don’t need a man to do anything for me?”

“No. I’m not a feminist, I just don’t like owing people anything. I’ve been fending for myself for a long time.”

He walks toward me and drops the chain into my hand. It’s old, and greasy, but it’s not rusted, just covered with a thick layer of dust. I nod. “Thank you. I’ll pay you back for the chain.”

“Don’t worry about it. We got a couple lying around here anyway, so if that doesn’t fit, let me know. Dad kept every little piece of junk that came his way in this shed. Mamma couldn’t stand it.”

“I said I’ll pay you back,” I say sternly.

He shrugs and slides a tub of grease across the counter littered with tools and dust. “Suit yourself. You’ll need this too. I’ll leave you to it.”

I don’t say another word as he walks out of the garage—I just stare down at the chain in my hands and the tub of grease. August’s fingerprints are stamped in the dust. I place my thumb over the largest one and smile at how big his prints are compared to

mine. The memory of walking in on him in the bathroom flashes unwanted into my mind, and all I can see are those big hands wrapped around his big ...no! August Cotton is a potential client; he's not to be manhandled, not even in my wildest fantasies. That can never happen, but damn, if that big broody Marine doesn't make me want things that I have no right to want.

Long after the sun has set, I have the bike chain all greased up and not at all where it should be, and it's clear that I have no idea what I'm doing. This is a lot different from scooping up dog poop or changing a fuse. I'm out of my depths with this one, and I need help. But I'll be damned if I'll ask for it, because August isn't the only stubborn adult occupying Tanglewood right now. I wipe my hands on a grease-stained towel I find on the work bench and set the bike to one side of the shed, then I climb the stairs to the house. The scent of tomato sauce, dough, and cheese assaults me. Pizza, again. I need to freshen up, so I have no idea why I'm tiptoeing down the hall toward the kitchen like a creeper.

"Auggie, why we hawe to hawe the pizza again?"

"Because, it's pizza or toast," he replies gruffly around the dull clanging of plates and the sounds of the cupboard thudding softly closed. "Now, be good and help me set the table."

"'Cwause why?" Bettina complains. The legs of a chair scrape along the floor. "Mamma never made pizza or toasts."

"Mamma ain't here, Bett. You got me. You're stuck with me, and I don't know how to do nothin' else." My heart breaks with the hopelessness in his voice, and I know I shouldn't be eavesdropping, so I quietly ease away from the kitchen.

"Why can't Wivvie cook?"

“Because Olivia is a guest. You don’t make guests cook,” he says impatiently. “Besides, she don’t belong here. She’ll be gone soon enough, and it’ll be back to me and you.”

I take a step back, and the boards creak beneath my feet. I wince and hightail it up the stairs, my heart racing at the thought of being caught listening in on August and his little sister.

I run the bath, and I try my best to remove the grease stains from my hands in the sink without staining the vanity with it. When I’m done, I pour in a ridiculous amount of bubble bath, and I sit on the edge of the tub with my hand swishing the foam around in the water. I wonder what it would be like to share this tub with the angry Marine. I wonder if there would even be room enough for me, given that he’s built like a tank.

No!No sharing bubble baths with August Cotton.You cannot afford to be thinking of a naked, wet August right now.Or ever. He might not have signed up to my program yet, but I have no doubt he’ll come around, and taking bubble baths with clients is a huge no-no. Daydreaming about sharing more than just a pizza with this man is a very dangerous thing. I’m just about to strip off my clothing when there’s a soft tap on the door.

“Olivia, are you decent?”

Am I decent?That depends on whether you’re taking my thoughts about our naked bodies slipping against one another in the tub into account, now, doesn’t it?

“Mostly,” I say, and give myself a mental smack down as he opens the door.

“How much of that did you hear?” That’s August for you—right for the jugular. He doesn’t like to mince words.

“Hear? Hear what? I didn’t hear nothing,” I say too quickly, which of course is code for “I heard every damn word you said, mister.”

“Listen, I didn’t mean—”

“Nothing by it?”

“I just don’t want her getting too used to this,” he says, staring at the steaming bathwater. “I don’t want her getting used to having you around.”

“Is that such a bad thing?”

“That’s not what I—”

“I went to the realtor today. Apparently there’s not a single rental in all of Magnolia Springs, though I don’t know if it was payback for yesterday or there just really isn’t any rentals here. Either way, I’ll be gone as soon as possible,” I say with a sigh. “As soon as I can find somewhere else to stay, but in the meantime, I don’t mind cooking for you and Bettina.”

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“You don’t need to do that.”

“She can’t eat pizza every night. If you buy the food, I’ll cook it.”

“No, she’s my sister, and I’ll take care of her,” he says. “I don’t need help.”

“Good Lord. You know I’ve met an awful lot of Marines in my time, but none anywhere near as stubborn as you. Marine or not, you’re still human, and you’re out of your depths with that girl.”

His eyes flash, and a muscle ticks in his jaw. “Don’t you come up in here tellin’ me what my sister needs.”

“If you keep shutting everyone out like this, you’re going to lose her.” I stand. My voice is raised to meet his own fever-pitch, but I sigh and lower it so Bett doesn’t hear. “They will take her away if you can’t provide adequate care.”

“I’m giving her all the care she needs.”

“No, you’re not,” I snap. “You have a problem, August, and not dealing with that problem is hurting her.”

“You might be used to ‘helping others,’ but you can’t shrink my head. I’m fine.” He steps closer, and I shove him back with my hands against his chest, but August is quicker and grabs hold of my wrists, pulling me to him. His eyes narrow and then widen as his thumbs trace the scars along my forearms. He turns them over to get a better look, and I attempt to snatch my arms back, but his grip tightens. While I’ve

never been comfortable displaying them to the world, I don't cover my scars, and most people never see what's right in front of them anyway. Only a handful of people have ever noticed. Still, that doesn't mean I like them being touched.

“What the hell is this?”

I yank out of his grasp and rub at my wrists, which ache from the pressure of his grip. My face is hot, and I swallow hard around the lump in my throat. “We all have scars, August. And we all need help at one point or another.”

“Olivia—”

“You can leave now.” I turn my back on him and lift the hem of my shirt, pulling it up over my head. I know it's a surefire way to get rid of him. He can't see anything but the back of my lace bra, but I feel him there behind me for a beat too long. My skin prickles under the weight of his stare, and then he leaves, closing the door quietly behind him. My throat constricts, and I stare down at the bath filled with bubbles. All I see is red spilling out of my veins like ribbons snaking over my naked body. Seventeen years old and I was so thin, so broken. I'd been desperate to live and longing to die, caught between two worlds, two realities, and here I was, fifteen years later, attempting to hide those wounds from a man who'd faced down death every day with an assault rifle and likely a goddamn smile on his face. August has walked the thin line between here and gone too—only difference is, he's still walking it.

I shake those thoughts from my head and step into the scalding-hot water. We all have scars. Some of them kill us little by little, some all at once, and some even save our lives.

I spend a long time in the bath. Too long. I'm pruneey, and my skin is completely waterlogged when I get out. It's dark, and I feel a pang of guilt as I stare at the tiny pink toothbrush on the vanity before me. August must have sent Bettina to bed

without brushing her teeth because I was hogging the bathroom. I need to be more aware of the burden I'm placing on the Cottons. I'll be sure to stay out of August's way for a while. After all, I have a shelter to start up. August doesn't want my help, but I haven't given up on a single soul yet, and I don't intend to with him either—I just need to give it time. The house creaks and groans from the heat of the day as night settles in and I cross the hall, climb into my empty bed, and stare up at the moonlit patterns on the ceiling. I've got nothing but time.

A faint bang comes from outside, and I climb out of bed and cross to the French doors, peeking through the curtains. I don't see anything. There's no angry Marine at my door, but the sound comes again, and I quietly unhook the latch and open it. I step out onto the porch and glance around. He isn't here, but I hear the rattling of tools and walk over to the other end of the balcony. There, in the spill of light from the garage, is August, fixing the chain on my bike.

I frown. I could go down there and stop him, ranting and raving about being capable of doing it myself, but I don't. Instead, I study him. The way he moves, the rigid muscles in his back, the way he favors his right leg, his real leg, when he could just as easily use the prosthetic to support his weight. This tiny little action tells me so much about him. He's stubborn as hell, and doesn't like to depend on anyone or anything. Well, that makes two of us. I suppose I can't fault him for that. After my daddy died, I was taught not to depend on anyone but myself. It made me into the woman I am today. And I like that woman; she's tough, and sometimes brave, and she knows when to push and when to pull back, but even she knows you can't walk through this world alone without support. Without someone to care about what happens to you, and without someone to ease the pain a little when it gets too hard and you feel like giving up.

August Cotton may have fought a war, he may know more about fixing bike chains than me, and he might even be a lot smarter than this town gives him credit for, but he still hasn't figured out that no one can do it alone. He will, though. And I'll be

there when he does.

CHAPTER EIGHT

August

IDIDN'T MEAN TO FIX her chain. I don't even know what the hell I'm doing down here. I'm tired. Too tired, but I couldn't sleep now if I tried. Hell, I haven't slept properly since I was first deployed. Kind of hard to sleep with so much sand and dust in your face. When I first enlisted, my Drill Sergeant would wake us up at all hours of the night. The bastard would go on and on about how we'd be expected to perform at our peak with little or no sleep. War doesn't wait for a Marine to be rested. Back then, we'd cussed under our breath and joked about him being an asshole when he was far out of earshot, but when we'd deployed, we'd quickly learned how right he was. When you're walking outside the wire in the Afghani heat and you can't keep your head up, the worst thing you can imagine is having to keep going. Until your unit starts taking fire, or your dog hits on a scent, or you miss all the little signs that your training taught you. Then the worst you can imagine is blood, dust, hot metal that rips through your flesh, and the body of your best friend lying in pieces, stinkin' of so much burnt meat, and fur, and blood.

Fuck. I fling the wrench. It hits the side of Dad's old ride-on mower and clatters to the ground. Times like this I wish I drank, but alcohol doesn't chase the demons away—nothing will do that. Not drugs, not booze, not women. Ha! As if I'd let anyone touch me with this ruined body. As if any woman would want to.

I didn't just lose my dog, or a limb in that desert—I lost myself in the process. I have no idea who I am anymore, and now this pushy pain in my ass comes along and wants me to talk about my feelings, and open up to her as if she could fix me. She wants to tape me back together, and what? I'll be back to the man I was before I lost everything? As if I'm not already fucked up enough. I don't need her coming in here

telling me that everything will be sunshine and roses if I just accept her help. I got my partner, my best friend, killed because I wasn't paying attention. There ain't no sunshine and roses in my future, only loneliness and pain and penance.

I glance up at the balcony. All the lamps in the house are off, but there's still enough moonlight to see by. And as if speaking of the devil weren't enough, there she is, standing on the porch in one of those silky little nightgowns, her hair falling loose around her shoulders and shining like a beacon in an otherwise black night. I can't see her face, but I feel the weight of her stare from two stories up.

What is it about Olivia that makes me feel as if all my old wounds have been reopened and exposed? The woman has been here less than a week, and I don't know if I want to choke her or protect her. I know one thing; I want to fuck her, slow, deep, and then hard and brutal, but that's never going to happen.

Olivia can't fix me, and I resent her for thinking she can. No one can fix me. I figure I have about another eighteen years before I can remedy the problem myself. I couldn't do it when my parents were alive. I'd tried. I stuck a gun in my mouth so many times I lost count, but I was too chicken shit to pull the trigger. I couldn't do that to my mamma. Not after everything my accident had put her through. It was easier to get lost and stay lost. It's sure as shit easier than being back here, raising my kid sister and pretending like everything is just fucking peachy. When Bett is grown, I'll disappear. I'll finish what was started in that desert. She's better off without me. Olivia will come to see that, too, eventually.

CHAPTER NINE

Olivia

ILEAN MY BIKE UP AGAINST the side of the church, grab my sandwich from the basket in front and glide my free hand over the cracked leather seat. August hasn't

just repaired my chain and pumped up my tires, but he's cleaned the thing until its pale blue frame sparkles. He hasn't fixed the breaks, a fact I realized as I went screaming down Oak Street, but I'm grateful to him all the same. I'll have to find a way to repay him that doesn't involve cooking him supper or helping him any, but for now, I have my very first town meeting to get to, and I'm late. We don't have a lot of those in Fairhope, but Mayor Winkler asked me to come as I was leaving the market yesterday, so I accepted.

I expected that most of the town would be there, but what I don't expect when I walk in is every pair of eyes in that room turning toward me. The entire town is here—including August, sitting in the very back row—and they are all looking at me. The church is hot as the eighth circle of hell, and I feel that surely my feet must be burning and horns have sprouted from my head with the way the good people of Magnolia Springs glare at me. I'm not exactly dressed up, as such, but I do have on a skirt, sensible heels, and a button-up blouse with a sash at the neck, tied in a loose bow. I am smart casual; I figured if this town meeting is held in a church, I should wear church clothes. According to the glances thrown my way, my church clothes do not have the Magnolia Springs tick of approval.

Wishing I could just melt into a puddle, I slip into the back pew—the same one that August is occupying—and I sit, wincing when my skirt that may have been just a little too tight when I put it on this morning threatens to saw my insides in half. I give my audience a tight smile and wonder how long I can go with my waistband cutting off all the circulation to my head.

Slowly, all eyes revert to the front of the church as Mayor Winkler takes to the podium. I open the tin foil on the sandwich I'd purchased from Stevie Rae Mae's Bar-B-Que, whose sign read, "You don't need no teef to eat my beef." Yep, they spelled teeth with an f. Still, illiterate signage or not, the damn thing looked delicious, and after one bite I can see that you really don't need teeth to eat this beef because it melts in my mouth like butter.

A moan escapes me, and all eyes swivel in my direction once more. Averting my gaze from Kathy Abernathy's glare, I lower the sandwich into my lap and finish chewing the huge mouthful I bit off.

Mayor Winkler addresses the crowd. He doesn't need a microphone, because the church isn't that big to begin with—hence why everyone just heard me moan like a whore in it. “Thank you for being here, ladies and gentlemen of Magnolia Springs. Now I understand it's Founders Day festival tomorrow, so I won't keep you long because I know y'all got the Moon Pie-eating contest to prepare for. We'll keep this short and sweet.”

“Take all the time you need, Mr. Mayor. I'm already set to take out that blue ribbon,” shouts a large man a few rows ahead of me. He's wearing coveralls that barely contain his rotund belly.

“Dream on, Carpenter,” another man says from across the aisle, and while everyone is focusing on him, I use the opportunity to my advantage and duck my head, taking a huge bite out of my sandwich. Oh God. I don't know why everyone in this town doesn't just do away with the market and prepackaged foods and eat Stevie Rae Mae's hoagies all day. They might seriously be enough to ignore the fact that the man is a rheumy-eyed eighty-year-old with very little teeth left inside his head. I may marry him anyway.

A beat later, while I'm scarfing down more of the sinful deliciousness, someone makes to sit beside me. I don't even have time to look up. I just take another bite, slide across the seat and chew, chew, chew, my head thrown back in ecstasy, my eyes closed, and my tongue savoring each tiny morsel.

“Good sandwich, huh?”

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“Oh, my God,” I moan in a hushed whisper. “It’s so good.”

The man beside me chuckles, and I open my eyes to find Jude du Pont grinning at me. I should be ashamed of my behavior, and there’s a part of me that definitely longs to sink down in the church pew and just melt into the floor, but I really don’t want to, because you can’t eat a sandwich if you’re a puddle of goo.

“You know,” he whispers conspiratorially, “this ain’t the first time someone’s said that about Stevie Rae’s beef.”

I turn my wide-eyed gaze on him. He’s grinning like a fool. “You’re sick.”

Jude’s smile grows even wider. “Maybe just a little.”

A quiet laugh escapes me and more glares are thrown my way, only now they’re directed at Jude too. For some reason, this turns the two of us into simpering fools. I do not know what has gotten into me—maybe it’s the stifling heat, or the fact that I haven’t had a whole lot to laugh about these past few days, but whatever it is, there’s nothing I can do to stop it, and Jude is just as bad. I feel more than see August’s eyes boring into me. I have this insane urge to just turn to him and ask what the hell his problem is, but I don’t. I keep my eyes directed firmly forward and make out as if I’m focused on the mayor. Which I really should be, but considering Jude is sitting close enough to feel the heat from off his thigh and he has me giggling like we’re back in grade school, I’m having a really hard time concentrating.

“Now I’d like to welcome Miss Anders to say a few words to y’all,” Mayor Winkler says.

Wait, what? Oh no, no, no, no.

I lean closer to Jude and whisper, “Did he?” I pause, because heads begin turning in my direction. “Did he just say Miss Anders?”

“Yep.”

“Is there another Miss Anders in town?”

“Nope. Just you.”

Oh, crap.

Mayor Winkler urges me forward with a wave of his palm in a come-hither motion. I cringe, setting down my sandwich. The second I stand, I realize proposing marriage to an eighty-year-old hoagie maker is no longer in my future because the fabric of my skirt rips all the way up to my barely-there panty line.

My eyes go wide, and I stare at the shocked faces around me. “Oh shit.”

A few startled gasps follow my profanity. A few murmurs follow it too, and I’m completely mortified. “Er, I ... probably need to lay off the hoagies for a while.” I give an awkward laugh and attempt to cover my exposed leg with the fabric that’s flapping loose from my skirt. Jude stands and removes his jacket, handing it to me, and I accept it gratefully, wrapping it around my waist to hide my thigh from view. He gives me an apologetic smile and nods to indicate that I should go on. That man could charm birds out of trees.

“Hi, I’m Olivia. Olivia Anders,” I say stupidly with a wave of my free hand. “But I guess you all already knew that. Anyway, I run a successful program to aid ex-infantry men and women in getting their lives back on track.”

My eyes stray to August's at the other end of the pew. I don't mean to seek him out, and I can tell by the way his jaw is set that his teeth are grinding. "Um ... to help them deal with integrating back into society. Paws for Cause has successfully paired over five thousand men and women with service dogs that do everything from provide comfort from anxiety, to fetching medication, helping distance their handler from members of the public if they feel threatened, or in some cases, saving them from committing ..." I glance around the room at the stern, unenthused faces and choose a better turn of phrase. "From ending their lives."

August clears his throat, and my gaze automatically locks on his. He stares at me as if he wishes I'd burn in hell. Staring at the befuddled and angry faces around me, I kinda wish for that too. But hey, maybe we'll both get lucky. My face is scorching, so I'm ninety-nine percent positive I'm going to burst into flames any second now.

"Where are these dogs comin' from?" the man in the coveralls bellows, drawing my attention away from August and back to the room.

I smile uneasily at him. "I'll be sourcing them from other shelters, nearby and across the country. A huge part of what we do is rescuing dogs from death row, and soldiers from the same."

With that, August shoots one long angry look at me and stands. He doesn't lock gazes with a single soul as he makes his way out of the back of the church, but every pair of eyes tracks the movement and I can't help but feel responsible, and also a little bit disappointed. If I can't convince the one man in town who needs my program more than anyone else, how the hell am I going to convince this community to embrace Paws for Cause? "So, we'll be opening in around a month, give or take, and—"

"What do you mean you rescue dogs from death row?" Coveralls says. "Haven't we got enough to worry about without fearing for our safety with mangy mutts runnin' around?"

“Oh, they’re not mangy. Quite the opposite. The dogs go through several rigorous health and psychological tests—”

“But still,” Kathy Abernathy stands and addresses the room. “You did mention they were dogs from death row, didn’t you? Maybe they were being put to sleep for a reason. How do we know they won’t just snap and attack someone?”

“They’re not dangerous. I don’t choose dogs that aren’t right for the program. As I said a moment ago, they go through a rigorous vetting before we decide a dog is suitable to become an Emotional Support Animal.”

Kathy smiles, and I have never wanted to flinch more, but she’s like a dog with a bone, and I won’t give her that satisfaction. “Then why not just train dogs bought from a reputable breeder?”

“Because breeders don’t save lives,” I snap. “In fact, they make the problem worse. Do you know how many dogs are euthanized every day in America?”

“No, but—”

“One-point-two-million dogs. Every day.” I let that information settle in for a moment. I know a misplaced temper tantrum here is not going to help my cause any, but I can’t help it. You don’t have to be an animal lover to see the unjustness of what people do to these dogs who only want to give them so much unconditional love.

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“It’s a terrible shame, and if we could change it, I’m sure everyone in this room would,” Kathy says. “But I’m afraid I fail to see how your little program works, and more importantly, how it’s going to keep the general public of Magnolia Springs safe. How can you guarantee that they won’t snap?”

“I can’t. No one is ever sure if a dog will snap or not. They’re animals, not people.”

“Exactly. I don’t think it’s too much to ask that we be safe in our own town.”

“It’s no different from owning a damn Beagle. If a dog is trained properly and given all the care it needs, there’s no need for an animal to snap unless it’s provoked or feels threatened.”

“Apparently the same can be said for humans too,” Kathy says, simpering in that southern belle way of hers. Her friends all titter in agreement.

“Ladies, if I may?” Jude says, standing beside me. “I’ve already discussed Ms. Anders’s program at length with her, and I’m more than happy to look over the dogs and ensure every one of them has a clean bill of health and are no danger to our town.”

It takes me a beat to pick my jaw up off the floor. I smile awkwardly. He nods and gives the crowd a little wave.

“Hmm, figures Doctor du Pont would be involved,” says the woman in front of us to her pew neighbor. She doesn’t even try to whisper, and they both shake their heads while making a tisking sound. I frown and take a deep breath. I’ve lived in small

southern towns all my life; I know better than anyone that southern hospitality sometimes only goes as far as your front door.

“Doctor?” I say under my breath.

Jude leans in and whispers, “Doctor du Pont. Town veterinarian and longtime hoagie lover. You didn’t let me get that far with our introduction the other day.”

“This town is just full of surprises,” I mutter and nod my thanks before turning to address the room. “The dogs are safe.”

“And what about us?” a big, burly man a couple of rows from the front says. “Are we safe from these ex-veterans who want to ‘distance’ themselves”—he puts air quotes around the word distance—“from us, and who might use their dogs to do it?”

“It isn’t about distancing themselves from others, sir,” I say. “In many cases our veterans return suffering from both physical and psychological wounds. An assistance dog can stand between you and their veteran if you get too close to ward away a PTSD episode.”

“A PTSD episode?” Coveralls says. “When I served, we didn’t have none of this PTSD bull—”

“Shh!” The woman in front of me stands with her finger pressed to her lips and a furious expression on her face. “This is the house of God.”

Coveralls tips his head in her direction. “We didn’t have none of that. You enlisted, you deployed, you killed the bad guys, and you came home.”

“Thank you for your service,” I say respectfully. “Hundreds, if not thousands of men and women have reported numerous cases of PTSD post-war. For some people that

can be crippling. There's no shame in them admitting they need help."

Coveralls pffts me. He actually pffts me. I purse my lips and take a deep breath in through my nose to keep from losing it altogether.

"How many of you know August Cotton?" There are a bunch of murmurs and nods, but no one actively speaks up. "How many of you know what happened to him during his service?"

It's as if one lonely cricket cries out. The church is eerily silent. "You know, I've been here a mere week, and already I can see how alone that man is. Have any of you even thought to ask if he was okay? Or if Dalton Brooks was alright, or needed someone to talk to? Did anyone ask Jason Lambert if he was just fine before he put a gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger? No?" I say accusingly. I stare down the shamed faces of Magnolia Springs and decide not to go easy on them. Life is always easy for those who don't serve, for those who choose to turn a blind eye. The real strength is in fighting, not just for yourself or for your country, but fighting against those who seek to repress us, even if those people are in our own back yard.

"I'm not a member of this town, but I can tell you every man and woman owes their life to all three of these men, and there are so many more. The Lamberts lost their son last spring. You could have prevented that. Each and every one of you sitting here in this church could have prevented that. Now I know that's hard to hear in a place like this, but it's the truth. Twenty-two American soldiers who fought for your right to have Founders Day festivals, and Fourth of July celebrations, and participate in your Moon Pie-eating contests, die every day by their own hand. Twenty-two of those men and women kill themselves, every day. Not every year, or every month, but every day they take their own lives because they can't live with the aftermath of war. It's my job to make sure the ones in this town don't do that. It's my job to pair them with not just a service dog, but a friend, another living being who's all out of chances, and who just might make them stop and put down the gun."

Silence follows my little tirade, and the faces all stare blankly at me, as if they weren't expecting that. And I suppose they weren't.

"Thank you for that enlightening information, Ms. Anders," the mayor says, and my cheeks pink up, then I duck my head, hand Jude his jacket back, cinch my skirt together, and squeeze my way out of the pew.

"Excuse me," I say, and then, holding my head high, I take several steps down the aisle before I remember my hoagie and go back for it. I don't even care that everyone is getting a full frontal view of my thigh. I just walk as calmly and as steadily as I can out of the church until I push the doors wide and I'm hit by blinding sunlight. Once the doors close behind me, I exhale and deflate. I also balk at the figure sitting on the edge of the cement flowerbed.

"Hi." I give a pathetic little wave.

"Wow," August says. "I thought they really hated me, but they really, really hate you."

"Yep." I flash Broadway hands at him, which earns me a half smile that's gone before I really have time to appreciate it. "I thought you'd be long gone."

"I'm waiting on Bett."

"She's here?" Oh God, please don't tell me I said all of that in front of a tiny human being.

"They round up all the kids and keep 'em busy in the Sunday School room while we have our town meetings. I don't like to pull her away from the others. Besides daycare, she doesn't get too much social interaction with other kids."

“Ah,” I say.

“That one of Stevie Rae Mae’s?” He tilts his chin toward my sandwich.

“Yep.”

“Best brisket in the south,” August says.

I nod my head. “I’m thinking that’s not a false claim.”

“It ain’t. I been to every Podunk town in this great state. It’s the best.”

“Walking the railways, right?” I sit down on the concrete edge beside him, still far enough away so he won’t feel threatened. He nods. “Did you find what you were looking for out there?”

He laughs halfheartedly. “Kinda hard to find what you’re looking for if you don’t even know what it is.”

“I guess you’re right. That would be kind of difficult,” I agree. “I thought walkin’ the railways was illegal. How did you never get arrested?”

“I’m a Marine, darlin’. We’re like ninjas, only tougher,” he says, and I raise my eyebrows. Was that a flutter of my heart when he called me darlin’? Yep. I think it was. “I got approached by Rail Authority a bunch of times, I was always gone before they could come back or send a car out after me.” He frowns and glances down at his shoes. “That true, what you said in there?”

“About the stats.” I cringe. “You heard that?”

“No. I mean about your hoagie.”

Did he just make a joke with me?

I nod with a wry smile. “Yeah, it’s true.”

“Then what you’re doin’ matters.”

I gape at him with wide eyes. “Does that mean you want to be a part of the program?”

“No,” he says, and my chest deflates. No. Not maybe one day, or not just yet, but no. Definite. Final. Never to budge, no.

“Okay, well, if you change your mind—”

“I don’t need your program.”

“There’s no weakness in asking for help, August.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t need help; I need to be left alone.”

“Then that’s going to be disappointing for you, because you’re not alone. You have—”

My words are cut short by the church doors opening, and Doctor du Pont steps out. For a beat, his gaze roams over me unapologetically and then it lands on August. The two men eyeball each other for a long moment.

Jude is the first to speak. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were out here with someone.”

August makes a derisive choking sound in the back of his throat and gets to his feet. “Would it matter if you did?”

“Excuse me?” Jude says, and I glance warily back and forth between the two of them.

“Will you tell Bett I’m waiting in the car?” August says, without even looking at me.

My shoulders sag, because I’m sitting on the church steps in a skirt that’s ripped all the way up to my panties, holding a now soggy sandwich, and I just yelled at the occupants of this town, pretty much eradicating any possibility of them ever getting behind Paws for Cause. All I want to do is hightail it out of here on my bike, but I nod, even though his back is to me, and say, “Sure.”

Jude lets out a sigh and turns to me. “Some of us have tried talking to him, but August Cotton doesn’t do anything he doesn’t want to.”

I clear my throat and set my sandwich down, attempting to cover my exposed thigh as best I can. It’s a dismal substitute for fabric, but it’s all I got.

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“You know you didn’t mention you were a vet.”

“Because you up and disappeared on me before we had a chance to have a real conversation.”

“Well, I didn’t want to mess with the Du Pont fan club. Word is, you’re the hottest bachelor in town.” I scan the parking lot for a white beat up old Chevy.

“And yet you can’t stop making googly eyes at August Cotton.”

I snap my gaze toward him. “I do not make googly eyes.”

“Sure about that?”

“I want to help him,” I explain emphatically, as if this should already be obvious.

“Right, you just keep telling yourself that.”

I sigh. We are not talking about my attraction to August Cotton because ... I do not have an attraction to August Cotton. And I do not make googly eyes. Simple. The doc is way, way off. Still, he might be clueless about the signals women throw off toward the opposite sex, but he is sweet. He didn’t have to help me out in that viper den. “Thanks for vouching for me in there, but you don’t have to worry. I’ve been doing this a long time, and I know what makes a good assistance dog, and what doesn’t. So, unless one of my dogs becomes sick, I don’t think I’ll be needing your help.”

He smiles, but it looks more as if he’s indulging a small child during a tantrum.

“Well, if it will give these folks peace of mind, I think you should come see me once you have your candidates picked out.”

“I really don’t think that’s necessary.”

“And I’m afraid I’m going to have to insist.”

I let out a puff of air and give him a tight smile. “Well, I guess I’ll be seeing you then.”

“Yep, guess you will.” Jude winks and wanders down the church steps. I watch his retreating figure with a frown. Cocky bastard.

Moments later, adults and children start filing out of the church, and I sit there until Bettina comes wandering out, glancing around nervously for her brother. “Bett.” I wave. “Over here.”

“Wivvie,” she shouts, and several pairs of eyes swing my way. I pay them no mind as the rambunctious four-year-old hurtles toward me.

“Hey, baby doll.”

She giggles and barrels into my legs, squeezing me tight. “Where’s Auggie?”

“He’s waitin’ in the truck,” I smooth her hair over her shoulder with my free hand as she continues to hold onto me. “Come on, I’ll walk you over to him.”

“What happened to your dress?”

“Let’s just say I had a little fight with a sandwich.” Her features twist into a puzzled expression and I’m certain she thinks I’m as crazy as her brother does. I take her hand

and my sandwich that—soggy or not—I still have big plans for, and I lead her over to the beat up Chevy truck. She climbs on in, and August starts the engine. Bett scoots over to the middle and pats the seat. “Are you commin’?”

“No, I’m going to ride home, but thank you,” I say, shutting the door and giving them a wave as an impatient August peels out of the parking space. Bett waves as they drive away, but August doesn’t look back. I swear, every time I think I’m making headway with that man, I just end up right where I first started.

As I turn, my gaze meets Jude’s from across the lot, and while August may have been ignoring me as best he could, it seems the good doc is doing the exact opposite. There’s a frown on his face as he opens the door of his sleek black Aston Martin. I don’t know what the hell that’s about, but I know there is definitely bad blood between those two men. No doubt I’ll find out about it sooner or later. That’s the way it is in small towns. Everyone knows everything. Nothing is secret, and the word privacy doesn’t exist.

Jude climbs into his car, and I glance back at the good folks of Magnolia Springs. Almost every pair of eyes darts away awkwardly, as if they weren’t just staring at the show those Alabama boys just put on. I shake my head and cross the lot to my bike where I climb onto the seat, ignoring the sound of tearing fabric as my skirt decides one peep show isn’t enough for today. With my head held impossibly high, I ride toward home.Home. Home is where the heart is, but it seems I forgot the way a long time ago.

CHAPTER TEN

Olivia

FOR THE FOURTH DAY in a row, I leave the realtor emptyhanded. My keys still hadn't arrived from Elberta and I would have hired a locksmith, but it seems that not a single one lives or works in Magnolia Springs or Foley. I'd be paying for someone to come all the way from Mobile, and considering they'd charge an hourly rate? Yeah, that isn't happening. I have half a mind to go and break down the damn door myself, but that won't serve me in the long run. Instead, I've agreed to give Georgia and Mr. Renoux one more day.

I could have asked August to run me to Elberta, but I don't like the idea of owing him any more than I already do, so I've made myself as useful as I can around Tanglewood by cleaning nonstop and helping with Bettina where I can without August knowing. I'm pretty sure he knows anyway, but if he does, he doesn't say anything.

I make a quick stop off at the market to grab a pint of ice cream and a carton of Oreos—those birthday cake ones with the sprinkles inside—because today is decidedly a cookie day. I ride back to the house with one hand on the handlebars while my other holds a teeny-tiny piece of happiness. The day is as hot as it is long, and when I finally make it back to Tanglewood, I collapse into a heap at the kitchen table. I don't even get up from my seat in order to reach the spoons in the dishrack. I'm halfway through stuffing my face with ice cream and cookies when August comes in from outside. He doesn't notice me sitting in the middle of the kitchen, but opens the fridge and pulls out a bottle of milk, screwing off the cap and swigging it

straight from the container. This makes me smile, because I do the exact same thing when I'm at home. But I'm the only one that drinks that milk, and this is kind of gross.

"Not everyone wants your cooties, you know? You should use a glass," I say before I can burst out laughing. He whirls around with the bottle still firmly pressed against his lips. I've startled him, and as he screws the cap back on and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, he looks sheepish. And I think for the very first time I hear August Cotton laugh—not a derisive laugh, but a real one. A God's honest laugh. I grin wider than any cat who got the cream. There's an awkward moment where he stares at me, and I stare back, and then I ruin everything by thanking him for fixing my bike, because a simple thank you to August is the equivalent of a slap in the face.

"Don't mention it." He turns his back on me.

"Why can't you accept a simple thank you?"

He opens the fridge door and shoves the milk inside. August frowns, his jaw set tight. "I didn't do it for that."

"Why did you do it?"

His shoulders fall, and he exhales a noisy breath. "It needed fixin'."

"Are you used to fixing everyone's problems but your own?"

The responding glare lets me know he's pissed. As if I couldn't already tell. "Why can't you let this go?"

"Because you need my help, August Cotton."

“I don’t need shit from you,” he snaps.

I rise, place the lid on my carton of ice cream and step toward him. Like a caged animal who’s cornered with nowhere to go, he tenses. His features tighten into a hard line, but there’s a hint of nervousness in his eyes. He swallows hard. Who’d have thought the Big Bad Wolf could be afraid of Little Red? Good. That’s the way I want him, frightened as the day he was born, because I’ll need to break down all of his defenses if I’m going to break him of this torment.

Another step toward him and he takes one back. We repeat this several times until he leans against the counter beside the fridge. I reach up to open the freezer. He flinches. Cool air wafts across us, and my nipples harden. I don’t know if he can see or not, but his gaze never wavers, he just glares at me as if he could incinerate me with a single look. I place my ice cream inside the freezer, but August doesn’t back up the way I’d expected him to. Instead, the hard line of his stomach brushes my side, and this time I’m the one who flinches. He leans in, but he doesn’t say a word. I inhale sharply, a breath of cologne, sweat, and summer, of heat, and even longing.

August paws at my shoulder, and then I’m thrust up against the cool refrigerator door, staring into eyes that sear down into mine. One hand grasps my waist, and he leans toward me, but he pauses just inches from my face, a heartbeat away from kissing my lips.

“I thought you didn’t need shit from me?” I whisper, because I can’t kiss this man, even though I want to. I can’t jeopardize his healing because I’d like to take a roll in the hay with him, and I don’t trust myself right now.

His eyes narrow, and he jerks away as though he’s been slapped. “I don’t.”

For a beat, we stand there, searching one another’s gaze, and then he backs away and leaves the room. I sigh and sag against the refrigerator door. I am a stupid, stupid

woman.

Eventually I leave the kitchen and climb the stairs to my room where I fall onto the bed and stare at the ceiling, desperately trying not to think of August Cotton's hard body pressed up against mine.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Olivia

“QUIT RUNNIN’ FROM ME,” August bellows from the opposite side of the house. He thunders after his kid sister, shaking the cabinets until the china rattles ominously. I don’t know how he doesn’t lose his damn prosthetic in the process. Bettina tears around the living room and makes a beeline for the kitchen, shrieking all the while and ducking around August’s legs. The brush in his hand goes sailing across the room and whacks off the wall, narrowly missing the television.

“Wivvie, save me.” Bettina barrels into me, chuckling, and I settle my hands on both of her shoulders.

“Woah,” I say. “Where do you think you’re going there, little lady?”

“Auggie’s tryin’ a brush my hair. It’s hurty.”

“Okay, but you know if you brushed it every morning by yourself you could get the tangles out easier, and you wouldn’t need to run away, because it wouldn’t hurt.”

“Auggie does sucky hair.”

“Oh, okay. Well, I’m pretty sure that’s not a word you’re supposed to use.”

“Olivia’s right. You’re not,” August says from the doorjamb. Bett squeals and attempts to burrow between my legs. I awkwardly pat her head and hold my hand out

for the brush that August must have retrieved in the time that it took me to lasso the four-year-old wildling.

He stares at my outstretched hand and frowns, setting the brush in it, and following up the movement with two glittery pink baubles. “What if Olivia does your hair today?”

“Will Wivvie be gentle with the tangwles?” she asks, staring up at me.

“Of course,” I say. “I have to brush my own hair everyday too, you know.”

“Auggie isn’t gentwle.”

“You wanna know what I think?” I crouch down before her, taking her hand and tucking the shiny pink baubles into her little palms. “I think August just doesn’t know what it’s like to have princess hair. If he did know, I’m sure he’d be more careful.”

“Auggie had pwincess hair once.”

“He did?” I say with a laugh, smiling up at the man in question.

“Mamma showed me picchoose. He had long, long hair, like Rabunzel only dark.”

“Rabunzel, huh?”

“Yup. He wasn’t cwanky then,” she whispers, conspiratorially. “But I wasn’t here ’cause I wasn’t borneded yet. Mamma said I was here before, but then I left and I was waitin’ all the time up in Heawven, and then when Auggie went off to war, I came back.”

“Wow,” I stare up at August for clarification. Of course I get none. Unless the steely

gaze and tight jaw are any indication of an admission, and I guess this is August, so that's usually all the conversation I get. Life of the party he is not.

“Mamma said I was borned in the bathroom during a big scary storm, but I wasn't bweathing, and the angels took me back to Heawven. I was a boy then.”

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My shoulders sag and I let out a deep breath. This family has been through so much.

“That’s enough, Bett.”

“You know that’s a really special story, but maybe you could tell me more some other time, because you’re going to be late and we still have to do your hair,” I say. August doesn’t look happy, but what am I supposed to do? Just ignore her? He’s doing enough of that for the both of us. I stand and move towards the living room.

“Now, who’s your favorite princess?”

“Anna.”

“FromFrozen?” I feign a shocked expression. “Mine too.”

“No way,” she says skeptically. “Adults dwon’t watch toons.”

“Can I tell you a secret? This one does,” I say with a smile, and she jumps up and down on the spot.

“Auggie, Wivvie’s favowrite is Anna too.”

“I heard,” he says.

“Auggie doesn’t like Fwozen. He says it’s boring.” She pushes past her brother, who promptly moves out of the doorway. “But I sawed him watch it.”

“Really?” I laugh and grin up at the big angry Marine in question. He doesn’t give

anything away—surprise, surprise. I roll my eyes and follow Bett into the living room.

“Thank you,” August says, and it’s so quiet I’m not even sure I heard right. I just shrug and I sit her down on the couch as Bettina starts singing one of the songs from the movie. I brush her hair and do a braid on either side of her head as she serenades me with songs from all her favorite Disney movies. Her voice is high pitched and sweet, I have to try not to laugh, but she’s just so heartbreakingly cute. If I’m being honest with myself, I’m going to miss the Cottons once I find someplace else to live. One thing’s for sure—there’s never a dull moment at Tanglewood.

When I leave the performance going on in the living room and head back to the kitchen for coffee, August is staring blankly at the counter before him. I think he’s supposed to be preparing Bett’s lunch for daycare. He doesn’t have that glazed over look in his eyes that comes with a PTSD flashback, but there’s something not right about his expression either. He looks emotional, and all I want to do is draw him into my arms and tell him that whatever it is, it’ll be okay. But I don’t, because I never know what will set this man off. So, I quietly make myself a coffee, and I pour him one too. I don’t have to ask how he takes it. I already know. It doesn’t take long to figure out a lot about people if you pay attention, and it seems that is all I do when it comes to August Cotton. I always pay attention.

I put in two sugars, forgo the creamer, and carefully slide it across the counter between us. Then I take my own cup upstairs in order to get ready for the day. I have a set of keys to pick up and a shelter to get ready. I’ve only been here a week, but I already miss work so badly. I miss my dog, Pebbles. Hell, I miss all the dogs from the shelter. Dogs don’t know how to love with conditions or strings attached. They don’t know how to hurt, unless they are trained for it. Not like people.

Downstairs, the Cottons leave the house, file into the truck, and pull out of the drive. I watch the taillights until they turn off at the end of the road and sigh. I might not want

to leave right now, but I have to get out of this house, because the longer I stay the more I fall in love with this broken, fragile family, and I'm not sure how to fix them. I'm not sure I can.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Olivia

IRIDE DOWN THE UNSEALED road out of town, admiring the canopy of live oaks and the clear aquamarine of the water beneath the rickety old bridge through Magnolia Springs State Park. I've never seen water this clear in the South, but I guess it isn't really a surprise. Magnolia Springs has been featured in Southern Living magazine for being the cleanest town in the South, and their water is no exception. Greyson Cotton had warned me about gators in one of our lengthy conversations, but I can't see how anyone would need to worry. A gator would stick out like a sore thumb in water this clean.

It's still early, just gone ten a.m, but the day is already shaping up to be a steamy one. I have half a mind to lean my bike up against the weathered railing and just dive right on in, but I have someplace to be, and I've already wasted enough time, so swimming will have to wait.

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I hear an engine behind me, but the one-lane bridge is too narrow to pass even a bicycle so I peddle double-time for another few yards until I'm back on the road again, where I steer my bike onto the shoulder.

"How's that chain workin'?" August's voice comes from the truck that pulls up alongside me.

I startle and almost careen off the road and into a ditch, but I right the handlebars just in time and glance at him. I stop the bike, and his brakes screech to a halt. "It's good, thank you. I really appreciate it."

"You don't have to thank me," he says, and glares out the windshield. This man really doesn't like to be thanked. "Where are you headed?"

"To the shelter. I picked up the keys this morning."

"I'll give you a lift."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know. Think of it as payment for braiding Bett's hair this morning."

"Okay," I say. I don't waste time arguing with him—what would be the point? Stubborn as I am, I doubt it's an argument I would win. I'm betting August Cotton could disagree all day long and not so much as show a single emotion or break a sweat. I slide off the seat and wheel it toward the back of the truck. He climbs out of the vehicle and lifts the bike over his head with ease, setting it gently down in the

tray. I smile as I watch the way his biceps bunch and release, but I look away before he can catch me staring. Flush faced, I climb into the truck and wonder what it would be like to lie naked with him, his big body on top of mine, or even beneath, though I have serious doubts that he'd let that fly. Control freak.

August climbs into the truck. It's not without its difficulties, but he makes it look as if he's always had a prosthetic limb. He glances over at me with an expression that could only be described as a smirk, shifts the stick in gear, and we peel away from the corner. Five minutes later, we're pulling into the front yard of the shelter, and boy am I glad that I accepted his offer because it was a good half hour from town. Which makes me wonder why Kathy Abernathy and the rest of Magnolia Springs has such a big problem with the idea of these dogs in their midst. I bet you could go a whole day out here without ever running into another soul.

I turn to August to offer my thanks, but he shuts off the engine and pulls the keys from the ignition. I frown, wondering what he's doing.

"Are you comin'?" he asks.

"You don't have to come in." I shake my head and climb out of the truck. The grass is overgrown; I'll need to hire someone to come take care of the lawns and landscaping, and the outside of the building could use a lick of paint or two. There are a handful of shingles that need replacing on the roof, but still, I smile up at the building, because it's all mine.

"They leave the door unlocked for you?" August's gaze is no longer on me, but zeroed in on the shelter.

"What? No. Of course not." I follow his gaze and find the front door ajar.

"Stay here." August climbs the stairs, and I shadow him along the footpath. He

pushes open the door. I can't see anything around his broad shoulders, but he inhales sharply and his back stiffens. "Shit."

I push past, and my heart slams against my chest as I take in the room. It's completely totaled. What was once a little rundown in the realtor's pictures is now completely destroyed. There's shattered glass everywhere underfoot, the countertop is in pieces, and broken furniture is strewn all around the room. I step inside and turn three hundred and sixty degrees. Everywhere I look there's a fixture ruined, drywall kicked in, or something left in pieces. And the very worst of it is the graffiti on the opposite wall. A woman on all fours being pounded into from behind by a dog. This wasn't just some random defacing of property; this was aimed at me. Anger strikes a pang in my heart, heat claws at my cheeks, and tears prick my eyes, but I won't let them fall.

When I turn to August, his eyes are on me, and his expression is furious. A muscle in his jaw ticks, and I hold my breath because I'm not even sure he's in the same room as me right now or if he's some seven thousand miles away in a place the world forgot. Apparently, he's still here, because he clears his throat and makes his way through the debris to a back room filled with more broken junk. There's a desk and chair—also broken—and a little TV with a built-in VCR sitting on a ledge in the corner. He hits the button on the VCR. It groans to life and protests as he tries to eject the tape. Eventually, August must grow tired of waiting for the thing to make up its mind, because he yanks the plugs from the wall and tears the thing apart, smashing the tiny television but breaking open the VCR in the process.

"What are you doing?" I shout, dodging a stray piece of circuit board that flies toward my leg.

"Collecting evidence."

"Wouldn't the tape have run out by now?"

“Old Man Tinker always had a problem with vandals. It’s only been a month since he sold it, right?” August fiddles with the inside of the VCR, attempting to free the tape. “The Realtor might’ve been checking on the place to make sure nothing happened to it before you could pick up your keys.”

He sorts through the mess he made, lifts the tape, and hands it to me. I’m sure I look astounded. I feel it too. I knew he was an impatient man, but this? Also, now I’ll have to buy a whole new monitor because clearly someone has it out for me here. “Hopefully you’ll find what you need on there. Take it to Sheriff Webb; she’ll see somethin’ done about it.”

“I’m not going to the police.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because the people in this town already hate me enough.”

“And?”

“I’m trying to build a business here, August. I’m attempting to get people to trust me and let me into their lives in order to make them better. The last thing I need is more residents running me out of the town I’m trying to build something in.”

“Suit yourself.” He shakes his head. I turn to leave when I find him carting out the TV and ruined VCR. He sets them down off to the side of the room, and then picks up what used to be a chair and dumps it in the middle, throwing more broken pieces of furniture on top.

“What are you doing?” I frown.

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“Cleanin’. What’s it look like, princess?”

“You don’t have to do that. It’s fine; I’ll be fine.”

“When’s your opening date?”

“A month from today.”

He glances around the ruined shelter meaningfully. “Yeah, you need my help.”

“August,” I say, but he shoots me a look.

“I got nothin’ better to do today. Now come on, time’s a wastin’,” he says, and leaves the room to collect more of the scrap from in the back.

Come lunchtime, he doesn’t make any attempts to slow down, and I’m beat. I wipe the sweat from off my brow and watch him a while. Damn, is the man fine. He’s a wall of muscle and determination as he strips wallpaper from the walls in great big sheets that have no intention of letting go. As much as I hate to admit it, I really do need his help. Otherwise I’ll still be here next July, attempting to get the place sorted.

“Hey, you hungry?” I ask hopefully.

“Nope.”

“Thirsty?”

“Nope.”

I frown. Well that’s just not natural. A huge man like him, expending all this energy, and he ain’t hungry? “Well I am.”

“Okay.”

“Do you, do you mind if I take your truck? I wanna get some water to keep on hand here.”

“You? Take my truck?”

“What? You think I can’t handle it?”

“I know you can’t, princess. What was your first car? A Jaguar?”

I frown again. I sure am doing a lot of that these days. “A Chevy, actually.”

August raises a brow but doesn’t say anything.

“We had this big old bomb of a thing. My daddy taught me how to drive it before he passed. Never did teach me how to fix it up though, so she turned into a rust bucket that had to be towed away from the trailer. Broke my heart to see that baby go, but Mamma needed the cash for ...” I glance at him, realizing I hadn’t meant to divulge all that. For a man who’s as accommodating as a sheet of paper in a rainstorm, I sure find myself talking an awful lot around him. “For food.” I finish, wetting my lips and glancing at the wall to avoid his scrutiny.

“You grew up in a trailer?”

I dust my hands off on my shorts. “Yep. Not all of us had a big old house like

Tanglewood to grow up in. Who's the princess now?"

His brow furrows. "I didn't know."

I chuckle and side-eye him. "Would it matter if you did?"

He nods and then fishes in his pocket, tossing me the keys, which of course I fail to catch and have to bend over to retrieve. When I come up again, August's gaze darts from my ass to my eyes, and the corners of my mouth turn up in a grin. "Were you just checking out my ass, Mr. Cotton?"

"Yep," he says, and goes back to working on the wall.

"You want anything?" I ask again. I have no intention of not feeding him, but I'd prefer to know his likes and dislikes than buy him something he might be allergic to.

August stares at me as if I've just asked him a loaded question, but he doesn't answer.

"August?"

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“No. I’m good. Thanks,” he says, and turns abruptly. He strips more paper from the walls, only now the action seems angry and twisted with violence. I walk away, wondering what the hell I’ve done to bring about this most recent mood swing. I can never win with this man.

At the market, I’m a right mess. I garner looks from the time I rock up in August’s truck without him right until I’m checking out at the register. As usual, everyone swivels their head in my direction, and this time I’m sure it’s not because the new girl in town is doing something obscene so much as it is the dirt on my shorts and T-shirt, and the plaster dust in my hair. I let it all roll right off me like water from a duck’s back. I love small southern towns, but I’m no stranger to their sheltered views toward outsiders. Let them talk, I say. Letting it go is usually the easiest way for it to blow over. I’m no more interesting than anyone else here, and they’ll come to learn that pretty quick.

After picking up some cleaning products, a few grocery items for Tanglewood, and a couple of hoagies and two sweet teas from Stevie Rae Mae’s—my new favorite barbeque house in the whole world, thank you very much—I head back to the shelter with my goodies in tow. August emerges from inside and watches me with a grin as the truck pulls up the drive and backfires, putting to a smoky stop only a few yards away. He leans against the doorjamb watching me, and for a beat I just watch him back. I don’t know what it means, these silent exchanges that occur between us. I’ve never been so unnerved as when he looks at me, really looks at me, and I don’t know whether I want to crumple under the weight of that stare or walk right up and kiss him.

August is the first to move, pushing off the doorway and heading toward the back of

the truck, right past me. I open my door, and leave our sandwiches and iced teas behind because he's hauling the groceries out of the bed of the truck. Afraid he'll see how bad my cookie hoarding is, I make a grab for them. Instead, I accidentally tear open the paper sack and the contents of the bag spill. He swears as he bends awkwardly to pick them up, and I do the same. We wind up butting heads on the way down, and I notice it's not easy for him to crouch with his prosthetic. August groans as he almost loses his balance, and I put a hand out to steady him. I'm met with angry dark eyes. He rips his arm away from mine, and I scramble to pick up the spilled items as he stalks toward the shelter.

I stare at his retreating form, at his gait and the angry man who's giving me his back right now because I completely emasculated him. If it were anyone else, they never would have thought twice about my hand on their arm steadying them, but August is a Marine, the toughest of the tough, and I should have known better than to offer him my help. This particular Marine won't accept help from anyone.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Olivia

I WAKE AND ROLL OVER in bed, groaning as each muscle in my body protests. God, do I wish I was sore from another kind of physical activity, but sadly the only activity August and I did together after we ate lunch in silence was glare at one another as we worked. Again, in silence. Last night had been just as tense. He'd left to pick up Bettina after daycare, but the two of them had returned, and Bettina had run around the shelter like a tiny mad woman barking as if she were a stray dog locked in a cage. August hadn't said a word to me, but when he'd come back he was wielding a mallet and several tools to help knock down a wall. August had only just started on a few panels when Bettina complained about being hungry and I knew it was time to head back to Tanglewood. All I'd wanted to do was climb the stairs and take a long hot bath, but I'd promised the Cottons supper. Me and my big mouth.

Instead, I'd gone straight to the kitchen, washed up in the sink and set about making steak and collard greens with fluffy mashed potatoes.

The tension at supper was so thick it could have been sliced, like a hot knife through butter. Bettina had been her super chatty usual self, but August and I remained quiet, other than to answer her questions or murmur our agreement. Not for the first time since I arrived, I'd wondered how ghostly this house must have been before I got here. After supper I'd waited in my room until Bettina had been bathed and settled for bed, and I'd snuck across the hall with a glass of wine and a packet of Oreos to run a nice long bath.

Now, all I want is another soak in the tub, but I have a shelter to build, and I'm pretty sure there'll be no strong and stalwartly Marine to help me out today. So, stiff as a board, I get up and pad my way over to the shower. The hot spray loosens some of the tension in my muscles, and the house is eerily quiet when I return to my room. August and Bettina have already left, so I make a quick coffee that I drink out on the balcony, and on my way out I grab an apple from the kitchen. Jumping on my bike, I ride along Tanglewood Road and over the bridge through Magnolia Springs State Park near Highway 98, watching the sun as it filters in through the trees. It's a perfect Alabama day, and I smile to myself as the shelter comes into view. The smile quickly vanishes when I notice the beat up Chevy in my drive. What on earth is he doing here?

I lean my bike against the side of the porch to a cacophony of noise. There's an awful lot of banging and crashing, and I run inside to find him armed with a sledgehammer, attacking the wall with all his might. I study the way he works. With abandon. One slam after the other, as if he isn't even here but far away. A lot of veterans get like that—they slip in between the cracks, fall into the chaos of routine. Slam, slam, slam. But this is different. The drywall is all but abolished. All that's left is the sturdy wooden frame, and his hammer crashes into it as if it were cotton wool. Each time he swings the hammer, he lets out a cry more animal than human. August isn't beating

back his demons—they're swallowing him whole.

"August." I say, though I know he doesn't hear me. He can't hear me, because he isn't in this room. His grunts are echoed with the sound of splintering wood, and my heart clenches with every bang because I'm afraid he's going to bring the roof down on our heads with the brutality of each strike. He's not that different from any of the men I've worked with in the past, so full of rage and demons, turmoil and loathing.

"August," I say, louder this time. Still no response. Fragmented wood flies all around him. A piece glances off the side of his face and clatters to the floor. He doesn't stop. I come up behind him, grab the handle when he swings it back. I'm pulled by his strength. My body slams into his back and within seconds I'm turned to face him, one hand wrapped around my throat, the other clutching tightly to the sledgehammer right by my head. Like a raging bull, his nostrils flair wildly as he looks right through me.

"Please," I beg breathlessly, but the sound doesn't make it past the hand squeezing my windpipe. My nails dig like claws into his hand, attempting to loosen his hold as I gasp.

"Olivia?" he whispers softly, and recognition slams into him. He releases me as if my touch could burn, and too dazed, too confused, and too weak to hold my own weight, I fall amongst the debris of splintered wood and particle board, gasping and coughing in a desperate attempt to suck the air back into my lungs.

"Fuck!" he shouts, lacing his hands behind his head and bending double, as much as his prosthetic will allow. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

I dry retch. Tears sting my eyes. I knew better, and I did it anyway. I was so desperate to save him from himself, from the demons inside his head, that I left no regard for my own safety. I scramble to my knees. I open my mouth, but no words come out, only a hoarse cry. August straightens and backs away from me.

“I’m sorry. Shit, Olivia,” he says, shaking his head. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

He leaves, and the tears fall down my cheeks. Stupid. So, stupid. You don’t approach a Marine when they’re mid PTSD blackout. I’ve known this since I began working with them, and yet just one glimpse of this man’s demons and all my sense flies out the window. I just wanted him to stop. I wanted to pull him back from that blackness. I knew, and I did it anyway, and now I’ve ruined any recovery he might have made so far just by me being in his house.

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I swallow, and my throat screams. I do too, but nothing comes out. His truck door slams. He starts the engine and pulls out of the drive. My silent sobs are drowned by the noise, and I collapse back against the debris. For the first time in a very long time, I cry, and I stare at the long scars on my forearms because the truth is, August Cotton scares me, and that's why I'm fighting so hard to save him. That's why I fight for every ex-serviceman and woman in my program—because my own demons nearly destroyed me.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Olivia

Seventeen years' old

"MAMMA?" I PULL BACK the door to our trailer and my excitement dies on my lips. A wall of smoke and fear slams into me. Mamma is passed out on the bed, again. And he is here.

"Is she still alive?" I demand, even though I know I shouldn't sass him. I don't like him. I don't like him coming in here and making my mamma sicker than what she is.

"She's alive," he says. I glance at my mamma, and then back at him, Steve. With his wiry black hair and shrewd blue gaze. He's thin as a rake, but I don't doubt he'd still be strong enough to hold me down. The way he looks at me makes my skin crawl. I back out of the trailer door, but he jumps off the couch and pulls me so hard I have no choice but to follow or I'll fall flat on my face over the step. "Where you goin', darlin'? I bought your mamma some groceries—can't have the two of you wastin'

away to nothin', now, can we? God knows, she ain't feeding ya. When was the last time you ate somethin'?"

"I'm not hungry." A lie. I'm starving, and my stomach growls to disprove my point. I try to yank my hand out of his grasp, but he just tightens his hold.

"All growin' girls gotta eat, and you got some more growin' to do, don't you, pretty thing?"

I shake my head. "I have to go. Someone's expecting me."

"Shit, girl. I know you ain't got any friends waitin' on you. Now fix us a fuckin' sandwich and sit your sweet ass down here beside me."

"I said I wasn't hungry."

Before I know what's happening, he whips his arm out and backhands me across the face. The slap rings around our tiny trailer, and tears prick my eyes, but I don't let them fall. My cheek stings; my lip, too. I glare at him. The devil gives me a pointed look that says he'll do it again if I give him reason to.

"Bitch, you ain't got a fucking choice," he snaps.

My gaze darts to my mother. I keep hoping she'll wake up, but he's shot her all up with smack. I could smell it the second I walked in, and I know she's not coming to anytime soon.

I could run. Everything inside me tells me to run, but where would I go? Mrs. Miller across the road sometimes bakes us cookies, and she's always said she'd be there if I needed her, but she's a little old lady, and certainly no match for Steve.

So I do as I'm told. I fix us both a sandwich. And I sit as far from him on the ratty little couch as I possibly can.

I drink the warm beer that he tells me to. It tastes like cat piss, and when he puts his boney, calloused hand on my knee and pushes up my skirt, I tell him to stop, but he doesn't.

I turn my head away when he offers me the crack pipe, but he shoves the tiny thing between my lips. Burnt plastic rolls across my taste buds. My lungs scream as I'm forced to take a breath, and my head spins. I should run, but my body is frozen, numb, and heavy.

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I'm afraid for my mamma. We might not get along at the best of times, but I still love her. She's my mom, or she's supposed to be, and I don't trust Steve not to hurt her, so I stay. I know better, but I stay, and it's the worst decision any seventeen-year-old girl ever made.

I stay, and I regret it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Olivia

IT'S A LONG TIME BEFORE I pick myself up off the floor, and even when I do it's as if I'm in a haze. The same one I found my mamma in time and time again. My throat aches, but it's no longer August's hardened hands crushing my windpipe—it's the past. It's demons, and the blackness of regret, the hollowness of a childhood that cannot be changed, no matter how much you might want it to. I close the door and walk out to my bike. It's already going on dark, which means I've been sat on that floor all day. I don't care. Let the darkness have me. I deserve it.

My stomach growls with hunger, and I swallow through the pain in my throat, always hungry. When you spend your childhood starving, food becomes your comfort when you do have it. Excess, warmth, nice lingerie—all the things to cover how ugly I am inside. I shake my head. How ugly I was. I'm better now. I'm here for a reason. I've saved so many with the work I do, and yet it still feels like that little girl inside me is drowning, because I couldn't save her. No one came to save her.

I pull the bike to a stop at the end of the long drive. Tanglewood sits like a shiny

beacon in the dark, picturesque, beautiful, and sturdy, even though it's crumbling around us. When I was a little girl, I dreamed of living in a house like this. I thought if I could dust myself off, make clean my dirty clothes, and wash away the stain of grubby handprints, that everything would be better, but demons live in pretty houses too. I didn't know that then, but I do now. I'd thought that homes like this were for good people—they weren't reserved for the heroin addicts or sullied children or Steves of the world. Boy, how I was wrong.

I climb off the bike and slowly push it up the drive before abandoning it in the graveyard of broken mowers, tractor parts, and cars that make up the Cottons' garage. I'm stalling. I know this. I know that he didn't mean to hurt me. It was my mistake—I screwed up. I ache all over, and I want to just melt into a hot bath, but the second I walk in the door August is there, towering before me.

"Olivia," he says. His eyes are red-rimmed, bloodshot, and stricken.

"No." I shake my head and step back. I'm afraid if I let him apologize, if I don't walk away now he'll see between the cracks. He'll discover why my arms are scarred. He'll find that darkness within me, and I won't know how to put it all back inside. I won't be able to reel in the thread that's unraveling from my center, promising to smother all that's good like so much black tar and sorrow. "I can't. Not tonight."

"I'm so sorry. I feel sick to my stomach."

"I can't do this now," I say more firmly, pushing past.

"Olivia, please?" August grabs my arms, drawing me against him. I struggle in his grasp, but it's useless.

"Don't touch me!" Tears spill from my eyes, and I shut my lids against the pain that feels as if it will tear me in two. "Let me go, please?"

“Auggie?” From the top of the stairs, Bettina’s cry causes us both to cease fighting. I stare anxiously up at her, wondering how much she saw and what she makes of it. “Why are you hwurting her?”

“Goddamn it!” August releases me and stalks away, toward the kitchen, and I’m left staring up at this poor innocent little girl, who’s likely just as confused as I am about what she just witnessed. I clear my scratchy throat as the back door slams.

“Wivvie?”

I wipe away my tears with shaking hands and smile up at her. I’m sure she knows it’s as forced as it feels. I hate that she had to see that. I hate that my own demons are raring their ugly heads when I thought they were long since dead and buried, and I hate that I can’t do my job properly because my feelings are getting in the way. “Come on, pretty girl. Let’s get you back to bed.”

“Did Auggie hwurted you?”

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“No, honey,” I lie. I don’t have the heart to explain what happened between us, because I barely understand it myself. “I was just ... sad about something, and he was trying to make it better.”

“Auggie doesn’t like sad,” she says with a frown. I climb the stairs towards her. “Sad makeded him angwee. He got angwee all the time when Mamma and Papa died ’cause I cried a lot.”

I smooth the hair back from her face and tilt her chin up to me. “No, honey, he wasn’t angry at you. August loves you. I think he got mad because he misses them too, and he doesn’t know how to feel about that.”

She nods, and I can see how hard she’s trying to keep her tears at bay. “Mamma used to wead me bedtime stories, but Auggie doesn’t do that. Will you wead to me?”

I blink back my surprise and say, “Of course. You lead the way.”

Bettina takes my hand in her small one and guides me to the room at the end of the hall. It’s the first time I’ve been this far. I’ve never needed to visit her and August’s bedrooms before, and the bathroom and guestrooms are all at the opposite side of the house. I can’t help but peek as we walk past August’s room. It’s easy to see his Marine training hasn’t left him, because his corners are all tucked away nice and tight, and the room is obscenely neat. From what I can see, there are no personal belongings, no pictures on the walls or frames sitting on the bedside table. A pair of combat boots are lined up at the end of the bed, as if he’s only just taken them off and plans to step into them again. I draw my gaze away and come to a stop in a very pink, very princess-themed room.

It's exactly the kind of room I'd dreamed of as a kid, and I smile, because Bettina has already had so much taken from her, but I'm glad that at least this one special place hasn't been taken away too. I wonder if every time she enters this room she thinks of all the nights her mother must have tucked her in. I wonder if Pearl Cotton did the same to August, and when he got too old for that, if he pushed her away. Did it break her heart? I imagine that's exactly what it would feel like, when your children were too big for cuddles.

Bettina runs over to the bed, but I stop on the threshold. I'm not sure August would want me in here, but right now, this is bigger than the two of us and our demons. A little girl just lost her mother and father, and she needs comfort. Incidentally, that happens to be what I'm good at, so I step inside her room and wait until she gets settled in her princess canopy bed before I climb in beside her, and I read from what she tells me is her favorite book. She snuggles in, and I stroke her silky hair between each turn of the pages.

Ten minutes later, Bettina is fast asleep, and the top stair creaks beneath August's weight. His eyes meet mine down the long hall. I'm not sure he's not going to fly into another rage, so I carefully slide out of the bed and switch on her night light. I cross the room and flick off the overhead lights, and just as I'm turning to close her door a fraction I'm pulled by the waist into August's bedroom and pushed up against the door. I'm panting; my heart thunders against my chest as I glare up at him. He pens me in on either side of my head with huge forearms. I hadn't noticed how many scars he has. There are two long keloids, and a few little divots from what appear to be shrapnel wounds.

"Olivia, I'm sorry."

I nod. I don't tell him it's okay, because we both know it'd be lying.

"I'm so, so sorry. I wasn't ... here. I don't know if that makes any sense to you, and I

know it's no excuse. Jesus. Please say something."

"I need a drink."

He frowns, and then a strange chuckle escapes his throat and he moves closer. He tilts his head, looking at my lips. For a beat, I think he's going to kiss me, and then his gaze dips to my throat and his whole expression shuts down. Carefully, he reaches out. The pad of his thumb traces the sensitive flesh of my neck, the places where his fingers have bruised me, and I suck in a sharp breath at how tender a gesture it is. August shakes his head and backs away from me. I take it as my cue to leave, so I quietly open the door and exit. Closing it behind me, I lean against the heavy Cherrywood, and let out a deep sigh. One step forward, ten steps back. That's the way it always seems to go with us.

I walk the hall to my room, where I close the door and let the world, and August Cotton, melt away as I collapse onto the bed. I'm raw, spent, and exposed, and I've done enough for one day. I sleep, and my dreams are filled with demons that hold me down and rape my mind and plunder my body as if it were treasure, as if I were a precious toy, and not broken on the inside.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

August

IN THE MORNING, I GET Bettina ready for school and drop her off before Olivia is even out of bed. I have plenty of work to do at Tanglewood, but that won't ease my guilt, so I take the tape we found at the shelter into the station. Magnolia Springs can't boast more than three cops, two of them reasonably new recruits, but then we've never had a lot of crime here. Lot of kids doing stupid shit, but nothing as bad as destroying the shelter.

Sheriff Webb and I went to school together. She never did much like me before I went away to war, much less afterward, and I know she's going to like me even less after this visit. Every day I walk through town, I see the way they stare at my leg and think I don't notice. I notice, believe me—when you lose a limb and have to walk with a prosthetic, people pay attention, and you feel like you got a fucking neon sign over your head that says “war cripple.” It's ironic that the cost of living in the land of the brave and the free only comes at the expense of those who are willing to die for it.

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Sheriff Webb leans back in her chair, sipping from a coffee mug as she pretends I'm not here. That's a habit for the occupants of this town—pretend like the angry cripple isn't standing right in front of you, and maybe he'll get pissed off and go away. Not this time.

I lean over the counter and ring the bell. Their receptionist doesn't appear to be in today. Sheriff looks at me, and then takes another sip of her coffee, so I ring the bell again. Still nothing. I raise my hand to ring it a third time, and she says, "August Cotton, you ding that bell once more and, war hero or not, I'm-a shove it up your ass. Now what can I do for you?"

I toss the tape on the counter. "Olivia Anders bought the shelter on Highway 98."

"Mmhmm, I know it."

"It was vandalized," I say. She doesn't get up from her seat, and I don't budge. "You might wanna take a look at the tape. Figure you know the perpetrators real well."

Her eyes narrow into hard slits, and she leans forward. "What are you sayin', Mr. Cotton?"

"Look at the tape. I'm pretty sure neither one of their parents can afford to pay Olivia damages, so you might wanna come up with a suitable punishment."

She chuckles, but there is not a trace of humor in it. "Might I?"

"Yep, I reckon you will."

She gives me a smile that doesn't touch her eyes, and I turn to leave. "How did you get the job of bringing this to my attention? I'm surprised Miss Priss didn't storm in here crying and carryin' on about the dogs and how we're all bad townsfolk for not offering to help our veterans."

"Don't call her that," I warn, and she tucks her hands into her belt with a smug smile and a huffing noise. "She's good people, and she don't deserve your hostility. Hell, she don't even know I'm here. She wanted to just forget it happened, but it ain't right."

She studies me with a shrewd gaze. "Why would she do that?"

"Because that's the kind of person she is," I say. "Olivia doesn't have to be here. She came here to help our town."

"And has she helped you, August?"

I turn away and make for the door, but I pause with my hand on the knob.

"More than you know," I answer back in a whisper, too quiet for her to really hear me. "You make this right, Shona, or I'll be paying a visit to your brother about your nephew and his friend."

I wipe the perspiration from my brow as I open the door and step out into the thick 'Bama heat. It's not even ten a.m. and already I'm sweating like a man walking through the gates of hell. Funny thing is, I was just fine before Sheriff Webb started asking questions. I was fine before Olivia Anders showed up. Now? Everything is shot to fucking shit, and I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to do about it.

WHEN I PULL IN THE drive, Olivia's bike is resting up against the porch of the shelter, and I smile to myself. I don't know why. I don't know how I make up for what I did to her yesterday. It ain't safe to be around her. Hell, even if I wasn't fucked up from war it wouldn't be safe to be around her anyway. That woman is dangerous. I never met a girl who got under my skin more than her. I never met a girl I couldn't walk away from.

I haven't even known her long. I don't know anything about her except she's as stubborn as a mule, and her heart is bigger and more pure than anyone's I've ever met. Something in her, something bruised and hurt and ruined by the world calls to me, and I can't get her outta my head. It's been an awful long time since I wanted to lie with a woman, and she makes me forget why I can't have her. All I see is her. All I want is her. But I can't even bring myself to be honest about not being complete. I ain't whole anymore. And I ain't a man women like Olivia want to take to their bed. I'm the thing they run from. And I'd hurt her in the end. Something tells me she's been hurt enough.

I climb out of the cab and head inside. Olivia has her back to me, earbuds in, and her hair tied up with a red bandana. She's shakin' her ass, and fuck me if it isn't nearly impossible not to walk on over there and rip those little short shorts from her body. Instead, I lean in the doorjamb and watch her shimmy as she works and sings off-key. She shouldn't be out here by herself, listening through her headphones. Fuck me dead. Anyone could walk on in here and take her against her will, and there'd be no one to come to her aid. Goddamn it. What is it with this woman? Why the hell doesn't she have any regard for her own safety? Throw her in the lion's den and she'd likely have her hand taken off trying to pet the damn thing. Or make it open up to her.

Olivia turns around with an arm full of plasterboard to dump into our pile in the middle of the room, her gaze meets mine and she jumps about a mile in the air, clutching her hand against her chest.

“Oh my God, you scared the shit outta me.”

“You know how many women are attacked every day because they listen to music through earbuds?” I say impatiently, thinking she should know this shit already. “You can’t hear an assailant coming.”

She smiles. “And here I thought I was safe in Magnolia Springs.”

I give her a look. “You never know who’s lurking around corners.”

“That’s true,” she says. “Most of the time we never know who’s standing right in front of us either.”

I nod, because she’s right. A little of the anger leaves me, and then my gaze drifts to the marks on her throat. I clench my jaw so hard my teeth creak. “How are you doin’ today?”

Her hand automatically closes around her neck, as if I wouldn’t notice the dark bruises marring her snow-white flesh. It was the first thing I saw last night when she walked into the house, and the only thing I saw later when I had her pressed against my bedroom wall and wanted to kiss her with everything I had. It’s why I didn’t kiss her, ’cause any man capable of hurting a woman the way I hurt her has no right to be putting his mouth on hers.

“I’m fine,” she says with a tight smile.

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I nod, though I don't believe it, and neither does she, I don't think.

Olivia unfastens the bandana from her hair and folds it, tying it around her neck like a scarf. "What are you doing here?"

"We got a grand opening soon, don't we?"

"August, I know you have things to tend to back at Tanglewood. You don't have to help me here."

"You know, this would go a lot quicker if you quit talkin'," I say, and I fight the smile that threatens to appear when she feigns disbelief.

I get to work, helping her remove the debris from the wall coming down, and we shift it out into the huge dumpster by the side of the building. I follow her to the back of the shelter where the kennels are mostly untouched. The concrete floor could use a lick of paint, the doors some new hinges, and some of them need new wire and a couple of new locks. Olivia makes an inventory, and I offer to take her to the hardware store. We don't have no Home Depot here, but we manage to find everything we need and spend a good hour strolling the aisles of old Winthrop's Hardware for shit we don't. The woman can shop.

We're not back at the shelter more than ten minutes, chowing down on sandwiches from Stevie Rae Mae's, when a police cruiser pulls into the drive, and we both look at one another in surprise. We abandon our food as the sheriff steps out of her vehicle.

"August Cotton, well, this is cozy," she says with a chuckle. I jam my hands in the

pocket of my jeans so I won't ball them into fists.

"Can we help you, Sheriff?" Olivia says, her brow furrowed in confusion as if she's worried she might have done something wrong.

"I took a look at that tape, and what did I find but my nephew and his friend Beau Banks?"

"Tape?" Olivia asks, looking between the two of us for clarification.

"Mr. Cotton here stopped by my office this morning, showed me a little video tape of the perps who vandalized your shelter."

I sigh. Olivia looks at me with a horror-stricken expression. Here it comes. "You took the tape to her?"

"For future reference, Miss Anders, if someone vandalizes your property or threatens you in any way, you should report it." Her gaze lowers to Olivia's neck, and then flits to me before settling back on Olivia.

Olivia toys with the bandana. "Thanks. I will."

"Alright, y'all, get your butts on out here," Sheriff Webb says, opening the back door of the cruiser. "Congratulations, Miss Anders. You're now the proud owner of two strapping young men who'll be spending the rest of their summer working for you for free."

"Oh . . . no," Olivia says, shaking her head. "That's . . . really, I can handle it."

Sheriff Webb chuckles. "Oh, but I insist. Boys, don't make me tase your ass."

Two teenage boys climb out of the car with their shoulders slumped and their faces downturned. The sheriff clips them both on the backs of the heads, and I stand there unsure of how to proceed. “Miss Anders, meet perp one and two, otherwise known as Josiah Webb, my nephew”—she manages to make nephew sound like a bad word—“and his accomplice, Beau Banks.” She turns to the boys and says, “Apologize, now.”

They keep their jaws locked up tight, and she whispers in a voice that’s not so much a whisper as it is a polite threat, “So help me God, I don’t care that either one of you are seventeen going on eighteen, or that you’re family, Josiah. I will give you both an ass whoopin’.”

“Sss-sorry,” Beau is the first to speak. He’s got scruffy blond Bieber hair and a pimply face—he looks like one of those shaggy dogs. Josiah Webb, though? He’s taller than his friend, bulkier too, and as black as midnight. He’s got a chip on his shoulder as large as mine, and he comes from real bad stock too. His aunt might be the town sheriff, but his older brother is doing time for statutory rape and supplying drugs to a minor, and his daddy is one hell of a mean bastard.

“Sorry,” Josiah says, but it’s obvious from his tone that he don’t mean it.

Sheriff scowls. “Act like you got some raisin’, boy. Now you two made this mess, you’re gonna help clean it up.”

“Will you excuse us for just a minute.” Olivia frowns and turns to me. “Can I talk to you inside?”

“Sure. You two run along and have a little chat,” Shona says. “I ain’t got nothin’ to do but stand around and wait for a bunch of white people all day.”

“We’ll just be a second.” Olivia reaches out to grab my arm. For the first time in a

long time, I don't pull away, I let myself be led. Once we're back inside the building, she turns on me. "Are you out of your damn mind?"

I smirk and fold my arms over my chest. "That depends on who you ask, now, doesn't it?"

"I specifically didn't want to go to the sheriff, I told you that. This town hates me enough; I don't need a reason for those kids' parents to come here upset with me." She folds her arms across her chest. This pushes her boobs up, and gives me a better view of her cleavage. When she catches me staring, her cheeks turn the prettiest shade of pink, and she drops her arms by her sides.

"So, you think it's okay they go unpunished?"

"Of course not. I just don't need anyone else putting a stop to this shelter."

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“Nobody’s putting a stop to it. In fact, now we’ll work quicker.”

“I don’t understand you,” she says, and it isn’t an insult—I can tell she’s genuinely baffled by me. Good. I don’t need her inside my head with her shrink bullshit about how I need some animal to pick up my cues and stop me from hurting another human being. Though the second that thought manifests inside my head, I see the desperate pleas in her eyes from when I had her shoved up against the wall with my hand squeezing her throat.

“You don’t have to, darlin’.” I walk toward the door and catch her sigh as she follows behind me a beat later.

She turns to Sheriff Webb. “Alright then, bring in the perps.”

“Well, you heard the woman. Get to work, boys,” Shona says, ruffling Josiah’s hair and glaring at Beau as they pass her and file inside. “I’ll be back around five to pick you up.”

Neither one of them look at her as they trudge up the stairs, though Beau mutters under his breath, “You can’t keep us here. It’s called kidnapping.”

“Dude, shut up,” Josiah says.

“Honey, I’m the sheriff. I can do whatever I want, and this is what I want. Now, you get your skinny little ass inside, and if you sass me again, you’ll be headed straight for juvie. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, ma’am,” they both say, and wander inside with their tails between their legs.

“They give you any trouble, you just let me know.” The sheriff opens her door. “I take it you’re goin’ to be here, Mr. Cotton?”

“Yeah, I’ll be here.”

“Mmhmm, that’s what I thought.” She climbs into the cruiser and starts the engine.

The second her car pulls out of the drive, Olivia turns to glare at me. “I can’t believe you did that.”

I shrug. My stance on letting those two little shits get away with it hasn’t changed any in the last five minutes, so I just stare until she’s uncomfortable enough to walk inside, and then I watch her ass as she goes. It’s something akin to torture, not being able to touch her, not being able to bend her over a counter, or a chair, or the fuckin’ hood of my truck and take her like I would have before war ruined me.

Balling my hands into fists until my bones creak, I force myself to focus on the pain and forget about getting closer to this woman, because it ain’t ever gonna happen. I keep my eyes firmly fixed on the ground and follow her inside.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Olivia

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THE FIRST DAY WORKING with my perps is a nightmare. As much as I hate to admit it, I'm glad August is here, because if he weren't, I have no doubt they either would've up and left, or continued vandalizing my shelter as if I weren't even in the room. They're just boys of seventeen, but it's evident that in their own minds, they're men. And there's nothing more dangerous than a kid chock-full of testosterone with no concept of self-preservation. They got to work quickly, but they were right little assholes about it, sassing me and saluting August when he gave them orders. I could tell that didn't sit right with him, and for a moment I thought maybe he was going to kick some teen ass, but he simply clamped his mouth shut so tightly I thought I heard his teeth squeak.

Two hours later, when he leaves to pick up Bettina from school and take her to her ballet classes, the boys wait long enough for August's car to be a trail of dust in his wake, and then they turn to me with defiant glares and head for the door.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Bite me, bitch," Beau says.

Josiah hesitates, glaring at me before kicking over the can of paint he was using. He follows his friend out the front door. I race across the room to save the thick liquid spilling out all over the concrete. I'd planned to cover the floor anyway, but I don't like wastage. It'd been drummed into me from the time I was a kid old enough to understand the word. That was when my daddy was still around, before he was killed by friendly fire. Before our lives turned to shit.

I right the can and look down at the mess. I don't want to cry over a couple of dollars

of spilled paint, and yet the tears spring into my eyes anyway, and I sit down hard beside the mess.

I have a half a mind to return the keys to the realtor, tell them to sell the shelter for whatever they can get, pack up my things, and head for Fairhope—for home—but my daddy never raised a quitter. I care about this town, even though its inhabitants have been less than welcoming. I care about August and Bettina Cotton, and I care about the veterans here who just need someone to reach out to them, so I get up, I dust myself off, and I get back to work.

At five p.m. Sheriff Webb shows up, and she is not impressed that our perps have vanished. I pity those boys because I barely know this woman, but already I know she doesn't make threats lightly, and she promises to return bright and early with our criminals—as in six a.m, early. I cringe internally. I have no desire to get up that early, but I don't let her know that because unlike Josiah and Beau, I do not have a death wish.

AFTER THE SHERIFF LEAVES, I set off for Tanglewood as the sun dips lower in the sky. I'm daydreaming, and nearly run my bike off the road when I see a box moving up ahead on the shoulder near the State Park bridge. My heart sinks because I know what that means, and while it will never make sense to me how someone could dump puppies or kittens by the side of the road, I know what to expect once I open the lid. I climb off my bike and lay it down in the soft grass. A squeal full of fear and pain comes from inside the box. I open it, and the squeals grow louder. A tiny pink and black snout stares back at me. The piglet backs up against the cardboard to get away, almost tipping the thing over, which causes him to squeal even more. It's evident he's lame. One cloven hoof is swollen and bent at an unnatural angle.

Whoever dumped him deserves to rot in hell. It's clear from the lack of mud and filth

that he isn't a farm animal, but likely a pet. There's an old flannel blanket inside the box, but not much else. I pull the messy cloth from his jail cell and cover the piglet's face as I lift it carefully and hold it close. He squeals and squirms in my arms, but I hold him tight.

"Shh, let's get a good look at you," I whisper in a calm even tone, despite my rage. "Shh, shh. You're okay."

Despite the injured hoof, the piglet burrows in against my chest, likely terrified that I'm going to put it back in the box. "It's okay. I got you."

I stumble over to the bike and transfer the animal's weight into one hand so I can set him in the basket. He squeals, and I cover his eyes with the cloth.

"We're just gonna take a little trip, okay?" I climb on the bike and ride as carefully as I can toward the center of town. I hope Jude was right about me bringing patients by at any time, because after punching Magnolia Springs Veterinary Clinic into the GPS on my phone, I make a beeline for his clinic on Pecan Grove Street. As I turn the corner into his drive, the piglet and I nearly come off the bike and go flying across the pavement because Jude is backing out and almost runs right over the top of us. I grab the pig and hold it close to my chest, abandoning the bike in the driveway behind his car. I slam my free hand down on the trunk. "Wait, wait, please wait."

Jude scrambles out of the car dressed in a blazer, a blue button-up, and slacks with shiny black shoes polished to perfection. He's a picture of old money meets new. His clothes are modern—designer. All the latest cuts, colors, and fabrics, but that stiff upper lip screams centuries of good breeding. I can tell my jaw is hanging open because ... pretty. What is it about country men that's just so damn attractive?

"Olivia, are you okay? I didn't see you there," he says.

“I ... yeah. I’m fine.” The piglet struggles in my arms. “I found this little guy by the side of the road, dumped in a box.”

He sighs. “Wouldn’t be the first time sadly.” He strokes the pig, who hasn’t stopped wrestling in my arms since I picked him up. “Come on inside. Ruby has gone for the weekend, but if you wanna play nurse, we’ll take a look at her.”

Do I wanna play nurse? I swear, I blush from the tips of my toes to the roots of my hair. “Sure.”

Jude leads the way, and I follow him into the building, which I’m assuming is an old homestead turned into a veterinary office. It’s painted in cool blues. The floors are covered with a light gray linoleum. There are portraits on the walls of cats and dogs melting in Dali fashion. It’s a little creepy, in an edgy way, so I guess it’s forgivable.

Jude wanders through the office, switching on lights as he goes before leading me to a little operating theatre at the back of the building. There are no Dali animals here, but stainless steel everywhere and surgical implements being sterilized in large metal trays filled with solution. This isn’t my first time in a veterinary clinic. I worked as a receptionist for a clinic when I was in community college. I thought that was what I wanted to do, until I realized that some of the animals that came in went home again in a disposals bag. I couldn’t deal with the pain, and I quit after my first month, deciding I needed to find another occupation in which I could help my animal friends.

Jude raises an eyebrow and indicates toward the examining table while he snaps on a pair of latex gloves. I set the piglet down, and it attempts to hobble away. It doesn’t get far. Jude holds it with a firm hand over its shoulder blades. “Okay, pretty girl, let’s have a look at you.”

“Girl?” I send him a puzzled expression, and he smiles and checks her rear.

“Girl.” He nods and gently lifts her tail. She bucks beneath the weight of his hand. “Right there is her urogenital papilla.” I lean over and look at the two small openings, feeling a little awkward checking out a pig’s butt.

“Shit,” he cusses as he feels her skin. His clear green eyes meet mine across the table.

I shake my head. “What’s wrong with her?”

“She’s pretty badly dehydrated, and the left anterior leg appears to be broken, but I can’t tell how bad it is without an X-ray.”

“Oh you poor darlin’,” I smooth my thumb over her forehead.

He takes the stethoscope from off the counter nearby and listens to her heart while he speaks. “I’m gonna need to sedate her and run a couple of tests, X-Rays, and then surgery. I could give her something for the pain and wait until morning, but with no one here to monitor her overnight, she could go into shock if the meds wear off.”

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“I can stay here with her,” I say. “I mean, if you can’t do the surgery right away.”

Jude stares at me for a long moment. I glance away, unnerved by his scrutiny. “Didn’t you just find her by the side of the road?”

I shrug. “I don’t like to see animals suffer.”

“Well, Miss Anders, it’s your lucky day, because that makes two of us.” He smiles and places the scope around his neck. “Now, hold her tight for me, but don’t squash her. Try and keep her as still as possible.” I do as he asks and Jude pulls a needle from the drawer along with a small vial from the cabinet on the wall.

“I don’t care about the costs, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I wasn’t, actually,” he says. “I was just thinking I need to cancel my date for the evening, because another little lady needs me more.”

I frown, confused by his forwardness.

“The pig, Olivia.”

“Right, of course.” I give a nervous laugh. “Sorry.”

He sticks the needle into the vial, drawing out a small amount of the clear liquid, and squirts a little out the end to release any air bubbles. “Hold her still for me.”

I do as he asks and with a yelp, she takes her medicine in the ear. I pat her back the

way you would to calm a newborn baby. “Good girl, shh. It’s okay.”

“Let’s lay her down. She’ll be feeling those effects pretty quickly,” he says, and I gently lay her on her side, keeping my body close to hers, so she doesn’t feel abandoned. Jude works his magic, and for the next half hour the pig’s X-rayed, intubated, hooked up to a drip, and given a full checkup under the anesthesia. Jude goes about all this as if it’s second nature, and I suppose to him it is.

“She’s going to make it, right?”

“I’d say she got lucky. It looks like she was in that box a long time in the blistering heat. If you hadn’t come along and found her, accosted the town veterinarian, and ruined his date, she’d likely be dead in a few hours.”

I roll my eyes. “I hardly accosted you.”

“You were two steps away from busting my window in.”

I chuckle, and after all the tumult of the past few days, it feels nice. “You’re right, I likely would have.”

“So, how’s that shelter coming along?” He hands me a fresh set of scrubs. They’re pink, a women’s size small, and I’ll likely be spilling out of them in every which direction, but I accept them gratefully because it’s better than ruining my own clothes.

I walk into the adjoining room to change. Once I have on the scrubs—that make me regret my little Oreo addiction—I realize that my bruises are far more obvious with the V-neck, so I keep the bandana tied around my throat. “Well, two angry teens decided to remodel for me, which puts me back about oh, let’s see, a month or two? Not to mention I’m now expected to work with the little bastards—that was Sheriff

Webb's way of ensuring I didn't press charges, I guess. Anyway, the town still hates me, and I'm still no closer to gaining support for the program."

He whistles under his breath as I exit the change room and clears his throat to cover the gaffe. "It's a small town. They'll get used to you."

"I'm not so sure," I say. "The people here are really unpleasant. If it weren't for you and August, I likely would have turned tail and run by now."

He gives me a puzzled expression. "Do we know the same August?"

"Come on now, he's not that bad. A little intense, but he's—"

"Dangerous is what he is," he says, and I know I've hit a nerve. "But you don't need to worry about the people of Magnolia Springs, and I certainly hope you've got no intention of leaving. Paws for Cause has saved thousands of lives. Don't be modest, and don't listen to what those jackasses say."

I blush because I've never gone to work a day in my life for the recognition, but it's nice to be praised all the same. "How do you know so much about my program?"

"Are you kidding? I was on the cover of Southern Vet's Lifemagazine two years in a row. I read those issues front to back, and Paws for Cause is always in it. I read your article; you weren't a blond then, but I knew your face the second I saw you at that Fourth of July parade."

"Yeah." I point awkwardly to my hair. "The bombshell is new."

"Oh, I didn't say you weren't a bombshell. I just said you weren't blond."

I fold my arms across my chest. "Shouldn't you be splinting something, or

operating?”

“You’re right, I should.” He shakes his head and lets out an amused sound halfway between a sigh and a laugh. “Do you give your Marines this much trouble?”

“Only the ones with corny lines.”

“Oh, come on, a man’s gotta try. You’re surrounded by good ole country boys and big strapping soldiers with anger-management issues all day long. And I’m just a small-town veterinarian. I know how you girls fall for those big broken types.”

“Well, sorry to burst your bubble, but I ain’t falling for nothing or no one,” I say, and I wish I felt as much conviction as I spoke with, but I am a big fat liar.

“But you will be my sexy nurse, right?” He winks.

“Oh my God, would you just fix my pig already, please?” I grin, patting the pig’s head, and rub one leathery ear between my fingers. The other has the cannula with the drip in it.

For the next hour, I watch on with squeamish fascination as Jude fuses her tiny bones back together with even smaller metal plates and screws. I pass the instruments after he points them out to me, and he talks as carefree and easy, as if we were on a date, about everything, from what he’s doing at that moment to why he wanted to become a vet in the first place and how he ended up leaving Atlanta for here. He ceases talk altogether when he stitches her up, and then he removes her from the oxygen, carefully lifting her and carrying her to a crate where he lays her on the soft blankets. There’s a dish of water nearby. Her snout wriggles, but she doesn’t wake. She is just the most precious thing I’ve ever seen, and I share a house with the world’s most adorable four-year-old, so that’s saying something.

Jude straightens and leans up against the crate. “You wanna sit with her?”

“Is that okay?”

“Well, we don’t have any animals in recovery right now. I was planning on sitting here anyway. You hungry? Everything else in town is closed, but I can rustle us up some TV dinners from the freezer.”

“Wow, you really go all out, huh?” I sit down beside the crate.

“Hey, I just saved your pig, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did. Thank you.” I stroke her head gently and shake my own in disbelief. “I can’t believe I have a pig. I’ve already got a dog at home.”

“Here, in Magnolia Springs?”

“Oh no. I meant back in Fairhope.”

He frowns. “You still staying with August Cotton?”

“And Bettina, yeah. I booked the room before their parents passed and I’ve been looking for a rental ever since, but apparently, there’s nothing in town. I don’t know how true that is, given that Kathy Abernathy and her good friend Georgia don’t like me much.”

Jude pauses for a beat, and it seems as if he’s mulling over his next words. “I have a cabin out by Tanglewood Road that’s unoccupied if you want to use it?”

I side-eye him. I can’t stay in this man’s cabin. I barely know him. I mean, I didn’t know August either, but Tanglewood is different. It’s ... well, it just doesn’t feel right. And who’s going to make sure the Cottons aren’t eating frozen pizza every night? “I can’t do that. Besides, you don’t know the first thing about me. What if I’m a crook

or a serial killer?”

“Do you know the man you’re living with?” he says, and it feels very much like a loaded question. “Besides, any woman who runs a non-profit that helps wounded veterans and rescues dogs from kill shelters, and piglets from cardboard boxes, I might add, is no serial killer.”

“Okay, good point.”

He smirks. “Plus, you have that sweet and innocent baby face.”

My eyes grow round. “I am not baby-faced.”

“Sure you’re not,” he says, and that freaking grin is back, doing things to my insides it has no right to be doing. “Anyway, you should think about moving out of Tanglewood.”

“Lord, you two really hate one another, don’t you?” I grin. “What, did he steal your position as quarterback?”

“We have . . . history,” Jude says, and then elaborates at my baffled expression. “I spent summers here as a kid; it’s why I have the cabin in the woods. And let’s just say August Cotton was an asshole long before he ever came back from war a wounded veteran.”

“Okay,” I say, feeling more and more uneasy by the second. August can be difficult, I’ll give him that much, but anyone smart enough to look further knows he has a heart of gold, he just keeps it locked firmly up tight behind a wall of iron thorns. “Well, the man can sometimes be pretty tough to take, but I think that’s understandable given what he’s been through.”

“He in that program of yours?”

I laugh. “No, August is one of those special cases. He’s happier to suffer in silence.”

“And what about you? Do you date men who aren’t wounded veterans?”

“Only if they fix my pig for free.” I wink. I don’t know why I’m flirting back. Maybe it’s the fact that he’s actually fun, and it’s been a long time since I had fun.

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“You may just send me bankrupt.”

“Oh please,” I say, shooting him a knowing look. “I saw your face when I brought her in. You would have fixed her no matter what it cost you.”

“Yeah. I’m a sucker for damsels in distress.”

I roll my eyes. “And it’s been a while since anyone asked, but I don’t date the men in my program.”

He raises a brow, looking hopeful. “The women, then?”

I chuckle. “No, Doc. I don’t date the women either. I don’t have time for dating.”

“Yeah, me either.” He leans his head back against the wall with an exasperated sigh.

“Weren’t you just running off to a hot date before you almost backed over Betty and me?”

“Betty?”

I shrug and stroke the piglet’s head, gently tracing her spotted black markings. “It seems like a good fit. She’s a total Betty.”

“That she is,” he murmurs, his eyes firmly fixed on me. Somehow, I don’t think we’re talking about my new pet pig anymore. “But I think it was you who ran into me.”

“Oh right, with my pushbike,” I say, matter-of-factly. “I can see how that would do a lot of damage.”

“Tell you what,” Jude says, toying with the stethoscope around his neck. “I won’t charge you for damages if you agree to have a real dinner with me.”

BY THE TIME I LEFT the clinic, it was well after midnight. Jude offered to drive me home, but his sports car lacked any kind of tow bar, and leaving my bike there was out of the question. I’d told him I’d return at the end of the next day with two replacement TV dinners and time to check on my pig. I didn’t want to admit it, but I’d even had a damn bounce in my step.

I park the bike in the shed at Tanglewood and creep up the front porch steps as quietly as I can. August and Bettina are asleep on the couch in the front room, as if they’ve been waiting up for me, and the guilt about eats me alive. I watch them for a beat and cover her small body over with a knitted blanket from the back of the couch. She doesn’t stir, but when I straighten, August’s eyes are on me, and he is not a happy camper.

“Where the hell were you?” he snaps quietly. “We called. We went to the shelter looking for you. I even went to the damn sheriff’s office because I was worried the boys had done something stupid.”

I’m taken aback by the malevolence in his tone. “My phone died, or else I would have called. I’m sorry I worried you, but I found a stray.”

“What?” He shakes his head in disbelief and gets to his feet.

“I found a pig, a piglet really, in a box by the side of the road. Her foot was broken,

and she was in pretty bad shape, so I took her to the vet.”

“Course you did.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I whisper-yell, so as not to wake Bettina. “Did you forget what I do? I save animals. Granted, this is my first pig, but was I supposed to just leave her there?”

“Right, you save things. That’s your schtick, isn’t it?” He stalks out of the room and down the hall toward the staircase. I follow on his heels. “Course it don’t hurt that the vet looks like Jude du Pont, now does it? Why, I bet you just had to stay all night and make sure the pig was okay.”

“Actually, I assisted him in surgery, which was hours, and then we monitored her to make sure she was going to pull through, since his nurse is away for the weekend.”

“He’s still using that one, huh?”

“Oh God, August.” I shake my head. “You know, he told me you two had history. I don’t know why you care where I spent my night ... but I’m a grown woman, and you’re not responsible for me.”

August reels back as if I just slapped him. “You’re right. Here I was thinkin’ you were in some kinda trouble. Didn’t realize you were into screwing the town player, but I pegged you as smarter than that. I’m sorry I overestimated you.”

“Hold up a goddamned second, I did not screw Doc—”

“Doc?” He whistles. “You do work fast. You’ve been here for what, five minutes, and already you got cozy enough with the vet to give each other nicknames?”

“You’re jealous? Is that it?” I question. “See, it’s kind of hard to tell, what with how fucking bipolar you are.”

“Huh. That’s rich.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you come on awfully strong for a woman who’s too afraid to take the leap. What’s the matter, princess? You can fix ’em, but they ain’t good enough to fool around with?”

“Jesus, August, you’re so dumb you could throw yourself on the ground and still miss,” I snap. “You’re hot one minute and freezing the next, but even with all of this tension between us, I’m starting to think that maybe you’re just not interested.”

His face twists with anger, and then what looks like confusion.

“Yeah, ya big idiot, I’m attracted to you.”

“Why?”

It’s my turn to blink in surprise. I know August doesn’t think too highly of himself, but is he freaking crazy? I feel as if I’m on glue here.

I can’t do this. I shouldn’t want this, but I do. I don’t care that it’s breaking my number-one rule. I want him. I’ve wanted him since the day I laid eyes on his stubborn ass. But I don’t think August knows what he wants.

Mortified that I couldn’t keep my mouth shut, I turn, but August grabs my wrist and pulls me toward him.

“Olivia.” He wets his lips, and it’s as if he isn’t sure whether to push me away or pull me closer. That makes two of us.

He eliminates the distance between us. His free hand snakes around my waist and pulls me up against his hard body, but he doesn’t lean in, not even when I reach up on my tiptoes. It feels as if I’m waiting on the edge of a precipice, afraid that I’ll fall and terrified that I won’t.

“Kiss me, August.”

He exhales and presses a kiss to the top of my hair. His arms tighten, and he whispers, “I can’t.”

The whole world comes crashing down around me. I glare at him and pull free of his grasp, willing away the tears that threaten to spill from my eyes.

“Wivvie?” Bettina’s sleepy voice both startles me and melts my heart. She’s standing at the end of the hall, rubbing her eyes with her tiny fists and squinting against the harsh overhead light. “You’re hwome.”

I hold August’s gaze a beat longer, crushed by his rejection, yet too stubborn to give him more than that one moment of weakness. Bettina stumbles forward and wraps her arms around my legs, nuzzling into me. I smooth her hair down and bend to gently squeeze her shoulders. “Hey, pretty girl. It’s time for bed, yeah?”

“Wivvie, will you wead me?”

“Oh honey, not tonight,” I say in as cheerful a voice as I can muster. “Livvie’s kinda tired.”

“You can come sleep in the pwincess bed with me.”

“That’s okay, sweetpea.”

“Are you weally a pwincess?”

I smile sadly and blink back traitorous tears. “No, honey.”

“Then why does Auggie cwall you that?”

“Because August likes to tease,” I say before I can stop myself. I shut my eyes and slowly open them, daring a glance at him. His gaze is hard and unforgiving, his jaw clenched tightly closed. I sweep Bettina up in my arms and decide I’ll tuck her in. If I’m using her as a shield, he can’t get mad at me. “Come on. Let’s get you to bed.”

He doesn’t say a word when I carry his sister up the stairs and tuck her in, and he isn’t in his room when I walk past on my way out. I brush my teeth and take off my makeup, and then I turn out the light and cross the hall to my room. I lift my shirt over my head and kick the door with my foot, but I hit something solid and unyielding. I rip the T-shirt off, and an arm wraps around my waist and pushes me up against the dresser. The breath catches in the back of my throat, and I stare up at a livid August.

“A tease, am I?” He leans in and whispers, “I am not a fucking tease. If you’d known me before. . . well, I woulda rocked your world, darlin’.”

“Then show me now,” I say breathlessly, my voice wanton and desperate. “Why won’t you kiss me? Why won’t you touch me?”

“Because I can’t.”

“Why?” I demand, done with this whole darn thing.

“Because I don’t deserve to be loved, Liv.”

He’s so wrong about that. So wrong. I can’t make him kiss me, but I can kiss him.

I reach up and smash my lips against his, nipping at him, kissing him hard until he opens his mouth and lets me inside. One hand tightens on my waist, and the other cups my cheek. He opens to me and kisses me back so ferociously that I don’t doubt the truth of his promises to rock my world. His tongue caresses mine, and I moan. His hands are desperate on my flesh, tugging me closer, as they cover every inch of my skin beneath his palm. I whimper, guiding his hand to my breast and the La Perla bra.

“No!” August pulls away as if my touch burned him.

“Why?”

“I can’t,” he says, kissing my temple. “I can’t do this.”

“I know you want me, August. I can see it on your face; I can feel it,” I say tilting my head toward the bulge in his pants. God, it’s as if we’re moving in circles, endlessly chasing our tails. “Why won’t you—”

“Because I don’t deserve you, Liv.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ve done things that would horrify you,” he whispers into my hair, as he cups my face. “And I won’t let you give yourself over to a monster.”

“August—”

“I lost my leg, my dog, my parents . . .” he laughs, but there’s no humor in the sound.

“But I deserved to lose so much more than that.”

He backs up a step, and I realize this is the first time he’s ever discussed his leg with me. The psychologist in me understands he’s made a huge breakthrough here tonight, but the woman in me despairs. Because she’s heartbroken. I have feelings for August beyond wanting to junk-punch him for being an asshole, and he might even feel the same about me, but he won’t let himself give in because he believes he isn’t worthy of anyone. What a lonely and tragic existence. To always be fighting a war in your head. To never know the touch of another human being because you went to battle for your country and became something, someone, you don’t like.

I reach up and touch his cheek. “August, please?”

He doesn’t say another word, just removes my hand from his face and walks out, slamming the door between us. I sink to the floor, close my eyes and bite my lip to keep from crying. I am a mess of a woman right now, and no matter how I try, I always seem to wind up curled into a fetal position when he leaves. I’m in way over my head with this man. It’s as if we got on a rollercoaster the day I arrived on his doorstep, and try as I might, I can’t make it stop. I have no idea how to get off.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Olivia

IN THE MORNING, I’m up early to avoid a run in with August, and he doesn’t come to the shelter to help. I can’t say I blame him. After last night, I’m glad for the reprieve, until the boys show up. Sheriff Webb drops them off with nothing more than a thinly veiled threat of whooping their asses if they don’t stay and do

everything they're told.

The problem is, everything they're told to do they make a mockery of, and it's just easier to let them goof off than to have to endure the vitriol slung my way. I work hard and as quickly as I can, but I'm doing it all on my own. When I'm carting out a load of trash to the dumpster, I stop and find the man who's plagued my thoughts all night and a good part of the day standing before me at his truck.

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“What are you doing here?”

He takes a deep breath and exhales slowly. “Been standin’ here the last twenty minutes tryin’ to figure that out myself.”

“And did you come to any conclusions?”

“Not one.” He laughs, and it’s genuine. The smile that goes along with it about breaks my heart.

“You gonna come inside and help then, or you just gonna stand there thinkin’ up reasons to leave?”

He swallows the steps between us, and I shove my trash at his chest. He takes it from me and steps down off the porch and into the yard to the dumpster. I smile to myself as I walk inside and study the boys, who’re spinning around in an old dusty office chair they found in one of the storage closets.

I shake my head and pick up the broom, cleaning away more debris from the wall we knocked down yesterday and the dust from the particle board. The boys ignore me, but the moment August’s huge frame fills the doorway, both of them are on their feet and casting their gazes around, more than likely for something to look busy with.

“I hope you boys aren’t giving Miss Anders any trouble.”

“Nope, we good,” Josiah says.

“Uh-huh, totally good,” Beau adds with a cocky smirk. I roll my eyes.

“Well, I’m here,” August says to me, running a hand across the back of his neck. He looks nervous, and if I’m honest with myself, freaking adorable. “Where do you want me?”

Oh, the answers I have to that question. A more important question might have been “Where don’t you want me?” I hand him the sledgehammer and smile. “You can start by finishing off that wall you beat up the other day.”

The boys chuckle. “Pussy whipped,” Beau says under his breath.

“Bro, with an ass like that I’d be pussy fucking whipped too,” Josiah says, and the other perp just about rolls on the floor with laughter. Before my brain can play catch up and process what’s happening, August’s hand is wrapped around Josiah’s throat and the boy is choking.

“August. NO!” I cry and attempt to pry his steely forearm away from Josiah, but it’s like moving a mountain. “Let him go.”

“Apologize,” he says through gritted teeth.

“August, come on, he’s a minor. Not to mention he’s the sheriff’s nephew. I think you’re really gonna want to put him down now.”

“Not until he apologizes,” August says, holding the teenager aloft as if he could do it all day without breaking a sweat.

“Sss . . . ss . . . sorry.”

August sets him on his feet, and he chokes and splutters all over my floor. “Sorry,”

Josiah says again when he can get the words out.

“You respect your elders, you respect women, and you respect a man that fought for your freedom, you little fuckin’ shit, or next time I’ll make sure you never have the chance to speak that kinda filth again.”

“Yes . . . sir,” Josiah says. Beau looks as if he might run, but if the tremoring in his legs is anything to go by, he isn’t going to get far.

I hold my hand out to Josiah to help him up, but he brushes me off and gets to his feet. He doesn’t say a thing to August, but the look he gives could raze a man to ash where he stands. Without having to be told, both boys head over to the far corner of the room and pick up their cleaned paint rollers from yesterday.

I let out a noisy exhalation and whisper to August, “Can I see you for a minute please?” He tightens his jaw but doesn’t say a thing. “Outside.”

I stalk out the front door and away from the building to the opposite side of the truck where I turn on him. “What the hell was that?”

“The little punk needed to be taught a lesson.”

“He’s seventeen years old, August. You’re a grown man, and a trained Marine.” He flinches, and I feel a pang of guilt in my belly. I sigh. “He’s the sheriff’s nephew.”

“And you’d think that in seventeen years, she woulda taught him some damn manners.”

I shake my head. “You can’t put your hands on these kids because they disrespect someone.”

“It’s what my daddy woulda done.”

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“You’re not their father,” I shout, and take a deep breath to get a hold of myself. “What am I going to tell Sheriff Webb? They might be little punks, but they’re punks in my care.”

“You ain’t responsible for them.”

“Then who is? This town already hates me enough as it is. Can you just please try not to strangle any more minors?”

He chews his lip, as if he’s really contemplating his answer, and I’m awarded a rare smile. “Can I slap ’em upside the head again if they disrespect you?”

I fold my arms over my chest and fight the smile playing on my lips. I lose. “Why don’t we take it on a case-by-case basis?”

“Deal,” he says, and pushes off the truck.

“Come on, Marine. Back to work.”

“Whatever you say, princess.” He gives me a salute, and I roll my eyes and head back toward the building. I stop and turn when I realize he isn’t following me, and I catch his gaze on my derriere. His eyes slide up to mine and he wets his lips and looks away, moving past me and into the building. I breathe a heavy sigh and follow after him like a love-struck girl. I have two choices: cut my losses or confront him again. I don’t know how I’ll handle the rejection a second time, but I’m not the woman he accused me of being either. If I was, I would have run away from Magnolia Springs as fast as my feet could carry me. I’ve weathered too many storms in my lifetime to

turn tail and run from a broken Marine. I'll face his violence and demons head on because I'm the hurricane now, and August Cotton better batten down the hatches or run for cover.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Olivia

"HEY, CHECK IT OUT. Scarface is outside," Beau says a few days later, and the three of us look at him as if he's grown two heads.

"No way?"

"He is. Go look for yourself."

"Who's Scarface?" I ask, though I'm not sure I want to know the answer.

"You know, what's-his-name? That guy who went off to war and came back all fucked up," Beau explains, and then nervously glances at August who is so obviously clenching his teeth. "Ah shit, I didn't mean nothin' by it. Please don't put me in another headlock."

"Okay, that's enough. Both of you, go get painting the kennel floors," I say, before August can tear them both a new asshole. They trudge off toward the kennels, and I sigh impatiently, preparing to head outside. August grabs my arm and pulls me back.

"Let me go," he says, setting his paint roller down. "I'll see what he wants."

"I'm perfectly capable of talking to strangers, August, especially if they're Marines. It goes hand in hand with the job."

“Just, please, will you let me do this one thing?”

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The pleading in his gaze startles me, but I nod and turn back to my section of the wall we're painting a soft lemon yellow. "Fine."

I'm curious, but I respect his wishes and leave him be. After what seems like a solid twenty minutes, but is actually probably more like ten, I decide to go outside, and I find August and Dalton Brooks deep in conversation. Dalton is standing in front of August. His long beard and hair is messy and unkempt. He smells a little ripe, and he's far too skinny for his large frame. His clothes hang off him as if he were a coat hanger made of muscle and bone.

"Well hi," I say, trying not to startle them both.

"Liv, this is Dalton." I do a double-take at August because this is the first time he's called me Liv when we weren't locked in some tense discussion.

I extend my hand. Sometimes meeting infantrymen for the first time can be awkward because you never know if a mere handshake will set them off. Of course, I've met plenty who don't mind touching too, so it really depends on the soldier and where they are in their recovery.

Dalton eyes my hand suspiciously for a beat and then shakes, but the feel of his clammy palm in mine sets my teeth on edge and the hairs on the back of my neck all stand up at once. I shove the feeling down, wondering what the hell has gotten into me. Dalton releases me and takes a step back.

August tells me conversationally, "Me and Dalton were both stationed in Helmand, different outposts, but same region."

“Wow,” I say, taken aback, because this is another rare gift—August actually giving me information on the war. On his war. “Well, if I know anything about Helmand it’s that they only send the best there.”

August’s lips curl in the corner. Not an outright smile, but not a frown either. He knows that I know that’s not true. They don’t send only the best fighters to Helmand; they send troops wherever they’re needed. If you survived Helmand Province, you got lucky.

“So, what brings you out here, Dalton?” I search the yard for his car, but there isn’t one. “Did you walk all this way?”

“I like to walk. God gave me legs, it’s what they’re for.” This isn’t stated like a dig at August, and he clearly doesn’t think much about it either way. August doesn’t rile up the way he usually does with me. “I don’t mean no disrespect.”

August chin nods back. “No offense taken.”

“I was at that town meeting—”

“You were?” I ask, confused, because I know I didn’t see his face there. I’d remember this face. At one point, Dalton might’ve been handsome. He has pale blue eyes, golden hair the color of spun sugar, full lips, and a strong nose. He would have been one of those guys you’d see on the street and maybe take a second look at because you thought he was cute. Now you’d do a double take for a different reason. One whole side of his face is ruined with scars, and tiny fragments of shrapnel embedded in melted skin. His hair is missing a fair way off his scalp, and I’d be willing to bet it’s why he kept it long and messy because it’s the perfect curtain to hide behind.

“Yes, ma’am. I heard you talkin’ ’bout me.”

“I didn’t mean any offense, and I’m sorry to use you as an example.”

“I know you didn’t mean nothing by it. I wasn’t offended. But I wanna help. I ain’t got much money, but I got strong arms and legs, and I got time.” He balls his hands into fists; they’re dusted with dirt or maybe grease, I can’t tell. “I got nothing but time.”

“I’m honored, I really am, but I can’t afford to pay you, at least not until I get this place up and running. We’re a non-profit organization, so any money we make at our other shelters goes back into that shelter, and that program.”

“I don’t need money. I have what I need, but I was thinking maybe I could work for you and you could find me a dog, put me in your program. It’s pretty lonely when you get out. All your buddies are gone, and a pretty woman won’t even look twice at you.”

I smile, but I make sure there’s no trace of pity in my eyes. “Well, I may not be able to help anyone out with their love life, but I can get you paired with a dog.”

“Okay.” He nods. “Then where do you want me?”

“You any good with a sledgehammer?”

He smiles, and it warms my chest. His coming here today and offering to help, hell, even just the conversation with August would have gone a long way to making him feel a little less forgotten.

August gets Dalton situated with the sledgehammer at the counter, and I head out the back to talk to the boys. Grabbing both of their ears the way my mamma used to do to me when I was in big trouble, I lead them out the back door and into the small fenced off yard. There’s just as much stuff that needs cleaning here as out the front, but we’ll

get to that. Hopefully, with the extra hands on board, we can get this job done a lot quicker.

“Ow, ow,” Beau shrieks.

“Woman, what the hell?” Josiah pulls free of my grasp. His eyes shoot daggers at me.

“Dalton will be working with us now.”

“The crazy guy?”

“Beau, if you make it to your eighteenth birthday without someone cutting out your damn tongue, it’ll be a freaking miracle,” I snap, and he quickly shuts up. “Listen up, sunshine, because I’m only sayin’ this once. Dalton will be working with us from now on. You are to call him Dalton. Not Scarface, not crazy guy, or any other shitty nickname you can come up with and seriously, they are shitty. You two have no imagination—we need to work on that, and your social skills. You are not to call him anything other than Dalton, and you will address him with the same respect you give August, or so help me God, I’m going to kick both your asses. Are we clear?”

They mumble incoherent words, and I snap louder, “Are we clear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Josiah says.

Beau nods. “Yes, Miss Anders.”

“Good, then get back to work, and I won’t tell your aunt what little punks you are.”

They back inside, grumbling as they go. Josiah rubs at his ear as he walks. I feel the tiniest pang of guilt, and then I smile to myself because it may have only been a few days, but already those little bastards are growing on me, and I think I just might be growing on them too. August stands in the doorway, and I roll my eyes. “What? You need a good ass kicking today too?”

“Nope. Just wanted to make sure you’re okay out here.”

“Yeah, the boys may be idiots, but they’re harmless idiots.”

“In my experience, teenage boys are never harmless.”

I take several steps towards him. He doesn’t budge, so I give him my best sultry stare and say, “In my experience, all men are harmless if you give them a cookie and a belly rub.”

He laughs. Honest-to-God, belly-shaking laughter that makes me chuckle too, and after a moment of awkward smiles he leans down and whispers, “You already made me the cookies, but I’m still waitin’ on the belly rub.”

Maybe I was wrong about being a hurricane. Maybe I’m nothing more than a soft

summer breeze about to get slammed by Tropical Cyclone August.

I give him a snide smile. “Get back to work, Cotton.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He grins and salutes me.

God help me, but I am surrounded by jokers, vandals, and madmen, and it seems I’m the maddest of them all because I’d like nothing more than to give August that belly rub—after letting him make good on his promise to rock my world, that is.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Olivia

I LOCK THE FRONT DOOR and wave to Sheriff Webb as she drives away from the shelter with my two favorite perps in tow. Dalton seems like he doesn’t want to leave, and I guess I can understand that. When you suffer from PTSD, keeping your mind occupied is important. Dalton doesn’t have anyone to take his mind off anything. We needed to get him a dog, and fast. I’ve put feelers out with all of my contacts. Jake said we have a possible pup lined up in Fairhope, but another soldier wants him and has signed up for the program. He is wheelchair-bound and, from a physical standpoint, he needs the dog more.

A week on from when Dalton first joins us, we’re nearly done with the renovations. It has been like a pissing contest around here to see who can get a job done first; the boys were in on it too, until August pointed out they were cutting corners with their shoddy workmanship and they realized they had to do everything again.

August packs up the truck. Bett sits in the front seat as her brother grabs my bicycle, preparing to put it in the truck bed, when I stop him by saying, “Actually, I was planning on riding home.”

“Why? We’ll just drive you,” August says, as if it’s a done deal and I have no say in the matter.

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“Because I have to stop by the clinic and check on Betty.”

“Right.” He steels his jaw and sets my bike back down on the ground.

My brow creases. I lean against the tailgate so he can’t put it up. “What is your problem with him?”

“Nothin’.” August’s hands ball into fists at his sides. “He don’t mean shit to me.”

“Right,” I say with half a grin. “That’s why you get so defensive when I bring him up.”

“I don’t get defensive,” he says. “What you do in your spare time has nothing to do with me.”

My smile falters. “Come on now, don’t be like that.”

“I ain’t being like anything. I just gotta get home and get Bett fed and into bed.”

“Okay, well, I guess it’s frozen pizza tonight?”

“Don’t worry about it. My kid sister isn’t your concern.”

“Oh, my Lord,” I say, exasperated. “You know, you really are a shit sometimes.”

“A shit?” he says, amused now. “Well, then, apologies princess. I didn’t realize I was such a pain in your ass. You have a nice night with the doc now, you hear?”

Asshole. I refrain from punching him in his pretty face and thank Dalton one last time for the day's work, then I climb on my bike and ride away before August can start the engine on his piece-of-crap Chevy. It isn't long before he zooms past me in a cloud of gravel and dust. Double asshole.

When I finally make it to the clinic, I knock on the door, even though it says they're closed. I called earlier today, and Jude's secretary told me plainly that the doc didn't work after hours. I'd understood that, and I'd been all too willing to agree to come in first thing in the morning, but a beat later there was a clunk. I thought she'd hung up on me, but it turned out Jude had overheard and decided he wanted to talk to me himself. He politely told his secretary that he'd see to my phone call personally.

It takes a few minutes for Jude to answer the door, and when he does, I'm surprised to find him not in his scrubs, but in jeans and a dress shirt. I look down at my own clothing. I'm in jean cutoffs, and my T-shirt and arms are splattered with paint. Not exactly my finest outfit.

"Hi," I say with a wave. "I hope I'm not late? I can come back tomorrow if you'd rather—"

"No, you're right on time. I have someone who I think will be excited to see you, and supper's nearly ready."

"Supper?" I say, confused, and then it dawns on me that he thought I was asking for a date. Oh God. That is so not what I meant to imply. "Oh, I . . . um . . . I didn't mean—"

"I know, but I thought you'd appreciate a meal after a long day, and I always make extra."

"I couldn't—"

“Everyone’s gotta eat, Olivia.” He pulls me inside, and I follow him through the clinic past the obscure paintings. The familiar scents of antiseptic and animal assault my nose. “Besides, you’d be doing me a favor. If you eat my portion of the Thai noodles, I won’t get fat.”

“You made Thai? What are you, Superman?”

“Well, you haven’t tasted it yet.” He shrugs. “Come on, we’ll go see your girl first. She’s doing well today.”

“She is?”

“Great, even. Her appetite has returned, and she’s moving around a fair bit—a little too much for my liking.”

I follow him through to the recovery rooms out back. It’s quiet, but there’s a little snuffling when the doc turns on the light.

“Hey, pretty girl,” I whisper at the piglet that’s now sitting upright in her crate, her sleepy eyes looking up at me and her tail wagging furiously. Before this, I never knew pigs could wag their tails, and it’s the sweetest damn thing I ever saw.

Doc gets her out of the cage, and I coo and coddle her for a long time there on the clinic floor. She has this wirey down that covers her body and tickles my arms as she nuzzles into my lap.

“She should be ready to go home in a day or two.”

“Home,” I sigh. “I don’t know where that is right now. I can’t keep a pig at a bed and breakfast.”

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“I thought you had August wrapped around your little finger?”

I give a humorless laugh. “No, we’re um . . . not wrapped around anything.”

He looks surprised by that—surprised, but not at all disappointed. “Well, in any case, she can stay here until you clear it with him. But we should go eat, so we can let this little girl rest.”

“Yeah, okay.” I hug Betty goodbye and promise to come see her soon, and then Doc leads me outside and across a small paved stone courtyard and into the main house.

It’s very much a bachelor pad, only neat, with open-plan living, dark hardwood floors, and stainless steel appliances. There’s a sectional sofa in front of a huge flat-screen TV and magazines like *Maxim* and *Sports Illustrated* grace the coffee table. On top of the pile sits a magazine that’s opened to my picture and the interview I did for *Southern Vet’s Life*.

I pick up the copy and grin awkwardly at the doc. “You catching up on a little light reading?”

He rubs the back of his neck and smiles apologetically. “Er, sorry about that. Let me just . . .” He takes the magazine from my hands, stacks it in a pile and puts it with the others on the end table farthest from us.

Jude leads me to sit at the dining table that looks as if it’s hardly been used, while he serves up supper. I’m grateful that the room isn’t set properly with candles and the like, because that would be awkward. As if this supper wasn’t already awkward

enough. I like Jude a lot, but I'm not interested in upgrading our friendship status to "in a relationship" on Facebook. He's a good man; he just isn't the man for me.

We talk about Paws for Cause, and he reminds me that he's willing to check each one of the dogs for free anytime I need it. Of course, I refuse, because I know better than anyone that you need to get paid to live, but he insists, and since he's the only vet in town, and I don't even have a car yet, I can't afford to go somewhere else if any of my animals need treatment.

The doc hasn't exactly been backward in coming forwards where I'm concerned, but it's still nice having a real conversation that isn't loaded with tension and expectation, and the fact that he gets what I do doesn't hurt either. After these few short weeks of living with August, it's refreshing to not have to be on my guard all the time. On paper, Jude du Pont is the perfect man, but he's nowhere near screwed up enough for me. I'm only attracted to broken men, the kind who I believe I can fix. The kind who don't wanna be fixed. It's always been that way with me and, unfortunately, now is no different.

After dinner, we move to the lounge room. I stay a little later, drink a little more wine, and when I say goodnight at his front door, for the barest hint of a second, I think he might kiss me. I even think I might like it. But that's more than likely the wine and loneliness talking so I shake my head to clear those thoughts, and I step back and grab my bike.

"Thanks for supper."

"You sure I can't drive you?"

"No. I like the ride," I say. What I don't say is that August would likely jack him to Jesus for driving me home and showing up on his property. "Goodnight."

“Goodnight,” he says, and I try to ignore the disappointment I see on his face and hear in his voice. I’m not used to men being so forward with me, or maybe it’s just that I’m always so busy I haven’t had time to poke my head up and see if there are men who are interested. Either way, the only capacity I want Doc in my life is as a friend, and so far, he’s been a good one. We barely know each other, but I trust him, and God knows I need all the friends I can get in this heartbreak town.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Olivia

Age seventeen

I WAIT ACROSS THE STREET until the car pulls out of the drive. My stomach pangs with hunger. I want to give it another ten minutes, or as long as I can stand to be out here in the pouring rain, but I know I don’t have a whole lot of time.

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I hurry across the road and through the gate at the side of the house. The people who live here don't have a dog, just a cat that prowls the neighborhood and lies about all day in the sun. He meows from under the awning and darts inside the open window. He gets a bit of a shock when I fold my legs into the window and climb in after it. His furry paw bats out at my wrist, drawing blood. I hiss at him and lose my balance, wincing when I land with a hard thud on the other side. My abdomen constricts, and I squeeze my eyes tightly closed and take several deep breaths until the pain passes.

I spot a box of Frosted Flakes on the counter. My stomach growls, but hungry as I am, I'm not here to raid their pantry. I glance around the kitchen and head into the family room off that, staring at walls that once held pictures featuring a different family's faces. I walk the long hall and climb the stairs I've climbed a thousand times before, ignoring the third step because I remember how it creaks. I'm shivering from the damp clothes hanging off my body. I walk from room to room, searching, touching objects that don't belong to me, and then, when I glance at my reflection in the mirror in the bedroom that used to be mine, I realize I'm the one who no longer belongs. My hair is limp and greasy, my face is gaunt, and my body far too skinny to fit in the clothes of the teenager who now occupies this room. I wander into the room that used to be my parents' and I sit on the bed and cry for a long time. Too long.

Another biting pain in my stomach forces me into action. I walk the hall to the main bathroom and run the water so scalding I wonder how I'll manage to sit in it. I lower myself into the bath and grab the cutthroat I brought with me, and then I slowly run the razor across my flesh. It hurts. A lot more than I expected. My heart beats out a sharp staccato rhythm. Fear prickles down my spine as the blood bubbles up and flows like ribbons from my veins. And I hug my swollen belly as the tears glance off my face and fall into the crimson water.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be the kind of mamma you deserve. I’m so sorry.”

My head lolls back against the tub, and I float. I’m finally free.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Olivia

“HEY, CAN I BORROW YOURtruck?” I ask August. I’d been tossing it over in my head for an hour so it may have seemed a little bit blunt just blurting it out like that, but the worst he can do is say no. We can’t work on the shelter today because we’ve found a live wire and all the electric needs to be grounded and rewired thanks to Old Man Tinker’s efforts to do it himself.

August leans up against the kitchen counter, but only briefly glances at me before he continues rifling through the giant bag of potato chips in his hand.

“I mean, please?”

He crunches a chip loudly. “Where are you taking it to?”

“Um . . . Jackson?” I ask, because it really is a question. Unfortunately for me, it’s a question that now has his undivided attention.

“As in, two hours away from here, Jackson?”

“Yup, that’s the one.” I smile brightly, feeling as if I’m losing him, but I’m desperate to hang on. He doesn’t smile back. “You know what, it’s okay. I can just—”

“I’ll have to call Miss Sue and ask her to keep Bettina an hour longer, just in case

you're not back," he says, shoving a handful of potato chips in his mouth.

I move forward and take the packet from him. "You should eat something substantial."

He screws his nose up, glances longingly at the packet I stow in the cupboard, and wipes his hands on his jeans. "What are you doing there?"

"My friend owns a shelter. She called about a dog that she can't place. She's a little aggressive, so I thought I'd try as a last-ditch effort. They're a no-kill shelter too, but this dog is . . . well, she's special." I open the refrigerator and bend to peruse the shelves. Finding what I need to make him a turkey sandwich, I straighten and turn to face him.

August's gaze darts away from my body with a slight flush of what looks to be embarrassment as he glances down at the floor. "Special, huh?"

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I place my ingredients on the bench beside him and take the plates from the cabinet above our heads, then I set about fixing us both lunch. “You know, you could come with me? If you wanted?”

The brilliance of my plan unravels thread by thread inside my mind, and I find myself tensing every muscle in my body as I wait for his response. When Sallyann called about Zora, I thought maybe if I could weed out her behavioral problems I could train her up for Dalton because we still haven’t found the perfect candidate for his emotional support dog. After talking with Sallyann, whose no-kill policy is as stalwart as mine, I knew she wasn’t the dog for Dalton, and we’d need some kind of miracle to turn that dog around.

Zora is a Military Working Dog, and by all rights, she should have gone back to the Marines. However, the family of the fallen Marine had agreed to take her because he loved that dog, he gave his life for hers, and they knew what the Marines would do if they sent her back. If a MWD can no longer work, they're fostered out. When they can't be adopted because of their behavioral problems, they're put down. From the sounds of things, Zora needs time, anxiety meds, and a whole lot of love. She's lost her handler. In her mind, there is no fate worse than that. August lost his comrade along with his leg. It doesn't take a genius to put the two together.

Sallyann is at the end of a very fine tether, but I have a MWD handler at my disposal. It's as if fate has dropped this opportunity in my lap and I can see how perfect this match would be. August doesn't want a dog, he doesn't want any part of my program, but sometimes we don't choose life—it chooses us. Though it is probably for the best that I don't mention any of this to him.

August wets his lips. “Sure, why not?”

“Really?” I say too quickly, because it couldn’t be that easy, could it? He raises a brow, and I promptly shut up, handing him the sandwich as a peace offering. He takes it, but not without studying me closely first. It’s evident he knows that I’m up to something, but he doesn’t say anything to the contrary, and as I sit at the small kitchen table across from him, neither do I.

He’s never discussed his IED detection dog with me, but MWDs aren’t ever just dogs in the military, at least not to their handlers. They’re soldiers, they’re Marines, and they save countless lives. I’m hoping Zora has it in her to save just one more, because this dog needs August as much as August needs her.

AUGUST TAKES HIS EYES from the white line to glare at me. “What?”

“Nothing.” I shake my head and smile at him. We’ve been on the road for an hour now, and I’ve spent the better part of it gawking at him across the cab of his truck.

“You starin’ holes in the side of my face, ain’t nothin’. Out with it, Liv,” he says, and I squeeze my thighs together because I like his new nickname for me a little too much.

“It’s just . . .” I sigh, knowing the next words out of my mouth could either end with him shutting me down or with me actually learning something I can use in regards to August's recovery. “You never talk about your dog.”

He clenches his jaw tightly closed, until that little muscle in his cheek pops. “No, I don’t.”

“Why not?”

He doesn't answer. Instead, he glares at the road ahead of us, his hands gripping the wheel so tightly the knuckles blanch bone white.

“August,” I say, resting my hand on his forearm. His muscles bunch beneath my fingers, and he follows the line of my hand up my wrist, my arm, my clavicle, and finally, his gaze meets mine. I find it hard to breathe when he looks at me like this, with his eyes afire and his full, beautiful lips curved up in the corners as if they were making promises his body was yet to make good on. Just when I feel my own lips part, and a hot and heady breath rushes out of me, he glances back to the road, flips the visor above his head, and pulls a picture from the elastic strap. The photo is crumpled and worn around the edges. It shows August in full uniform, and I'd be lying if I said it didn't make my skin hot and prickly all over, with his broad shoulders and massive frame, and the half smile on his face as he stands proudly holding his rifle. He's breathtaking. Beside him is a robust Belgian Malinois sitting proudly at his owner's feet, his long tongue lolling out to the side and his eyes squinting against the sunlight. It takes me a beat before I realize August's gaze is no longer on the road; it's on me. I wet my lips and glance at him. “He's beautiful.”

He smiles like even he's not sure if I'm talking about him or his dog, and then the light leaves his face, and he studies the road again. I turn the picture over and read the inscription. Lance Corporal August Cotton and Havoc.

“Havoc, huh?”

“Yes, ma'am,” he says. “That dog saved my life more times than I could count.”

“He's magnificent.”

“He was. You know other Marines don't really get what we do—they give us hell

about handling puppies like it's all fun and games, but I never would have made it out of that desert if it weren't for that dog. He saved me on nights so brutal and lonely that I thought I could just walk out into the desert and be done with it. I didn't care if I got captured. I didn't care if I got shot. I just wanted out of there. Havoc kept me alive, and I woulda taken all the ribbing those boys could dish out willingly if it meant I didn't have to go through that alone."

"You don't have to be alone anymore, August. We could put you in the program and get you paired up with a dog, today. You already have experience with handling—"

"No." His voice bellows through the truck, and I flinch. August holds his breath and then exhales loudly. "I can't do that."

"Why?"

"Why you always gotta push my buttons?" he bites out. "You push, and you keep pushing until I'm ready to snap."

"Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Are you ready to snap?"

"I'm this fucking close." He pinches his thumb and forefinger together.

"Good," I shout. "Maybe I've finally gotten you to feel something after all of this time."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:57 am

“Don’t talk to me about feelings. You don’t know shit. You don’t know what I’ve been through. You don’t—”

“When I was seventeen, my mother’s dealer raped me,” I say, and I hurry through the words because I’m afraid my mouth will close up like a clam if I don’t. “I wound up pregnant.”

“Shit.” August drifts into oncoming traffic, but he jerks the wheel hard until we swerve back into our lane, and veer off the road. We come to a bumpy stop on the shoulder.

“I couldn’t tell my mother. I was terrified she’d accuse me of doing it deliberately, of seducing him. I didn’t have the money for an abortion, and I . . .” I swallow back tears. “We were living in a trailer at the time, but before that, we’d had a house, with a big back yard and a tub so huge you could get lost in the damn thing. Before my daddy was killed in combat. We lost everything when he died; I even lost my mamma. She went from a strong military wife to a woman addicted to pain pills. When she could no longer afford those, she turned to crack. She met a guy in the trailer park we’d moved into, and he became my mother’s dealer, my rapist, and the father of my unborn child.”

“Liv,” August whispers. I know his eyes are trained on me, I can feel them, though I can’t look at his face. I know it wasn’t my fault, but if I glance up at August and there’s even the barest hint of pity or blame, I won’t be able to unsee that, and I don’t want either from him. “I’m sorry.”

I nod and glance out the window at the blacktop baking in the heat. “It was the only

place I remembered being happy. That house. I had nowhere else to go, no one to turn to, and I felt like within its walls, I'd be closer to my daddy. But someone else lived there now, a family, who were whole. Not like us.

"I waited until they left, the kids at school, probably, and the father at work. He wore suits. I remember thinking it was so different, you know? When my daddy left for work, it was in full uniform, and there were a lot of tears, always." I smile at August, but inside I feel hollowed out. I've never told anyone, not even my best friend, Ellie. I shouldn't be burdening him with this, but I was tired of keeping the worst parts of me hidden. I wanted him to know that I understood pain. I knew how it felt to harbor a broken spirit because I'd done it since I was sixteen years old. "I wandered through their house, and every trace of us had been removed; my daddy wasn't there. He was long gone.

"I knew that. I'd known it a long time, but I still kept searching. I waited for him. I thought somehow, he would cross the veil that separated our worlds and he'd stop me, so I lay there on a stranger's bed staring up at the ceiling, knowing I didn't have time to waste, and waiting anyway. I was waiting on a miracle. It never came. I dried my eyes, and I ran a bath so hot I was afraid my skin would peel. I screamed as I stepped into it. It's funny how your body fights for self-preservation, even when there's nothing worth saving."

I glance down at the scars on my wrists. I taste the bitterness of sorrow on my tongue, feel the tightening in my throat, and the sharp prick of tears sting my eyes. I know how this story ends, and still I want the chance to re-write it.

"I cut myself. Stuck that blade in my skin and I watched as the blood poured out of my body. I didn't know what came next, and I didn't much care what happened to me in the afterlife. All I cared about was not feeling this pain anymore. My daddy would have been so ashamed of me, but I couldn't take care of a monster's baby. I couldn't even take care of myself.

“It hurt like hell. They don’t show you that on TV and in the movies, it’s always just a little nick and the character quietly slips away, as easy as falling asleep, but it isn’t real. Somewhere in amongst all the pain and blood, I woke up. I fought and changed my mind. I crawled out of that tub, but I didn’t make it two steps before I fell and hit my head.”

I can’t look at him. Instead, the words pour out of me as I stare through blurry eyes at the long, empty road before us. “I saw my daddy, August. I saw his stricken face, and I wanted to stay with him, but the next thing I knew, I woke up in a hospital bed. I’d lost the baby. That was a given, I guess, and I was doped up on despair and morphine. I tried to pull my drip out because I was terrified I’d become like her, like my mamma.

Salt water spills over my cheeks. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. “I don’t know what it’s like to fight in a war zone, to see the things you’ve seen and to have to be okay with what you’ve done, what you’ve lived through, but I do know something about feeling unworthy. I do know what it’s like to wake in a hospital bed and find you’re all alone, and to know that you’ve made decisions you’re not sure you can live with. And I know what it’s like to forgive yourself, and discover that there is a reason you’re still here. I don’t know if it’s divine intervention or just a series of events that led me to your door, but I do know I was born to do this, and you weren’t born to be alone.”

I wipe my tears away and search my purse for a Kleenex. I come up empty, but August leans over and opens the glove box, pulling out a travel packet of tissues and handing one to me. “Thank you.”

He unfastens my belt, and the next thing I know, I’m being drawn up against his warm body with his big arm wrapped around my waist. I hold my breath, afraid if I let it in, if I give in, I’ll break down completely, but he squeezes me tightly, and then I fall apart. I sob like I never have, not even when I slipped into that bath, or lay

dying on a stranger's tiled bathroom floor—not even when the doctors told me that I was going to be okay and I didn't see how I could be. I didn't see how I deserved to be after what I'd done.

He squeezes me so tight I fear I may crack a rib, but right now it's the only thing holding me together, so I don't move away. I just lean into him, and I take his strength.

When my mind is quiet, and my tears have all but dried, he presses a kiss to my hair and says, “You done good, princess. You did real good.” His voice quavers, and he tilts my head up to his, pressing a chaste kiss on my lips. I kiss him back, but there's no heat to it, just a kind of acceptance that I didn't think I'd ever feel from this stubborn, short-tempered Marine. And it's as sweet a taste in my mouth as it is bitter, because I just poured my heart out to this man, and I know he'll never let himself open up to me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

August

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:57 am

AT THE SHELTER, LIV introduces me to Sallyann Anderson, a trainer she taught several years ago. She's bubbly, and she talks a mile a minute. She also stares at my leg. It makes me uncomfortable, so I fall into step behind Liv and wish I could just melt away into the background. Truth is, I'm used to people staring. I'm even used to people firing stupid questions at me as if they were rounds, one after the other. POP. POP. POP. But I ain't used to women looking at me like I'm some damn prized pig.

Sallyann leads us back to the kennels. We walk through a door housing twice as many cages as Liv's shelter in Magnolia Springs. They're near empty, which I guess is a good thing. It means they're actually making a difference here. We're led through another door, and I know the second I step inside what I'm about to find. I can't explain it, but I know what sits in the kennel at the end of the room. I know that frenetic energy, equal parts excitement and fear. Liv hasn't brought me here on a whim, and this is no ordinary dog.

"Zora was great with the kids at first," Sallyann says. "But the widow started to see small changes in her behavior. She went off her food. They'd take her for a walk, and she'd hit on a scent, wouldn't budge for hours. She doesn't like men much either, which is odd, considering her former handler was one, and the widow never could get her under control."

I tune out the incessant chatter. The blood whooshes in my ears as I move toward the kennel on autopilot, and there she is—Zora. A sleek German Shepherd standing at her full height, hackles raised, shiny white teeth exposed. Glorious and savage. Beautiful. Her coat is dull, possibly because of anxiety, but it could be that no one's gotten close enough to groom her. This dog should be put down; it should have happened the moment she returned home to U.S. soil. Logically, I know this.

Sallyann and Liv likely know this too, but as I stare into those knowing tawny eyes, the idea breaks my heart. I don't know how Zora got cleared for civilian life, but here she is, glaring at me like she wants to rip my damn throat out. I crouch down in front of the cage and hook my fingers through the wire mesh separating us.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Sallyann says. But I hold up a hand for her to wait, and she promptly shuts up.

Zora edges toward the door of her cage, her head bent low, her hackles raised, and a sneer on her muzzle. I look into her eyes and see her bravado, but I have her number. This dog may be acting tough and ruling the roost because they've let her, but her bark is definitely worse than her bite.

"Zora's the name the Corps gave her?" I ask, never once taking my eyes from that proud canine face. She straightens and cocks her head to the side as if she's hanging on every word I say.

"Far as I know," Sallyann says.

"Zora, sit," I command, following the words with a hand gesture she'd know well. She whines and sits. She's panting, and though it's warm in here, I know it's not from the heat. "Zora, lay down."

Another whine, but she does as I instructed. She even rolls onto her back as if playing, but she keeps two eyes firmly fixed on me as she rubs her spine along the concrete floor. Sallyann laughs, and Zora barks and sits up on alert again. "You got a KONG?"

"Yeah." She points to a collection of used toys sitting nearby.

"Does she have her own?"

“No.”

I sigh. “You got any that haven’t been used, ma’am?”

This would probably go better with her own KONG, but if her handler died in the field, I’d say it’s long gone. “I don’t know how much you know about MWDs, but they don’t work for food or treats. They work for their toys; they work for praise.”

“A bit like men then,” Sallyann jokes, and I level her with a hard gaze. “I’ll go get her a new toy.”

“Thanks, Sallyann,” Liv says.

“Zora,” I say, mimicking the high-pitched, excited tone we’re taught to use in training. She cocks her head again. Her ears prick up and her tail flicks, once, twice, and then a third time. “You ready to get nice and friendly with me, mamma?”

Sallyann comes back into the room, and Zora’s defenses go up again, snarling and snapping at the intrusion.

“Zora. Sit,” I command. She doesn’t sit. Instead, she lunges for the chain-link fence between us, almost knocking me off balance. “SIT!”

She abruptly skitters back from the door and whines. I breathe a little easier because her listening just now, whimpering and hanging her head, means she doesn’t want to disappoint me. It means I’ve already won. I’m the alpha. “Good girl.”

I hold my hand out for the KONG. It isn’t Sallyann who passes it to me; it’s Liv. I know this without looking because she has a way about her that both calms me and sends me reeling all at once.

Zora gives a strange, disgruntled bark, and I can't tell if it's because she's jealous that I'm distracted by Olivia or just desperate to get her jaws around the new chew toy. She whines.

"Oh, you want this, huh?" I show it to her, dangle it by the rope in front of her cage. Her gaze darts between the toy and my face, and once I know I have her undivided attention, I tuck it into my pocket. I'm not teasing or being cruel, but I won't reward her for bad behavior. She'll need to work for it.

"Alright, mamma," I say, using the fence for support as I stand. "I'm coming in there. Try not to chew my face off, okay?"

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Sallyann asks. "She has to be muzzled before we can touch her bedding and food bowls, and even then she'll only let Helena in."

"She don't need no muzzle; she just needs an alpha to follow." I slide the lock back and she growls. When I push open the door a fraction, she snarls at me, baring wickedly sharp teeth. "Hey, that's enough."

Zora backs up several paces, and I step across the threshold of her kennel. This dog could bring me down easily. I know this, and she knows this, but she doesn't attempt it, and I don't try to get close to her. I ease myself down onto the concrete floor.

"Oh God, please don't chew his face off," Sallyann says. "It's far too pretty, and I can't afford a law suit."

"Hey Sallyann," Olivia says. "Why don't you head on out of the room, and I'll sit with them a bit? August knows what he's doing."

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“You sure?”

“We got it,” I say impatiently. The woman looks taken aback by my abruptness, but she nods and leaves the room much more quietly than she had before.

Olivia moves ever so slowly, inching down the wall opposite Zora’s cage. The dog growls, but I tell her to be still and she goes back to sulking in the corner. She’s still as far from me as the kennel will allow but she won’t go into the crate.

I want to ask Olivia how she’s doing, and how she got so strong after experiencing all of that shit at such a young age, but I’m afraid to. Her strength frightens me, because she got through all that and she’s still standing, and a few months of war has left me crippled and on my knees, begging for an easy way out.

Olivia watches Zora closely, as if she’s afraid the dog will snap. I know she won’t—I wouldn’t be in here otherwise—but occupying her space is just another way of showing her who’s dominant.

Zora slowly crawls forward on her belly toward me. “You know she’s doing pretty well for a dog who wanted to tear us all to shreds a few minutes ago,” Olivia whispers.

I nod. “She’s responsive.”

“And you?”

“I’m not unaffected. And I ain’t stupid. I know why you brought me here.”

“Come on, can you blame me?” Olivia grins. “My friend calls and says she’s got no choice but to put down a MWD, and I’m not going to take my best asset along with me?”

“Your best asset?”

She shrugs. “You know I could use a trainer like you on my team.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m not a trainer, Liv. I’m a handler. I don’t see no explosives around here, do you?”

“Just that temper of yours.” She gives me a flirty smile, and my dick twitches. She’s gotta stop looking at me like that; it makes it so damn hard to keep on resisting.

Zora paws my outstretched leg. I reach out to pat her, and there’s a brief second when she snarls, and it looks as if she might add my hand to her list of war trophies, but when I make contact with her huge head she closes her eyes and her tongue lolls out.

“Good girl,” I say in a high-pitched voice that makes Olivia chuckle and Zora rolls on her back, exposing her soft underbelly. I give her a good rub, loving her up the way she deserves, and I trace the scars on her legs and stomach that war left behind. “You been through hell too, huh?” I whisper. I don’t intend for Liv to hear it, but I don’t regret the words either. Zora jumps up and licks my face.

“Okay, mamma, that’s enough.” She keeps licking even as I push her away, and sticky saliva covers my hand and face. I pull the KONG from my pocket and toss it across the small kennel. It bounces off the wall and she runs after it, scrambling over my legs in a race to get it before someone else can. It lands in front of Olivia.

“Don’t touch it,” I warn. Olivia’s responding glare says, “This isn’t my first time at the rodeo, dumbass.” I grin, because I love how expressive she is. We may not say a

lot, but our eyes say everything our lips can't.

Zora snatches up her toy and returns it to my lap, but she won't give it up. I let her have it, because she earned it.

"So, what do we do now?" Olivia asks.

I chuckle and shake my head at her, unable to believe that someone so pure, so perfect, could manipulate me like I was putty in her hands. I played right into her trap, and she knew I would all along. "We go home, Liv."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Olivia

One week later

YESTERDAY, I PARTED with ten grand of my life savings and finally bought myself a car. I can't ride everywhere and I can't keep relying on August to drive me to shelters all across the great state of Alabama. So as much as it hurt, I rode to the station, hopped the bus to Mobile, and drove a secondhand 2007 Chevrolet Tahoe off the lot. It has good mileage. The seats are a little beat up, but it will fit two large dog crates and five passengers comfortably, so it will do.

When I pull into the drive, Dalton is already hard at work painting the outside of the shelter. He's shown up here every day to work at seven a.m. The man managed to break in everyday without ruining the windows or the locks, so I caved and decided to give him a key. He's logged more hours on this shelter than any of us have, and it is almost done. We have a little work to do inside, a kennel or two to fix and a flowerbed to plant. Out the back, we've set up a permanent obstacle course for the new recruits. We are due to open our doors in two days, but first, I have a huge surprise for Dalton. I just have to go get it.

"Morning," I say to him as I head through the open door.

"Morning, Miss Olivia."

"How long you been here, Dalton?"

He dips his roller in the tray and continues to paint. “You want the truth or somethin’ I make up?”

I chuckle. “The truth, Dalton. Always the truth.”

“Mighta been about five a.m.”

I shake my head and glare up at him, but he just keeps on painting. “You need rest. You can’t be working all day and not restin’. I don’t wanna see you here at all hours of the morning.”

“I can’t sleep, ma’am.”

“I know,” I say. “I understand that, but I need you to try. I can’t have you collapsing on me in the middle of the day.”

“I’m a Marine,” he says, as if this is self-explanatory. He’s right; he’d stand there all day and all night if he had to, even if his legs were burning, his back screaming, and he could barely keep his eyes open. He’d still stand tall, because Marines are made of grit, stubbornness, and resilience.

I give him an impatient look and say, “You know what I mean.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I set the gardening supplies I bought yesterday down in the middle of the porch, and Dalton climbs off his ladder and follows me to the car to help with the rest. “How you doin’? Aside from the lack of sleep, that is?”

“Can’t complain.”

“You can, if you want to.” I give him a reassuring smile. “I’m a real good listener.”

He shrugs. “My head gets a little messed up sometimes, but the pills help to keep it straight. Ain’t much else I can do. I ain’t missing a limb like August; I ain’t dead like my buddies. I’m here, I’m alive. It is what it is.”

“You have my number. You can call me when it gets bad. You know that right?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says. “But I don’t own a telephone.”

“What?”

He shrugs. “I ain’t got no electricity.”

“Why not?”

“Don’t need it,” he says. “I don’t like the buzzing. It gets all up in my head, and I don’t want the government keeping track of me.”

I frown, and I’m about to ask what he means by that when the boys show up on their bikes. They stopped having the sheriff drop them off about three weeks back, and just started riding here of their own accord, ready to work. I’m going to miss them when the summer’s over. By now, they’ve more than made up for the damage they did, and I can’t see them sticking around much longer. Truthfully, I don’t really know why they’re still here. I’ll have to see about hiring someone else once they’ve moved on. I’ve already discussed hiring Dalton on a full-time basis once we are open to the public, but it will take a lot more than just two people to run a shelter, much less a program like Paws for Cause. I’ll have to make the time to discuss it with them later today. For now, we all have work to do.

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“Beau, you’re with Dalton and August today,” I say. “Josiah, you’re with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“For me?” Josiah says, looking slightly uncomfortable.

I grab the brim of his cap and turn it the right way around. “No, dumbass, not for you.”

“Why the hell am I going then?”

“Because I need some muscle, and Beau’s fresh out of that,” I tease. Dalton chuckles quietly.

“Hey, that hurts.”

“Aww, would you look at that? The little pervert has a heart after all,” I say and point to the shovel, “Start diggin’. You’ve got some flowers to plant. I drew you a diagram in the notebook there, and you better not mess up my design. If I come back and that Bee Balm is where the Indian Pink should be, I’m gonna make you do it all again.”

Josiah starts laughing.

“And you—go get your little behind in the car. I’m playing Sam Hunt the whole way.”

The smile fades from Josiah's face, replaced by a grimace. "You gonna make me listen to white people singing about their trucks the entire time?"

"Oh, honey, Sam Hunt don't sing about trucks," I say with a grin. I'm enjoying the forlorn expression on his face a little more than is healthy. "Well, he kind of does, but he sure ain't singing about driving them. Now get in."

IT'S DARK WHEN I PULLup in front of Josiah's house. We've just come from visiting the doc, and I glance at the dog occupying my back seat in my rearview mirror. Jude had been an angel to look over our new friend Xena. I worked with the sweet-tempered Cavalier King Charles Spaniel myself four years ago and trained her for a child psychologist in Montgomery who used Xena as an emotional support dog for her patients. Kati passed away before I left for Magnolia Springs, and it took me a bunch of called-in favors and IOUs to locate this little warrior princess, but here she is. I have plans to train her for a different kind of emotional support, and August doesn't know it yet, but Tanglewood will have a few extra guests checking in tonight. I can't very well leave them at the shelter unattended. I'm not sure how he's going to take this news, but I'm just praying to the good Lord above that he likes me enough to not throw me out on my ass. He hasn't yet, so surely that counts for something.

I look down at Betty nestled in Josiah's lap. He strokes the wrinkled skin on her snout and stares straight ahead out the windshield. I can tell he doesn't want to go in, but his daddy's sitting on the front porch stoop, and he can't very well pretend he isn't here.

"You know, you're kind of a natural at that."

He laughs, but there's no humor in it. "Yeah."

“I bet if you work hard you could still go to a good college. Plenty of places take late submissions. You’re smart, Josiah, and you’re better than this.” I tilt my chin toward the run-down house. I’ve been in Magnolia Springs for a little more than a month now and no one had to point out Cole Webb’s house on a map of places you go if you’re looking for trouble. I know just by looking at that man’s soulless eyes that he isn’t a good person.

“I ain’t goin’ to no college, Miss Olivia.” He shakes his head. “That isn’t in the cards for me.”

“Why not? You could repeat your final year, study to be a vet, or enlist and do what August did. You’d make a great dog handler.”

“Because kids like me don’t go to college.” He shakes his head. “Hell, no one in my family ever set foot on a campus unless it was to steal from one.”

“What about Sheriff Webb? She didn’t go to college?”

“Police Academy don’t count,” he deadpans.

“Of course it counts. She’s working isn’t she?”

“Yeah, eating donuts and running this Podunk town in country-as-fuck hillbilly Alabama.”

“Watch your mouth,” I say, taking Betty from him and giving her nose little piggy kisses. “Besides, I happen to like this town.”

“Why? Everyone here but the Cottons hates you.”

“You don’t hate me,” I say with a smile. “Beau and Jude don’t hate me, and Betty

definitely doesn't hate me."

"Nah, we don't hate you. We did, though. We thought of a million ways to screw you over after Aunt Shona made us come work for you."

“But you didn’t.”

He shrugs. “August showed up.”

I laugh. “That’s it, huh?”

“He’s one scary-ass motherfucker.”

“Language,” I warn with my best impersonation of an angry mamma.

He smiles, his white teeth so stark against that handsome, dark face. Josiah seems oblivious to the way girls look at him, but he’ll be breaking hearts soon enough. I’m sure of it. “Sorry, ma’am.”

“You know, if you don’t wanna be stuck here like the rest of your family, then you need to work your ass off to get out,” I tell him honestly.

He shakes his head and makes a derisive sound in the back of his throat. “I ain’t ever getting outta here.”

“Josiah Webb,” I say sternly. “You quit talkin’ like that. A couple of months and you’ll be an adult. You’ll be free of this place, and you never have to look back.”

“Well, you gonna get outta that car, boy?” Cole Webb shouts from his front porch stoop, and Josiah stiffens beside me. His window is down, and there’s every chance his father heard what we were saying. “Or are you just gonna sit there yacking all fuckin’ night with some pretty piece of ass?”

He sighs. "Sorry, I gotta go."

"Hey," I say, grabbing his forearm. "You do not have to apologize for him."

"I better go."

"Okay," I say, against my better judgment. All I want to do right now is just drive away with this kid, but though he may be incompetent as a parent, Mr. Webb is Josiah's father, and running away with Josiah in tow would be kidnapping. "It gets better than this."

For a beat, Josiah just looks at me, then he shakes his head, opens the door, and climbs out of the car. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Bye." I set Betty down on the passenger seat and start the engine as Josiah trudges up the overgrown path. I don't peel away from the curb because everything in me tells me to wait, to stay, to take him away from here.

Cole doesn't move from the stoop as Josiah tries to pass. Instead, he leans his arm against the porch railing to stop Josiah from climbing the stairs. "Where you been, boy?"

"Workin', Pop."

"Workin' huh? Well, where the hell is your pay? You workin' for that white bitch for free, or is she showing you her sweet pink pussy as payment?"

My blood boils. I grind my teeth so hard my jaw hurts. I unfasten my belt and grab the handle, but before I can get outside, Josiah shocks the hell outta me by snapping, "Don't talk about her like that."

“What’d you say?” Cole stands, shoving his son back a step, and then I’m out of the car, stalking up the path as he grabs Josiah’s collar and swings his arm back, his hand balled into a fist. “You don’t talk back to me, you hear? You don’t ever talk back.”

His fist slams into the side of Josiah’s face, and the kid is knocked on his ass on the front porch. I don’t think about my feet moving toward them, or the vehemence spewing from my mouth as I stand between Josiah and this mean old bastard. “Touch him again and I will end you.”

All I can think about is protecting Josiah. All I care about is standing up for him the way I wish someone had stood up for me when I was a kid and a man twice my age took everything from me.

I am tired of bullies; I am tired of assholes who think they can demand respect with their fists. I shove Cole, and his eyes go wide as he stumbles back a step. I’m probably the only person in his life who ever has. He doesn’t look like he’s taking it well because his gaze burns into me with hatred. Fear twists my gut, and before I can even anticipate how he will respond, he swings his arm back and it connects with my cheek. Pain explodes through my jaw and eye socket, and I land on my ass on the porch just like Josiah. From the car, Xena’s barking pierces through the ringing in my ears. Josiah’s father lunges for me, and I close my eyes, but the blow doesn’t come. Josiah is on his feet, a blur of shadow in the evening light as he and Cole wrestle across the porch. With a guttural roar, he slams the older man back into the coffee table. It breaks beneath their combined weight.

I scream and scramble to my feet, attempting to pull the boy off his dad before he beats him bloody. He’s stronger than me, and probably outweighs me by at least forty pounds. “You don’t,” he says, punching his father in the face, “talk to her.” Punch. “Like that.” Punch. Punch. Punch.

“Josiah, stop!” I yank at his shoulder, his shirt, anything I can get purchase on. My

head is spinning, my vision is fuzzy, and my stomach roils with nausea. He won't let up. "Let him go. He's not worth it."

The kid's panting heavily, breath see-sawing out of his lungs when he finally gets to his feet. His dad splutters and rolls onto his side, letting out a choked laugh. "That all you got, you little pussy?"

Josiah takes a step forward, and I throw myself on his back, yanking him away by wrapping both arms around his chest. Even then he drags me a few paces before I can stop him. "You wanna get outta here? You walk away now. Keep going, and you'll wind up in prison. You're better than that, Josiah. You're better than him."

He staggers backward and shrugs off my hold. I reach for his arm again, but he shakes his head and holds up a hand to ward me away as he glares down at his father. He's shaking like a leaf; we both are.

"Get in the car," I snap.

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“You better run, boy,” Cole murmurs. He’s on his back now, struggling to get up. “I see you around town, I’m gonna choke the life out of you the way I shoulda done when your mamma left you on my doorstep.”

Josiah takes a step toward Cole, but I grab hold of his arm and yank him down the stairs toward the car. “Get in.”

He glances back at the porch, terror and agony written all over his face. If he sets foot in that house again, he’s going to wind up with a knife in his back.

“You run, you little fucking, pussy.” Cole is on his feet now. It took him a beat to recover but he’s up and starting toward us as we pull away from the curb. “Your bitch better watch her fucking back, too!”

I slam my foot down on the accelerator, attempting to put as much distance between us and that vile man as possible. My lids are heavy and my stomach roils; my hands shake so violently that they jerk the wheel.

“Are you okay?” Josiah asks.

“I’m fine,” I say, though I’m not sure he hears me. I’m not sure I hear me over the whooshing in my ears. “Put on your seatbelt.”

“Your face,” he says, and his own twists with sadness.

“I’m fine, Josiah.” I keep my gaze squarely on the white line. It appears to blur and shift, and I know I should pull over, but I’m too afraid to. I just need to get to August,

then we'll be safe. Everything will be better.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Olivia

WHEN WE PULL INTO THE drive at Tanglewood, I take my hair out of the messy bun, and I muss it up so that it covers my face. I know it won't hide the wounds, but as desperate as I'd been to get to August, I'm terrified of going inside. I'm afraid of his reaction, and what he'll do once he figures out who did this.

Xena has calmed some. I'm not sure Betty knows that anything was amiss, but Josiah and I are both shaking like leaves in a windstorm. I slowly climb out of the car while he sits there. He's in shock. He didn't say a word after we left his street. Not that there was much to say—we're both pretty shaken up.

I stiffly walk to the back door of the SUV and open it. Xena jumps out. She sniffs the ground, no doubt scenting Zora on the air, but she doesn't follow the trail far, preferring instead to keep close. I reach in and take Betty from Josiah who sits in the front seat, panting as if he's just run a marathon. Poor kid. While I'm betting he's no stranger to a beating—how could he be with a father like that?—I think that maybe this is the first time he's ever fought back, and it takes some getting your head around. Finally standing up for yourself can make you feel vulnerable in ways you never imagined.

"Are you gonna sit here all night, or are you coming inside?"

He turns to me with a shell-shocked expression. "You defended me."

"Couldn't let you take all the glory," I say with a humorless laugh. No part of this is funny, but if I don't laugh, I will crumple under the weight of this fear and sadness.

“No one has ever done that for me before.”

“That’s what you do for friends, Josiah,” I say quietly. “It’s what you do for family.”

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“But we’re not family. You barely even know me.”

“Honey, I’ve been putting up with your bullshit all summer,” I say, setting Betty on the ground. I lean against the car, not just so I can see him better, but because the lightheadedness is back in spades. “I know you, just like you know me.”

“Yeah.” He nods.

“Good, now get out of my goddamn car and get your ass cleaned up. You’re dripping all over my upholstery.”

Josiah looks down at his lap. He seems surprised by so much blood. “Shit.”

“Come on. I need a stiff drink, and you need to ice that nose and clean yourself up so I can see if you need to go to the hospital or not.”

Josiah opens his door and steps out of the car. I call Xena to my side, bend and scoop Betty up in my arms, but I almost topple when I stand up straight. Shit. I think I have a concussion. Josiah grabs my elbow and helps to keep me upright. I lean my head against his shoulder as we walk up the stairs and through the front door. Inside, August meets us in the foyer, and I’m certain we’re a sight to behold.

“Hi,” I mutter pathetically when I see his face and his concerned expression. I try not to cry, but the tears spill over anyway. “You’re okay with extra guests, right?”

My lips tremble, my legs shake, and I fall into his big chest as he carefully holds my bruised face between his hands. “What the hell happened to you?”

I shake my head. "It doesn't matter."

"Like hell, it doesn't. Who did this? Who hit you?" August demands, looking at Josiah for an explanation. "Both of you?"

"I think I need to sit down," I say breathlessly, but before I can even finish the words, I collapse against him, my body going limp as a wet noodle. His hands tighten on my face, and I cry out. August takes me by the shoulders and leads me over to the couch where he lays me down. "I think I might be concussed."

"And you drove?"

"No, I'm pretty sure the adrenaline drove. I don't even really remember the trip."

"Stay here. I'll get some ice," he says, and turns to Josiah. "Watch her, and then you and I are gonna have a little chat."

"Yes, sir," Josiah says, glancing down at his bloodied fists.

August turns and heads for the kitchen. "We need to go the Sheriff's office and report this."

"No," Josiah says. August turns to face him with a curious expression and the boy wets his lips, and glances at the floor. "I mean, please don't call her, sir. She'll make me go back. Please?"

August looks to me and I shake my head. He lets out an exasperated breath and stalks away.

"Don't tell him anything," I warn Josiah, once August is out of earshot. The kid just looks at me. Maybe it's my addled brain speaking, but I know August. He won't let

this slide. “You can’t tell him. If you tell him, he will go over there, and it won’t end well.”

“He’s gonna know. He already knows—you can see it. I ain’t lying to him. He scares the shit outta me, way more than my daddy ever could,” Josiah says, and I slump down in the couch some more. I like this couch. It’s old and smells like Tanglewood, like August, because this is where he sits after Bett has gone to bed. He doesn’t watch TV or read a paper, work on a puzzle or anything. He just sits and stares at the wall opposite, and I know he isn’t here at Tanglewood but is somewhere fifty thousand miles away in the Afghani desert.

The dense weight of sleep tries to pull me under and I fight against it but I must fail miserably because when I open my eyes again, August is there, holding something cold to my face—a pack of frozen peas, I think. His dark blue eyes bore into mine, and I smile sweetly, though it probably looks more like a grimace because my head hurts when I do it. “Ow.”

“I’m gonna fucking kill him,” August says through gritted teeth.

“Shh,” I say and reach out a finger, pressing it against his lips. I end up tugging his bottom lip down in a clumsy gesture, and his whole face softens. I reach up and attempt to take the peas from him because the cold and pressure are too much, but he shakes his head and holds them in place. I rest my hand on top of his and sigh, my cheek and eye socket throbbing.

Fucking men. They sure know how to hit you where it hurts. My shelter is due to open in two days. I’m going to be wearing a pound of makeup and dark glasses for a month. My face will make me look like I belong in a Dixie Chicks song about a woman who gets beat up by her husband. I don’t even have a husband. I have one giant pain-in-the-ass Marine, a house full of dogs that aren’t mine, two teenage boys who behave like dogs, a piglet, and a four-year-old who’s stolen my heart completely.

And now I have a black eye, and a possible brain trauma. It was worth it, though. Josiah is worth it.

I open my eyes again. “Where’s Josiah? He didn’t leave, did he? You have to stop him; he’ll go back.”

“Shh, princess,” August soothes. “He went upstairs to clean up. Bett’s probably up there talking his ear off. Everyone’s okay.”

“I’m sorry I brought home a kid, a pig, and another dog.”

He chuckles, gently stroking my hair back from my face. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned about you, Liv, it’s to expect the unexpected.”

“I couldn’t let him beat on that kid right in front of me,” I say with a trembling voice, and the tears flow thick and fast down my face. “Josiah came to my defense, and his daddy just ... he beat the shit outta him, August. And I knew it wasn’t the first time. I don’t know how I missed it before. How did I miss it?”

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“You did the right thing, darlin’, and you couldn’t have known. None of us knew.”

“I just don’t know how I didn’t see it. He can stay here, right? As long as he needs? I’ll pay his way . . . Of course, I might go to jail for kidnapping.” I laugh, but it hurts my whole damn face. “Then I’d have to submit to an overly large cranky lesbian and become her bitch, ’cause I can’t throw a punch to save my life.”

He leans forward and kisses my hair. I close my eyes. Who’d have thought my angry Marine could be so careful, so sweet, and capable of so much tenderness? “I’ll protect you from the big scary lesbians. No one’s taking you away from me, princess.”

Despite the pain, I smile.

No one’s taking you away from me. I like the sound of that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

August

IAM GOING TO MURDERa man, not in battle, or for self-defense, but because I need him to know that you can’t hurt what’s mine and not pay for it. I sit in my truck parked across the street, and I wait. The house is busy; people mill around. The odd junkie climbs the stairs to get a fix and disappears again just as quickly as he shows up, and now Josiah’s father, Cole Webb sits on the porch alone.

I’m gonna teach that son-of-a-bitch a lesson he should have learned long ago—you fuck with a Marine, you get fucked back. Only I won’t pull any goddamn punches. If

Shona wants to arrest me, she can. Maybe now she'll stop ignoring the shit her brother does. Maybe now she'll see the kind of cesspool her nephew was living in and the hell he survived at the hands of his father. Until this asshole is behind bars, Josiah will be staying where it's safe.

I saw the fear on Olivia's face, like she expected me to kick them both out when she stood in my house, staring up at me with ruin in her eyes, terror in her heart, and blood spattering her T-shirt. I didn't care about another mouth to feed. She could bring as many kids and dogs into my house as she wanted, and I wouldn't dream of turning them away. I'd do anything for her. She hasn't figured that out yet, and I'm not about to tell her because the truth is she can do better than half a man. Fuck, she could have any man in this whole goddamn world. She hadn't figured that out yet either, but she will, and her leaving will hurt worse than having my leg ripped apart by an IED.

I step out of the truck. I should leave Zora behind, but the truth is I can't be sure I won't need her. I've gotten into plenty of bar brawls since my accident. Sometimes I come out on top, and sometimes I don't. I was looking for death then, seeking out darkness in anything and everything just to feel closer to the edge, to feel like a man again, or to die like one. With both my legs I could beat the shit out of someone like Cole Webb and not even break a sweat, but I no longer have both my legs, and I'm not the same fighter I once was, so I may need Zora's help. Of course, Liv might kill me when I make it back, if I make it back, but I'm not about to let Cole get away with hurting her or the kid.

I cross the street and walk the few paces to the front porch. Stairs. I hate stairs. I fucking loathe them. Most of the time I don't feel any different on the outside. I know my limits, I know what I can and can't do on my prosthetic, my everyday life isn't that limited by the fact that I have a leg I wasn't born with, but sometimes, I forget. I feel like any other man, and then I encounter a set of stairs, and the guilt and shame come slamming right back into me again. Just like now, when I long to race up the

stairs and choke the life out of this asshole. I have to stop and take each one slowly or run the risk of falling headfirst into the porch. I grab the railing and take two steps at a time with my right leg and then plant the prosthetic as effortlessly as possible. It's easier two at a time—gets you there quicker, and there's less chance of falling on your face. I don't need this asshole thinking I'm weak.

“Well would you look at that? Even the town cripple's darkenin' my doorstep to give me a piece of his mind. You gonna fight me too, Cotton?” He chuckles. “I ain't got no problems hittin' a lady, but a cripple? And a vet at that? You gotta be shittin' me. You gonna take that chunk of metal you call a leg and beat me with it?”

“Nah, I'm gonna use my fists, you dumb fuck.”

He laughs again. “Well, this I gotta see.”

He stands up and Zora barks, her teeth snapping together. “You gonna get your puppy there to fight for you?”

While his attention is on my dog, I strike, slamming him into the ground. I go down with him, it's impossible not to, but knowing that I'm at a severe disadvantage, I'm not afraid to fight dirty. He connects with my jaw, wraps his hands around my throat, but I slam my body down on his, driving my fist up under his ribcage into soft unprotected organs. He's winded, gasping for breath. I pull my arm back and hit him twice, one in the jaw, another in the cheek. His head snaps back with the blow. He's out cold. I got half a mind to finish the bastard off, but Bett's face flashes before my eyes, and I slowly and painfully get to my feet, though it takes every bit of core strength I have. I groan, wincing as I move my jaw side to side and spit on his prone body.

Zora lunges toward him the second I'm out of the way, but a sharp command from me stops her dead in her tracks. She's not happy about it, but she follows me down

the stairs and we retreat to the truck.

Every nerve in my body thrums like a live wire. I'm drunk on adrenaline and when I climb in the truck beside Zora, taste metal in my mouth, and hear my heart thundering in my ears, I feel alive.

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I scratch behind Zora's ears. Her tongue lolls out, and she thrust her head through the window and gives Cole Webb another short, sharp bark as we peel away from the curb. I think she misses it, too—the fight, the work, feeling useful. You can take the Marine out of the Corps, but you can't take the Corps out of the Marine. We're a match made in heaven, she and I.

WHEN WE RETURN, THE house is as quiet as it was when we left. Olivia's likely still asleep in her bed. Josiah is in the next room, and Bett's nightlight casts a rainbow of color down the hall, drenching it in light. I climb the stairs as silently as I can, which isn't quiet at all, and when I reach the top, I'm surprised to find Olivia in her doorway, standing in a silk nightgown, pale pink, so pale it's almost white. I know I shouldn't look, but my eyes dip down to her breasts, to the rosy outline of her nipples beneath the silk. I wet my lips and meet her gaze, and it takes everything I have not to reach out and pull her to me.

“You went to Josiah's, didn't you?”

“How's your head?”

“You're not answering my question.”

I give her a sly smile. “Because you already know the answer.”

“What did you do, August?”

“Nothing any other Marine wouldn’t.”

“Jesus, August,” she says, sounding tired and at the end of her tether. “Is he still breathing?”

“I ain’t looking to go to jail, princess.”

“You beat up the sheriff’s brother,” she whisper-yells, impatient now. “You’re a trained Marine; you’re supposed to be the level-headed one here.”

“Oorah,” I say sarcastically.

“August.” She closes her eyes and exhales loudly, and I realize I don’t wanna fight her no more. I reach out, grab her waist and pull her to me, and then I smash my lips into hers. Liv lets out a startled whimper that quickly turns into a moan. I pull away, grin down at her stunned expression, and whisper, “Get some sleep, princess.”

I walk down the hall, check on my sister, and then disappear into my room without glancing back at Liv, though I know she’s watching me. I feel her stare burning holes in my back the whole way.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Olivia

“JESUS CHRIST, WHATthe hell happened to you three?” Beau crows as he glances between August, Josiah, and me. He shoves his hands into his pockets and stares. All three of us look at him. He turns to Josiah and says, “Dude, did you get stupid enough to make a pass at Olivia? Holy shit, man. I know she’s hot, but that’s—”

“That’s enough,” August says, and that’s the end of it. Beau could probably hazard a

guess at what happened—surely if anyone knows about Cole Webb beating his son, it's Beau. Still, he's being his usual irritating self by attempting to provoke us all. Either way, when August Cotton tells you to can it, you can it. Unless, of course, you happen to be me. I'm not so good with the shutting up and agreeing to do everything he tells me to do.

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After that kiss last night, I don't know whether to provoke him further or be a good girl so I get rewarded with another. I decide to be like Beau because I can't resist. "All right, y'all, if August is done playing headmistress, we can all get to work." I wink at the boys. It hurts my face, but it's worth it to hear them chuckle. I dare a look at August. He doesn't smile, but his eyes do it for him, lighting up and crinkling in the corners.

"I thought we were done working," Beau says, rolling his eyes.

"You wanna get paid? You work. If you don't need the cash, sugar, you know where the door is. Don't let it hit you in the ass on your way out."

Beau's shoulders slump and Josiah grabs a red T-shirt from the counter with the Paws for Cause logo on it that I had sent over from Fairhope, and tosses it to his friend. Beau pulls off his shirt and put the new one on. Josiah is already wearing his. I yank the cap off Beau's head and ruffle his fluffy blond hair. "You two are so adorable I could just eat you up with a spoon. Now go get the obstacle course set up in the yard. The doors are supposed to open at nine a.m. sharp."

"Headmistress, huh?" August says as the boys file out the door. Bettina follows, clutching Betty close to her chest. The two of them are thick as thieves since I brought the piglet home.

I grin up at him. "You like that?"

"Oh sure." He takes a step toward me and I take one back until I'm pressed against my gleaming new counter. "What man doesn't like being referred to as a crotchety

old woman?”

“Well, you are kinda bossy.” I fight the urge to roam my gaze over his big body. I fail, and wind up taking the long way round, ogling every inch of well-defined muscle straining against his clothes. “Nothing womanly about you though.”

“Not one thing,” he mutters, leaning closer. The front door opens, the little bell above it ringing like a warning, and if the counter wasn’t at my back, I’d have skittered away like a frightened deer. “We ain’t open yet.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” says a familiar voice. “I’m looking for Olivia.”

“Ellie?” I place my hand on August’s arm and peek around his shoulder. “Oh my God, what are you doing here?”

August straightens but doesn’t turn to face our audience, and I squeeze out from between him and the counter and run at my best friend with my arms flung wide while we both squeal like schoolgirls.

“It’s your grand opening, isn’t it? We wouldn’t have missed it for the world.” She lowers her voice to a whisper, “But now that I see what we’re interrupting, I think we probably should have stayed at home.”

“I’m so glad you came,” I say, ignoring her jibes. The only thing I’ve told Ellie about August Cotton is that he’s a Marine, about as accommodating as a park bench in a tornado, and as stubborn as a damn mule. I squeeze my best friend so hard she might be at risk of exploding. When I let go, I tuck my hair behind my ear, and she gasps. “What in hell and damnation happened to your face?”

“Oh, er . . .” I wince. “A drug dealer beat me up.”

Ellie's eyes go wide. "What?"

I wave it away as if it's no big deal. "It's a long story."

I'm saved from having to explain it by the adorable ten-year-old bursting through my door followed by his emotional support dog, Nutters.

"Aunt Olivia!" Ellie's son, Spencer, launches himself at me, wrapping his arms around my waist.

"Hey, Spence." I stare at Ellie in shock. My best friend just smiles and shrugs. In all the time I've known this boy, he's hugged me only once. Spencer is autistic and has sensory processing disorder. One of the symptoms of that is that he doesn't like to be touched. "How's my favorite boy?"

"Good," he says. Nutters sits by his side, staring up at me. He's wearing his vest, which means he's on duty and shouldn't be petted. He's fully grown now, and a little overweight for his breed and height. Spence is likely feeding him from off his plate at supper time.

"Where's Jake?" I ask.

"Out at the car, probably struggling with Maybelle's carrier," Ellie says. "Are you going to introduce us, Liv?"

"Lord, where are my manners? Ellie, Spencer, this is August Cotton."

"Nice to meet you," Ellie says. She doesn't offer her hand to shake because her own Marine is as opposed to being touched as Spencer is. "I've heard so many great things about you."

He laughs. “They can’t have been from Olivia then.”

“Oh, she goes on and on about you,” she says, shooting me a pointed look. I glare at her with a wide-eyed gaze that screams, “Shut the hell up before I cut you.” She ignores it. “I’m thinking she’s failed to mention a few things though, mainly about the two of you being so close.”

“Ellie, maybe you should go check on your husband.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’s fine,” she says. “I want to hear more about the two of you.”

Of course, right at that exact moment, Jude du Pont walks in carrying a bunch of flowers in one hand and a package of Birthday Cake Oreos in the other. Ellie glances between the doc, August, and me. “Well, it seems my best friend is just full of surprises these days.”

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“Hi. Is this a bad time?” Jude says in his smooth southern drawl, and a grin splits Ellie’s face practically in two. Jude stares at my face with a furrowed brow. I put a pound of cover-up on, my hair’s hiding most of the damage and he’s standing a few feet away, but I guess he’s noticed that something’s a little off.

“Not at all,” she says. “The more the merrier.”

He shuffles his loot and extends his hand to Ellie. “Jude du Pont, town veterinarian.”

“Ellie Tucker, supposed best friend.”

Jude laughs—somewhat nervously—and I give my best friend a tight smile before daring a glance at August, who I know must be angrier than a cut snake right about now. “I just wanted to be the first to wish you good luck on opening day, but it looks like I’m too late.”

“Looks like,” August says sharply.

Jude glares at him before turning his attention back to me. “Here. I got you these.”

“Thank you, that’s really sweet,” I say, taking the gifts from him and turning to set them down on the shelf beside me. My hair falls in my eyes, so I tuck it back behind my ear.

“What the hell happened to your face?” Doc demands. His eyes narrow and he cups my chin and gently angles my head to get a better look.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” I say, quickly covering his hand and drawing it away from me. I should have applied a third layer of concealer. “Spence, honey, why don’t you run along outside with the other kids? Bettina’s nursing my pet piglet if you want to take a look?”

“You got a piglet?” Ellie asks, as her son and Nutters run outside.

“That’s not nothing, Olivia,” Jude says sternly.

August laughs and folds his arms across his huge chest. “What? You think I did that to her?”

“I don’t know, Cotton,” he says through clenched teeth. “Did you?”

August steels his jaw, and I can hear his teeth grinding from here. “You know me better than that.”

“I did once; I don’t know who the hell you are now or what you’re capable of,” Jude says. August takes a step toward him but Jude doesn’t back down. I can’t decide if that’s brave, or really stupid.

“August didn’t do this,” I say impatiently, wedging myself between the two men.

“Then how come you’re both sporting war wounds?”

“Josiah’s dad hit me.”

“What?” Jude looks at me incredulously. “What do you mean?”

“I dropped him off last night and his daddy threw some nasty words around. Josiah should have just ignored it, but he stood up for me, and I couldn’t walk away when a

kid was getting his face rearranged so, voilà.” I make a lazy hand gesture toward my face. The doc looks dubious, glancing between August and myself. “Josiah was there, Doc. He got pretty badly beat up too.”

“Okay, I’m lost,” Ellie says. “Who’s Josiah?”

I grimace, knowing I am going to be in all kinds of trouble where my best friend is concerned. “That’s another long story.”

“And how did you get beat up?” Doc says to August.

“I paid Josiah’s daddy a little visit.”

“He still breathin’?” Jude asks, mimicking my words from last night.

“I reckon he’s having some trouble with that this morning, but he ain’t dead, if that’s what you mean.”

“I thought Fairhope was full of drama, but y’all need your own TV show down here,” Ellie says and I sigh, exasperated.

I turn to Doc. “Thank you for the flowers, and for being here, it means a lot.”

He nods. “It’s my pleasure. I gotta get to the clinic, but if you need anything, you just holler at me. I’ll see myself out.”

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“You do that,” August remarks, and I shoot him a look that says to knock it off. Standing right here in this room are the only people who’ve been nice to me since I arrived in Magnolia Springs, and I can’t afford to lose a single one of them.

Jude leaves and a beat later, Jake finally pokes his head in the door. His dog, Nuke, flanks his side, and he’s carrying little Maybelle in her car seat. I make a beeline for the baby. She’s going on five months now, and it seems as if she’s grown to astronomical proportions since I left. I scoop her up and hold her close, smelling the top of her head and smiling at her clean baby scent. When I look up, August is watching me closely. I’m not sure why, but I blush three different shades of red, and I have to look away. “Hi, Jake.”

“Hey, Liv. Did you know there’s a group of women out here waiting to come in?”

“There is?” I ask, moving past him to peek through one of the windows. Kathy Abernathy and her posse of snooty bitches are all standing around outside in their church clothes, and I bet they’re just dying to come and find cause enough to petition the mayor to close my shelter. “Shoot.”

Ellie joins me at the window for a looky-loo. “Who’s that?”

“Oh no one, just the devil and her spineless minions.”

“What is going on with that hair? It looks like the cat’s been sucking on it.” Ellie gives the window her back and smiles at me. “Looks like it sucked the joy right out of her face too.”

“Sounds about right,” I say with a sigh. “She’s not exactly my number-one fan. Tried to convince the town that our dogs were unsafe and have us shut down before we could even open our doors.”

“Well, we could always not let her in, but then where’s the fun in that?” Ellie takes the baby from me and hands her off to Jake. She grabs my arm and leads me away from the window. “August, would you be a sweetheart and throw me one of those red T-shirts on that counter?”

He looks quizzically at my best friend. “Sure.”

“Thank you,” she says, catching the shirt in midair. She throws it on over her tank top.

“I think I’ll go check on the kids,” August says.

“I’ll come,” Jake says, but Ellie holds up a hand to stop him.

“Oh no, mister. You and Nuke are staying right there.”

August shrugs and shoots Jake an apologetic look before pushing open the door and disappearing through it as quickly as possible. Ellie pulls a compact from her purse and I glance at her as if she’s lost her damn mind. “What are you doing?”

“Helping out my best friend when she’s in need.” Ellie dabs the powder puff over my face, concentrating on my black eye. I wince, because it hurts like a bitch. “Though you and I are gonna have us a little chat later. I’m still mad at you.”

“I can tell,” I say, afraid I might lose an eye. I move out of her reach.

“Girl, August Cotton is fine. Why didn’t you tell me you two had a thing?”

“It ain’t even like that.”

“Oh, it’s like that. Trust me, with him looking at you the way he does, you definitely have a thing.”

I never realized just how much I missed my best friend until this point. All this time I’ve been dealing with everything on my own, and I forgot how much I needed her, how much I needed them.

I shake my head and stare up at the ceiling. “He’s complicated.”

“He’s a Marine. Were you expecting easy?”

“I don’t know, Elle. I’m starting to think I’ve bitten off more than I can chew.”

“Oh, honey, hush. There isn’t a man alive that can’t be fixed with a little understanding, some TLC, and a batch of baked goods. Now pull yourself together, and put some lipstick on, we’ve got to wipe the floor with some basic bitches.”

I may have terrible taste in men, but I sure know how to pick a best friend.

“YOU BEST CALL ME, OLIVIA Anders, or I’m gonna go straight to Kathy Abernathy and find out all those juicy little secrets you been keeping,” Ellie shouts, hanging out the passenger window as Jake backs their minivan down my drive. “She and I are tight now, don’t forget.”

“I promise I’ll call you,” I yell back and wave goodbye. Jake reverses out onto the road and honks the horn. I blow a kiss and watch their taillights disappear through the trees.

I am plum worn out. Opening day had a much better turnout than I'd anticipated. We'd had a barbeque, and a bouncy castle for the kids, and Beau had even surprised me with his face-painting skills. He'd been the mastermind behind that very detailed graffiti on my walls a couple of months back, and it was nice to see him putting his thug-life skills to good use now.

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We'd had families drop by, looky-loos, Mayor Winkler had come with a reporter from the town paper and had a photo opp, and we even had two adoptions on our books, so I'd call that a success.

My absolute favorite part of the day, though, had been when Kathy Abernathy was forced to eat her words. Ellie had been an absolute rock star. She was sweet and charming in that doe-eyed, unsuspecting way of hers, laughing and chatting with Satan's hellhounds when she'd called Nuke over to her. You couldn't not love Nuke. He has the sweetest temperament of any dog I've ever met, and he is a sucker for a pretty lady who gives belly rubs. Kathy had even gone so far as to call him adorable and let him lick her face, then Ellie had dropped the bomb that Nuke had been a stray that I'd rescued from being euthanatized and that my program had also saved her husband's life. Truth be told, Ellie deserved all the credit there, but I did train Nuke, and I was not about to correct her in front of Kathy. Not today, Satan. Not today.

I head back inside and close the door, leaning against it with a sigh.

"Congratulations," August says. He leans against the counter, Zora sits by his feet. They both appear calm and relaxed. A new look for them.

"Well, I couldn't have done it without any of you." I walk toward him, stopping only when the tips of my boots reach the ends of his. "Of course, I'll have to come up with a suitable way to say thank you, because I know how much you hate those two little words."

He shakes his head and grins. "I think I have a few suggestions for you."

“You do?”

The door to the yard bursts open and Bettina tears in clutching Betty under her arm. The two of them are squealing as Beau chases after them—terrorizing the poor girls. Josiah follows them through the door holding Xena’s lead. He takes off her vest and loves her up accordingly. He’s good with her.

I smile up at August and take a step back, turning to assess the animals in my new shelter. I don’t know how I came to have a piglet, a little girl and two teenage punks following me around as if I was their mamma. I don’t really know how any of it happened other than to say that’s life in small-town Alabama. It happens to you, rather than you controlling it. One day you’re the new girl in town, and the next, you have friends, a support system, a family, and one hell of a hot Marine who you sometimes loathe as much as you love.

Lord help me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Olivia

I HEAD OUT INTO THE early morning sun, a coffee in each hand, and a smile on my face. August sits on the front porch stairs, working on a greasy metal part that he nearly drops when I approach. He looks me up and down, and I should have the good grace to be embarrassed because my hair is mussed from sleep and I’m dressed only in a robe and a silk chemise with matching tiny little shorts. The sash on my bathrobe has come loose so as I bend to hand him his mug, I’m essentially giving him an eyeful. His fingers brush mine as he takes his cup, but he doesn’t bring it to his lips. He just watches me, his gaze skimming down my body in a way that forces my heart to beat double.

Josiah is likely still sound asleep upstairs. Beau, too, since he can be found wherever his best friend is. Bettina is inside, watching Frozen and singing loudly along with Anna, and it's this reminder, and only this reminder, that stops me from climbing into her big brother's lap and easing some of this sexual tension between us.

August clears his throat and I sit down beside him, pulling my robe closed once my hands are free. He goes back to the part he's working on, and I glance out over the yard with its oak-lined drive. It's warm already, and I have this urge to remove my robe altogether, but I don't. It slips off one shoulder anyway, pulled by the weight of my ass sitting on it. I lean forward, resting my chin on my knees. I feel August's gaze on me, and a beat later he reaches out and his greasy fingertips brush across my skin in a feather-light touch that I never thought a man as large as him was capable of.

The air leaves my lungs in a rush, and my nipples form hard peaks that would be impossible to hide beneath the silk of my pajamas. Warm fingers slide the strap from my skin, and I close my eyes and bite my lip hard, and then Zora barks so loudly it about takes my ear off as she tears down the stairs and around the side of the house. August's touch is gone, and I might have believed it never happened at all except for the dark smudge of grease on my shoulder and strap.

"Zora, come!" August climbs to his feet, almost knocking over our coffee, and Betty starts barking the way she does when she gets excited. A beat later, Dalton rounds the side of the house, and I barely have enough time to get my robe tied before I'm face to face with the man. Good Lord. It's not even eight a.m.

"Dalton. Are you okay?" Before I've even said the words, I know he's not, but he nods anyway. We missed him yesterday, but I know how he gets around crowds. August and Jake aren't comfortable in them either, but they both have a dog to take the edge off.

"Thought I'd come by and s-s-see if you need me to be at the s-s-shelter today?" The

stutter is new. I've never heard him do that before, and it's alarming.

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August notices too, and we share a worried look. “On a Sunday?”

“Dogs s-s-still need feedin’. But I-I-I-I should go, you’re . . .” He points to my robe.

“You know what? I’m gonna run upstairs and get changed real quick, but you should come inside. I was just about to make pancakes, and I have a surprise for you.”

“No, I j-j-just wanted to help. I d-d-don’t like s-s-surprises—”

“You’ll like this one. Come have a seat.”

His shoulders sag a little, and he bows his head. He won’t look at me, but I glance at August, silently hoping he’ll come to my aid here and keep the man in place until I can get to the bottom of why he walked all this way at eight a.m. on a Sunday to see if he could help. Dalton has been at that shelter every day—bar yesterday—without fail, rain, hail or shine. He even finished up the gardens and helped August clear the trash in preparation for our opening day while Josiah and I were laid up on the couch with our war wounds.

August finally catches on and nods imperceptibly. “Hey Dalton, you’re good with engines, right? You wanna help me with this?”

I smile, because Dalton knows as well as I do that August knows a thing or two about putting together that old tractor, but he just nods and gives his fellow Marine his rapt attention. I stand and dart inside, ignoring the wide-eyed looks Josiah and Beau give me in my robe as they’re coming down the stairs.

Beau opens his mouth, and I glare. “Don’t say it.”

He grins, and Josiah punches him hard on the arm. “Ow! What the fuck, man?”

“Language!” I snap. “Go set the table ready for breakfast. I’m making pancakes.” I get nothing but blank faces in return. “Both of you, and set a sixth place. Dalton’s here too.”

“Jesus, she’s a slave driver,” Beau mutters.

“Shut up,” Josiah, and I say at once, and he puts his hand out to fist bump me. I love this kid, and as obnoxious and disgusting as Beau can be at times, I love him too. Sometimes I find it hard to reconcile my boys with the teenage delinquents who destroyed my shelter; they’re both so different. They’re young men now, sometimes polite and always respectful, and I have August to thank for that.

I have August to thank for a lot of things, not least of which is the way my ovaries jump up and down waving their tiny little ovary hands in the air saying, “pick me,” when he looks at me. I wish there were time for a cold shower because I could use one after yet another missed opportunity to climb into his lap, grab hold of his broad shoulders, and ride him like a champion rodeo rider.

I hurry into my room and change into a summer dress that covers all the essentials without making me too hot, and I run a brush through my tangled hair, tying it back with an elastic before scooping Xena up from off my bed and heading downstairs. I take Xena out on the porch and hand her lead to Dalton. She’s not wearing it, of course, and it takes him a beat before he understands. “Is i-i-it—”

“She’s all yours. We need to do a little training for both of you, but we’ll start on Monday when you come into the shelter. For now, the two of you should just get to know one another.”

“I-I-I-I don’t k-n-n-now what to say.”

“Say you’ll stay for pancakes,” I tell him with a broad smile. He nods, and I turn to head inside.

“Oliv-v-v-ia? T-t-thank y-you.”

“You’re more than welcome, Dalton.”

In the kitchen, the boys have set the table just as I asked, and they sit around now with Bettina eagerly awaiting pancakes before I’ve even had time to pull the bowl and ingredients from the cupboard and pantry. Josiah gets to his feet and takes the eggs and milk from the refrigerator without being asked. I smile at him, and he retreats to the table again at Bettina’s insistence so he can read the new *Frozen* book to her. He helped me at the market yesterday after we closed the shelter, and he purchased the thing with his own money. My heart had literally melted right there at the checkout, and I’d fought back the tears. The kid had nothing to his name but the clothes on his back, and the few items that I had put in the buggy for him, and here he was spending what little money he had on a present for a four-year-old girl who’d lost her parents.

Before I’m done with the pancakes, August and Dalton come inside, and after I yell at them both to wash up before they sit at the table, they join us as I start plating up food for the kids. When I’m sat at the table between Bettina and Josiah and across from August with a beautiful German Shepherd standing guard by her owner, a piglet tearing around the room barking for scraps, and a Spaniel wagging her tail and nudging my leg with her nose, I can’t help but smile.

Magnolia Springs may have started out as my own worst nightmare, but somewhere along the way, it became a dream. This is my family. With all its ticks and idiosyncrasies, and despite its flaws and imperfections, it’s perfect.

I blink back tears and stare down at my plate so no one will see how ridiculously girly I'm being, but when I glance up, August's gaze burns into mine and without a word, he leans across the table and hands me a clean napkin. I take it with an embarrassed laugh. No one says a word. They just continue shoveling pancakes into their mouths, and this time when I stare at the big hulking Marine across from me, there's a smile that plays on his lips. One that I desperately want to wipe off . . . with my mouth on his.

Damn Marine.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

August

Then

I CLIMB OFF THE BUS and hoist my gear over my shoulder. I didn't think I was going to be able to get off this weekend, much less be able to come home, but I pulled in every kind of favor I could from my team and got a weekend pass to see my girl.

I purchase flowers from Mrs. Matchet on Main Street and walk the three miles home. Mamma would skin me alive if she knew I was coming home without seeing her first, but some things are worth the risk. I had to be here for Savannah's birthday, I just had to. I walk up the street to our house and frown at the car in the drive. I didn't know Jude was home from school yet. He'd said he was staying on in Atlanta for extra credit and working through the holiday. Sav's birthday isn't the only reason I'm happy to be home Thanksgiving weekend. I'm looking forward to a home-cooked meal with my folks.

I use my key to open the door. I can't wait to see her face when she realizes I'm home, but when I step over the threshold and walk into the entryway, I'm met with a sound that rips the rug right out from under me.

As if on autopilot, I walk down the hall and push open our bedroom door. My best friend is buried balls' deep inside my fiancée, and her legs are up over his shoulders as he pumps inside her. I stand in the doorway, watching them. It's as if I'm dreaming, it isn't real, it isn't . . .

“Fuck, Sav.” He groans, interrupting my thoughts, piercing my heart like a blade, white-hot and searing. “Christ, I love this tight pussy.”

How can she do this? How can either of them do this to me, to us?

The ringing clap of his flesh slamming against hers echoes off every wall in the room, and as her mouth drops open in an O, her eyes closed and her moans splitting the air, my stomach bottoms out, my blood boils, and everything turns red. I charge at the two of them, grab him around the back of the neck, and pull him off her as I slam my fist into his gut, and Sav, my Sav, my fiancée, screams for me to stop.

She hurls herself at me. I shrug her off onto the bed. Jude comes up swinging, but I duck, and jab my fist into his nose. Blood sprays my face and shirt. One clean crack to the jaw while he’s still reeling is all it takes, and it’s lights out for this asshole. His body crumples in a heap on the floor.

I stare down at him, knowing he deserves this and so much more, but I don’t feel any better for knocking him out. Sav launches herself at me, screaming, but I can’t make out her words. I let her slap my face, my chest. I let her hit me until the blood spattering my shirt stains her hands and she falls against me. I can’t help but put my arms around her, because even though she just ruined me, ruined us, by fucking my best friend, even though the two of them have betrayed me in a way I never thought possible, I love her. It’s muscle memory. Loving her is muscle memory, and losing her is worse than the thought of dying in Afghanistan.

“I hate you.” She shoves away from me and slaps my face, hard. “I hate you. You left me here.”

“For you. I did it for us.”

“No, you didn’t. You did it for you, because the idea of being a hero gets you hard.

You did it because you wanted to feel like a big man and run around the desert playing with guns. You didn't sign up because it meant we'd be taken care of financially, or because you wanted to fight for our country. You've talked about joining the Marines since you were twelve years old. You'd always planned on leaving me."

"Then why did you agree to marry me?" I shout.

"I don't know!"

I inhale through my nose to keep from putting my fist through the wall beside her head. "You don't know. So what? You're in love with Jude, now? Is that it?"

"I don't know," she whimpers.

"How long?" I shout. "How long have you been fucking my best friend, Sav?"

She flinches as if I'm about to hit her. I laugh, because I'd never dream of hurting her. Not in a million years. Not like she's destroyed me. "You two deserve each other."

"August, wait. I didn't mean for it to happen. I'm sorry, baby. I love you." She grabs hold of my arm but I shrug her off, and she goes tumbling to the floor, staring up at me with an accusatory glare. I pause, wanting to go to her despite my anger, but instead I turn my back and stare at the prone body of my best friend naked and bloody, laid out on my bedroom carpet. Jude's face is a mess, but it's nothing the doctors won't be able to fix if he throws enough money at them. Jude du Pont never met a problem he couldn't fix with money. "You best call him an ambulance."

"August," Sav whimpers, but I walk away, and I don't look back.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Olivia

“WHERE ARE WE GOING?” I say, as I adjust Betty into the crook of my arm and follow August through the scrubby underbrush. It’s hot as Hades out here. We’re two days into a heat wave and you’d think the whole world had gone crazy.

I’m starting to think the same of August. I have half a mind to just dart back to the car, because I can’t see how walking farther into the scrub is going to help us cool off, but I follow dutifully behind him because he accompanied me to Fairhope to help Jake with one of his pups, and he sat around patiently for a half hour talking to Jake while Ellie badgered me with more questions.

On the way home, August had said he wanted to show me something, and when a hot Marine tells you he wants to show you something, you damn well better take a look.

Zora jumps around excitedly between us, getting lost in the tall grass. She might have a hard time letting her inner Marine go, but apparently, she turns into a damn puppy-dog when she’s walking through the scrub. It must have been so hard for her all those long months in the Afghani desert, not to mention being cooped up in a kennel all day long after her service. In fact, this is the first time I’ve seen her drop her guard and switch off her internal soldier. A working dog can’t ever just be a civilian again. Their training stays with them always, just like the rest of our infantry men. War doesn’t end when a Marine returns home to U.S. soil. For some, it’s just the beginning.

“Are you sure you know where you’re going?” I say with a teasing lilt to my tone because I just can’t help but push this man’s buttons. The angry Marine turns around with a raised brow, and I raise my own in return.

“You know,” he says, continuing to walk at a clipped pace despite his prosthetic. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’d jumped up out of that hospital bed and demanded to get back to work just hours after he lost his leg. “You harp on about me not trusting anyone, but I wonder if you’ve ever noticed that about yourself?”

I stop in my tracks. “I do not have a problem with trust. I’m very trusting.”

“Uh-huh,” he says with a laugh. “You know you’re a control freak, right?”

“I am not.”

“You are. And you’re slower than molasses in January,” he says with another dark chuckle. “And I only got one leg, so I know slow.”

“Did you just make a joke?” I laugh, and then my breath is stolen from me as we come to a clearing. August’s lips pull up in a grin. “Oh my God.”

“Aren’t you glad you trusted me now?”

There’s a small waterfall—only about fifteen feet high—and a deep aquamarine pool glistens in the sunlight as if it were a mirage. Everywhere there is lush, green vegetation and craggy rocks slick with wet moss. “It’s beautiful . . . I . . .”

Zora makes a beeline for the water, running and splashing nose-first as she barks and doggy paddles to the middle. Betty squirms in my arms and begins squealing. I set her down because I don’t want her to hurt her leg, and she takes off after Zora.

“Can she swim?” August says, watching her.

“Apparently,” I say. Jude’s gonna kill me for getting her cast wet, but I don’t say as much to August because I know how he gets when I mention the good doctor. “Is that safe from gators?”

“Well, if it’s not then we’re screwed.” He pulls off his T-shirt. I ogle every inch of his broad scarred back, longing to reach out and touch it, wanting to kiss the hollows and dimples where I assume pieces of shrapnel were once buried. Other women might see his scars and be intimidated or pity August for all he’s been through, but not me. I find them beautiful. Glorious in their imperfection. Before I can stop myself, I reach out and trace my hands over the worst on his upper right shoulder. He stiffens. My insides tighten, and the breath leaves me in a rush. He turns to face me. My fingers trail over sweaty marked flesh, and he meets my gaze. I retract my hand, but he grabs it and presses it back in the spot it was resting. Not in the center of his chest, exactly, but over another deep scar on his left pectoral muscle, the side that took the brunt of the blast. He lets my hand go, and I trace my finger lower, over hard flesh to another scar marring his abdomen. I long to explore all the valleys and plains of his body, every indentation, every muscle, every mark.

August watches my expression with his head bowed. His lips are just a few inches from mine. It would be so easy to stand up on my tiptoes and kiss him, but the moment is stolen from us by Zora dashing out of the water to head-butt my leg and shove her way between us. Clearly someone is a jealous bitch.

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I swallow hard and take a step back, releasing my hand. August doesn't stop me this time, and I'm both thankful and saddened by it. He bends to show her some love, roughing up her hackles as he coos to her and calls her mamma.

Yup. Someone is definitely a jealous bitch, and it ain't the dog.

August unbuttons his jeans, and I can't tear my gaze from him. His gaze locks with mine, and he doesn't look away as he unfastens his belt and jeans and then he shoves them down his legs and sits on a nearby boulder in nothing but his boxers. His right leg is all torn up from shrapnel with a long red scar spanning the length of his shin, and the other is a titanium leg with a moving foot joint. August is a transtibial amputee—he still has his knee and a small amount of flesh and bone below that. Of course, I can't see that, because a thick flesh-toned prosthetic liner covers his knee and everything below it. He removes his shoe from the prosthetic and slides his jeans all the way off.

I stare, not because this is the first time I've seen a prosthetic, but because this is the first time I'm seeing August's prosthetic, and he's watching me as closely as I am him. I don't know if he likes what he sees on my face, or if he's surprised by my non-reaction, but he stands and turns away, slowly navigating his way over the rocky landscape to ease down into the water. Zora comes and splashes all around him, Betty too, and I swear to God, my heart about melts as he picks up the piglet who's growing fatter every day and holds her close to his chest.

“You comin', princess?” he taunts, letting Zora lick his face. Oh, to be a dog right now. I strip off my little summer dress and throw it on the rock beside his jeans. I'm down to my underwear, a lace balconette bra with matching panties that practically

have his eyes bugging out. My underwear is the color of spring skies, and August is looking like spring sky is his favorite. His tongue darts out to wet his lips, and his heated gaze turns to an eruption of laughter as I run across craggy rocks to dive bomb into the water. It isn't so much a dive bomb as it is a belly flop. When I come up for air and brush the wet hair back from my face he's standing much closer than he had been a second before. It startles me, and he smiles when I suck in a sharp breath.

"Blue is my favorite," he says, as if I'd asked him the question.

"Really?"

"Uh-huh." He takes a step toward me through the water, and I take one back. With a grin, I dive and swim away, ducking under the waterfall. I come up for air and tread water, waiting. I think maybe he's not coming when he breaks the surface mere inches from me. I startle. August moves closer, gently resting his palm on my chest and pushing me, so that my back is pressed against the jagged rock wall of the waterfall and we're both hidden away behind it, sharing one another's breath, holding one another's gaze. He leans in and places his hands on the rock either side of my head.

"I didn't know blue was your favorite color," I say, stalling. He makes me nervous. I must have fantasized about this man a thousand times or more, but being alone with him—wet and nearly naked—without another soul around to interrupt turns my head to mush and my stomach to butterflies.

"Now you do, princess."

"I wish you'd stop calling me that."

"I wish you'd stop talkin'," he says, as he leans in, and my mouth snaps closed. I wait with baited breath, and then Zora barks as someone comes crashing through the

bushes and we break apart.

“What the hell?” a familiar voice says, and August swims away from me through the heavy spray of the water. I sigh and let my head fall back against the rock wall.

“August Cotton, Josiah said I’d find you here.”

Sheriff Webb? What does she want?

“Don’t suppose Olivia Anders is with you, too?”

Dang it. No point in hiding, I suppose. I push off the wall and swim through the falls. “Guilty as charged.”

“The whole town’s been looking for you two,” she says in an accusatory tone. “Course I went to Tanglewood first; you weren’t there. Went to the shelter; you still weren’t there, but my nephew was.” She glares at me. “Working in hundred-degree heat while you two are here, fooling around in the water, happier than pigs in shit.”

Okay, so it looked bad. But it wasn’t as if I was making them work for free anymore. I was paying both boys a wage. A small wage, but still. “He’s getting paid to work,” I assure her.

“Oh, I’m sure he is,” she replies wiping the sweat from her brow. “Just like you’re working now. Or should I say working it?”

I open my mouth, about to volley back a snide retort when August says, “What’s wrong, Shona?”

“Bettina’s in the hospital.”

I gasp and cover my mouth. “Oh my God.”

August wades through the water toward her. “What happened?”

“Seems she got into it at the daycare center with another kid. He was sprouting stories about you. She pushed him, he pushed her back, and she fell over and broke her arm. She’s in the hospital right now with Miss Sue.”

“How long ago?”

“‘Bout an hour, like I said. I’ve been all over town looking for you two. In the future, Mr. Cotton, maybe take your damn cell phone with you,” she says and trudges back the way she came.

August is already out of the water, making his way over weather-beaten rocks. There’s a small hole in the back of his prosthetic, a release valve, and the water shoots out of it so his leg doesn’t fill up and become a lead weight. He slips and almost topples, but he rights himself and moves faster, hopping over the obstacles in his path to get to his clothes. Betty, already grown tired of the water, snuffles around the long grass, no doubt looking for treats, but Zora stays silent and watches August’s every move like a hawk. Dogs are good at picking up tension. If he’d just let me train her up as an emotional support dog, she’d already be helping him feel more at ease right now. Though I guess even the dogs in my program would have a hard time calming someone like August when his little sister is in trouble.

I dress quickly and scoop Betty up instead of making her trudge through the long grass. The poor baby is completely tuckered out. Her cast is soaked, and swollen, and I know I’m going to have one hell of a time convincing Jude it’s purely by accident that it’s this waterlogged.

“She’ll be okay,” I say reassuringly. August ignores me.

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“Come on, Z,” August says, and she looks at him with her head cocked to the side. He rolls his eyes and turns to face her, using a hand gesture. “Zora, come.”

She whines and runs alongside him. August may only have one leg but damn that man can move fast. I hurry behind and finally catch up when we reach the truck. August opens the door.

“Get in the car,” he says, and then turns to the dog. “Zora, in the truck.” The dog whines, and I don’t miss the fact that his commands to her were a little bit nicer than the orders he gave me, but I try not to overthink it because his little sister is sick.

I dive in and set Betty on the seat next to Zora. She could take off the piglet’s head in about three seconds flat if she wanted to. Like most MWDs, she’s trained to attack when necessary, but the dog doesn’t pay my little piglet any mind. She’s panting and her ears are pinned back low to her head, indicating that she’s stressed. It could just be the hike through the bushes at August’s clipped pace, but I’m betting it has more to do with her daddy’s anxiety rubbing off on her and everyone else in this truck. I rifle through my purse and find my phone. I have thirty missed calls, most from the shelter, but others from numbers I don’t recognize.

August climbs in, shoves the keys in the ignition, and slams the truck in reverse before I’ve even had time to locate my seatbelt, and then we’re tearing down the road toward town.

I hit a few buttons and Josiah’s voice comes through the speaker, “Hey, Olivia. It’s me. Josiah. Um ... you’re gonna wanna call me here at the shelter, apparently Bett’s in the hospital and I don’t know what to do.”

Shit. The poor kid sounds terrified. I don't bother listening to the rest of the messages, I can do that later. Instead, I call Josiah and tell him to shut up the shelter and head home to Tanglewood, and that August and I are on our way to the hospital. Slipping the phone back in the bag at my feet, I clutch Betty tight as August flies around another corner.

"August, you need to slow down," I say, holding onto the doorframe for dear life. "We're not going to make it there if you keep driving like this."

"My sister is in the hospital, Liv. Don't tell me what I need to do."

"She's gonna be fine, but she won't be if you total the car and wind up—"

"What?" He takes his eyes off the road to glare at me, and there's so much anger, so much venom in his gaze that it's impossible to reconcile this man with the one who was about to kiss me beneath the waterfall just a few minutes ago. "Dead, like my parents?"

"I didn't mean it like that." I throw him an apologetic look.

"My baby sister is sitting in a hospital room, probably scared out of her mind, and the whole time I was here fucking around with you." He takes one hand off the wheel and rakes it through his hair. "What the hell is wrong with me?"

Ouch, that stung like a bitch. "Are you saying this is my fault?"

"Well, if you weren't here I wouldn't have taken you down to the falls."

"You couldn't have known that she'd get hurt. I hardly think that's my fault. Accidents happen all the time."

“You think I don’t know that? My parents are dead; my leg is gone, blown to smithereens along with my dog. I know all about accidents, Olivia.”

“I just . . . where are you going?” I say, noticing that he just flew right by the turn-off. “The hospital is on the other side of town.”

“Well I can’t exactly show up with a dog, a pig and some random woman in tow, can I?”

Random? “You know what? Stop the car, let me out.”

“No.”

I glower at him. “Let me out or I’ll jump.”

He pulls over to the side of the road and I swing the door open, grabbing Betty from the seat. I call Zora because I know he can’t take her to the hospital, and she can’t sit in the hot car all day, but she doesn’t come.

“Zora, out,” August snaps. The dog whines and follows his command, jumping out of the truck.

“Heel, Zora,” I say and she does, but she barks at August.

“Go with Liv,” he says, and then he disappears in a cloud of dust.

Only after he’s gone do I realize that I left my purse, and my phone in his truck. Shoot. It isn’t the walk that bothers me. It’s not that far, and the exercise will do me good, even though the hot sun threatens to burn me from my scalp to the top of my boots. It’s the fact that I almost kissed this man, I have kissed this man, and if the sheriff hadn’t shown up today, well, maybe that almost kiss would have led to a heck

of a lot more. Maybe not, but these last few weeks I feel like I finally got under August's skin. I broke through some of his walls only to have him slam a barricade in their place. It seems that's the way it is with August Cotton.

"Come on, ladies. It's hotter than a billy goat with a blowtorch out here, and there's a carton of Ben and Jerry's with our names on it in the freezer." I tuck Betty under my arm, afraid she's already had too much exercise for one day, and I issue Zora with a command by lowering my voice the way August does when he orders her to do something. She walks alongside me, and the three of us head for home. We're not on the road for more than twenty minutes when a car approaches, headed out of town. It's one of those sleek black sports cars, and I know who owns it the second it slows and I see that shiny Aston Martin winged badge on the hood.

The car passes, turns around, and pulls up alongside us. Zora isn't happy about the intrusion. Her jaws snap, and her big body jerks with every bark. The car window rolls down and she jumps up, completely savage.

"Zora, down!" I shout, grabbing her collar and yanking her back. She sits—albeit grudgingly—but she doesn't take her eyes off the doc.

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“You know I pulled over because I didn’t think it was safe you being out here all alone, but I guess there’s no chance of anyone getting near you with your guard dog there,” Jude says.

“I’m sorry. She’s an ex-MWD.” I sigh. “I guess approaching cars for her are still a trigger. We’re trying to socialize her, but there are some kinks,” I grimace. “Obviously.”

“That’s August’s dog, right?”

“Yeah, sort of. How did you know?”

“I’ve seen the two of them around town.”

“She couldn’t be rehomed.” I shrug. “And she’s not fit for the field, so it was Paws for Cause or an injection that would take her over the rainbow bridge. She deserves more than that. August seems to be the only one she’ll listen too.”

“Right.” He twists his mouth into a hard line. “And he what, loaned her to you for the day?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, at the risk of having my face chewed off, do you ladies want a lift?”

“Oh, that’s okay. We can just walk.”

“It’s one hundred and fifty degrees out,” he deadpans. As if the sweat pooling between my boobs didn’t already tell me that.

“Okay, that’d be great, thank you.”

“Hop in.” He removes his Wayfarers and places them in the center console. My gaze flits over his tailored black pants and a button-up dress shirt. He’s too dressed up for a day at the clinic.

“I’m not ruining another date, am I?” I say, almost afraid of the answer because now that I’ve felt that cool air-conditioning wafting through the window, I don’t want to give it up.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sure she’ll forgive me.”

“Oh, my God, really?” I glance down the road. “Okay, that’s it. I am not cock blocking you again.”

“Great, then get in,” he says with a smile that could catapult Colgate sales sky-high.

I laugh and open the door, but Zora goes on high alert, barking at Doc. “Like pet, like owner, huh?”

I frown, but let that one slide. I don’t know what their history is, but I know these two men have a list of issues a mile long.

“In the back, Zora,” I command, though I try using the playful high-pitched tone of voice August takes with her. That way she’ll know I’m not threatened by the doc, and hopefully, we can make it back to Tanglewood in one piece.

The dog whines and hops up on the leather upholstery, jumping into the tiny

backseat. Almost immediately she leans forward to breathe down the doc's neck. I wasn't sure if she could sense that this man had been far too close to a lot of doggy butts with his thermometer or if she just didn't like him in principle because August would have hated me hopping in his car, but as far as Zora is concerned, there is no love lost for this veterinarian. Poor guy.

"And how's my favorite patient doing?" he coos to Betty, and as if her and Zora couldn't be any more different, Betty practically jumps out of my arms and into the doc's lap and kisses his downturned face by nuzzling against his lips with her snout, her tiny tongue poking out every now and again. Jude chuckles. "Now, why can't your owner take after you?"

I shake my head and close the door. "I'm not climbing on into your lap to lick your face, Doc."

"You got me," he says, making out like I just shot him in the heart. Jude glances down at Betty's leg and frowns, gently touching the swollen plaster. "Olivia, why is her cast wet?"

Uh-oh.

"Um, we might have taken a little dip in the water," I say this as if it's a question, which obviously it's not, but for someone so pretty, Jude has a mean cranky doctor face.

He scrubs a hand over his cleanly shaven jaw. "You took her swimming?"

"Maybe?"

"Jesus," he says and starts the engine. "You realize you could have undone all of the progress she's made."

“I didn’t know she’d go in,” I explain. “Who knew pigs could swim?”

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“Everyone,” he says impatiently. “There’s a damn resort in the Bahamas where you can swim with pigs.”

“Huh.” I frown. “I did not know that.”

“We’re gonna have to set her cast again.”

“Okay, just tell me when you want us to come in.” Jude just looks at me. I grimace.

“Oh, you mean now?”

“Yeah, Olivia. I mean now,” he says. Betty hops over onto my lap, and I have to admit, her cast does look bad. “What? You have somewhere else more important to be?”

“Nope, not a single place in the world.” And I don’t. August wouldn’t have left the hospital yet, and at this point, I’m not even sure he wants me back at Tanglewood at all.

AN HOUR LATER, WHEN we pull in the drive at Tanglewood, August waits on the porch step, but he’s on his feet and storming toward us before Jude has even pulled the car to a stop.

“Where the hell have you been?” he demands, yanking my door open. “And what the fuck is he doing here?”

I glower at him as I climb out and set Betty on the ground. “Driving me home.”

He scoffs. “It had to be him, didn’t it? I bet you just couldn’t wait to call him.”

“Really, August? I didn’t call him. I didn’t have my goddamn phone because I left it in your truck. He happened by when we were stranded by the side of the road.”

“Of course he did.” He throws his hands up in exasperation. “Jude du Pont always comes to the rescue.”

“Well thank God he did, because if not I’d still be out there, getting heatstroke because you left me by the side of the road.”

“Wait. You left Olivia out there on her own?” Jude says. He’s out of the car now, Zora is too, and all the warming she’d done toward him in the last hour simply vanishes.

“It’s fine,” I say.

“It’s not fine.” Jude steps closer to me. “He left you out there by yourself where anything could have happened to you. What if Cole Webb had been the one to find her?”

August flinches involuntarily, as if that thought hadn’t even occurred to him. It hadn’t occurred to me either, but Jude makes a good point. August sneers at the doc. “You’ve got two seconds to get your ass the fuck off my property, du Pont.”

“You need to calm down. You’re scaring her,” Jude snaps, stalking away from me and closer to August. Zora growls.

I frown at Doc. August doesn’t scare me. Okay, well, he doesn’t frighten me in the

sense that I am afraid for my safety, but my feelings for him scare the shit outta me.

“I mean it. Get the fuck off my property.”

“I’m going,” Doc says, and steps back, almost running into Zora, who’s practically circling him with her hackles raised.

“Zora, here, now,” I snap at her, but she pays me no mind. She continues to growl at Jude, and I glare at August. “Can you call off your dog, please?” He ignores me. “August!”

“You know it’s not too late for you to come with me,” Jude says. “You’re not safe with him.”

“Not safe?” August roars. “Not safe with me? You got some fucking nerve showing up here.” He turns to face me; his eyes burn bright with rage. “Did this asshole tell you what he did?”

“August—”

“Nah, you know what? He’s right. Maybe you should leave too. Because if you’d rather be with him after the damage he caused, then you’re perfect for each other, but I don’t want you around my kid sister.”

I scowl at him. “What are you talking about?”

“He fucked my fiancée, Liv.”

“Jesus Christ,” Jude murmurs.

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I glance between the two men. “Is that true?”

Jude shakes his head and sighs. “It . . . it was a mistake.”

“A mistake that you repeated all summer long. A mistake that wound up—”

“I loved her too,” Jude snaps. It’s the first time I’ve ever heard him close to losing his temper. “And she wasn’t exactly innocent in all this.”

“You were my goddamn best friend.”

“I think you need to leave,” I say to Jude. He frowns but opens his car door. “Thanks for the lift.”

“Anytime,” he says, and there’s more than a hint of sarcasm to his tone. I’m thinking the doc isn’t much for self-preservation. He climbs in the car and speeds off down the drive, and I turn and face August.

“Where’s Bettina?”

“Upstairs, asleep.”

“And you’re not watching her?”

“Am I supposed to?”

I sigh. “Yes, you are. You’re sure as hell not supposed to be down here arguing with

some guy who stole your girlfriend in high school.” I throw my hands up in exasperation. “God, men.”

“She wasn’t my girlfriend.”

I just shake my head as I walk past, but he catches my arm. I seethe. “Let go of me.”

“I don’t want you seeing him.”

“You don’t get a say.” I attempt to wrench free, but he tightens his hold. “Take your hands off me, August.”

He frowns and glances down at his hand on my arm, as if he wasn’t aware of the punishing grip he has on me. “I’m sorry. I . . . shit, Liv. She was my everything.”

“And she chose someone else. It’s been, what, thirteen years?” I snap. “Get over it already.”

“Eight,” he says abruptly. “She was my fiancée. She was the reason I enlisted.” He scrubs a hand over his face. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I’m sorry. I just . . . I don’t like seeing you with him. I don’t like him showing up on my property after we were—”

“You left me by the side of the road, August.” I turn and glare at him.

“I’m sorry,” he says, yanking me back to him. “I panicked. She’s the only family I have left. I . . . I just keep screwing things up.”

“She’s not the only family you have left,” I snap. “Lay your hands on me like that again, and she will be. And I’m not your ex.”

“Liv—”

“Don’t.” I pull free and stalk inside, slamming the door behind me. I come face to face with Josiah. I’m so startled that for a beat my heart jackhammers about as if I’ve been caught doing the wrong thing. I press my hand to my chest. “You scared me.”

His eyes are dark and angry, focused solely on the man outside as if he could burn holes through the screen and raze August where he stands. “You alright?”

“I’m fine.” I attempt to move by him and up the staircase, but he frowns and gently grabs my arm. The small gesture forces a lump into my throat that I can’t swallow down. Tears sting my eyes, and I exhale impatiently. Josiah looks like he doesn’t know whether to hug me or let me go. The choice is made for him when August opens the screen door.

“Liv,” he says quietly. I don’t look at him. I can’t. “I’m sorry.”

His broken timbre forces a sob from my chest, and I run upstairs and shut myself in the bathroom, leaning my weight against the heavy oak door as I sink to the floor and fall apart. It wasn’t the force with which he grabbed me, or the fact that he’d left me by the side of the road, really—because I’d expect nothing less when it came to Bettina, she would always be his first priority, and I wouldn’t change that for the world. What hurt most is the way Josiah looked at me, expecting me to demand more, expecting me to know how to fix this situation, and I was just as clueless as the broken seventeen-year-old boy staring back at me, maybe even more so.

I’ve fallen in love with August Cotton, but I don’t know how to fix him any more than I know how to leave.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

August

Then

ISTARE AT THE LETTER in my hands. A single piece of paper that I thought might be the end of me. I roll my head against the scratchy canvas of the cot so the other guys won't see as a hail of gunfire sounds in the not-too-far distance. Havoc nudges my arm with his nose, and I reach out and scratch him behind the ear. He closes his eyes against the ever-present dust that kicks up anytime a member of my platoon moves inside our tent. I should take him back to the kennels. It's hot as the eighth circle of hell, and he's not fond of the constant gunfire. That makes two of us.

At least in the kennels he has air-con and can stretch out on the cool floor and sleep. I should take him back, but I don't because I'm stronger with him at my side. We've been working him hard; as one of the only dog teams here in Sangin, Havoc and I are escorting every patrol team that goes out beyond the wire. I should be amazed that he's standing at all, but I'm not because I know my dog. He's prideful, and it's as if everything he does is him saying, "See, Dad? Who's a good dog, then? Huh? And you thought I couldn't hack it playing with the big boys." It's as if his every glance is full of smug self-assuredness, and I love him all the more for it.

He puts both paws up on my arm and whines. I pat my chest, and all sixty-four pounds of him bounds on top of me and settles in. The breath leaves my lungs in a rush, and for a moment I stare up into those ochre eyes and think he understands why my soul is in tatters right now. The letter Jude wrote me falls away from my hand,

down into the gap beside my cot and the wall of our tent, and I wrap my arms around my dog.

Emotions run up and down the leash between dog and handler. It's a constant tug of war between feeling what my dog feels and compartmentalizing the fear and pain that needs to be seen to and that which needs to be stored for later when we're not being shot at or risking our lives for the rest of our unit by leading the patrol. He knows when this desert gets too much for me, and I know when it's too much for him.

It isn't the desert that haunts me now, or the gunfire, the women and children caught up in firefights, or the civilians that find an IED meant for one of us. It isn't the terrorists who take aim at my dog from behind primitive mud walls baking in the sun, or the bastards who seek to blow us sky-high every time we step outside the wire. It's the three little words written on Jude's note.

Sav is dead.

I bury my head in my dog's neck and inhale sharply to keep from choking on the sobs that long to break free from my chest. He smells like blood and dust, and he licks at my face, as if I'm a small child and he's kissing it all better. God, how I wish he could. I wish I'd never walked in on the two of them. I wish I'd never found out. I wish I'd seen her one last time before I deployed, instead of ignoring her calls and refusing to reply to her letters. I don't care that it makes me a chump—if that's what made her happy, then I'd gladly give her that. I'd do anything to have her in my arms again, and not buried six feet under.

The only girl I ever loved is dead and she killed herself because of me, because I broke her heart.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Olivia

ABEAD OF SWEAT TRAILS down between my breasts, and I sigh. Four days. We've been in this heat wave for four days with temps reaching 112 °F, and there's been no relief.

I slop my hands in the water, and it splashes all down my shirtfront as I watch August out in the yard. His bare chest is on display as he sets up a sprinkler for the kids to jump through. Bettina has one of the big ziplock baggies around her cast, as does Betty. I taped it to Bettina's arm and Betty's leg myself. I've learned my lesson where water and casts are concerned.

"Turn her on, Josiah," August yells. A beat later, the pipes rattle and bang as they protest from under the house, and Bettina begins squealing as the sprinkler starts up. Zora barks. Her jaws gleefully snap at the arc of water as if she could catch it in her mouth. Bettina, Beau, and Josiah take turns running through. Zora just charges through everyone. Even Betty runs at a full tilt, but August, still dressed in jeans and boots, doesn't go near the water. Instead, he watches from the sidelines.

I thought about taking him a pitcher of sweet tea, or even grabbing him some cool water from the fridge, but then he'd know that I know he's out there. Which would mean he'd know I'd been staring at him, and he'd likely cover up that amazing body. Besides, I'm still mad at him. We haven't said a word to one another since that argument on the porch, so screw him and his hot body. I'm not taking him shit. I will continue to ogle him though, because . . . pretty.

I plunge my hands back into the water that's long since run cold and peer at him through the lace curtains. From here I can see the scars on his back, and the long gash across his side. I figure it's from the IED that caused him to lose his leg, but that still doesn't stop me from wanting to know every little detail of the story behind it, from wanting to run my fingers over it, and my lips, too.

I place the dish in the rack and grab another, and I jump when I realized that August is coming up the back stairs. He enters the kitchen and inhales sharply, as if he's surprised to see me. I turn. Oh, holy mother of God, he's even more beautiful up close.

"I didn't know you were in here." He opens the fridge and pulls out a bottle of water, screwing off the cap and gulping it down.

"Yep, just washing dishes," I mutter, nonchalantly, hoping he won't notice the window's direct line of sight to the back yard.

"Sorry, I'll go put a shirt on." He flicks the bottle cap on the table. It spins a few times before the movement dies out and the room is silent again.

"Well don't do it on my account," I whisper, too loudly. Goddamn it, Olivia, can't you keep your whore thoughts to yourself? August frowns in confusion. "I mean, it's too hot for clothing. If I could take my shirt off, I would."

August raises a brow, and throws my words back at me, "Well, don't let me stop you, darlin'."

I know he's only saying it to test me, because he doesn't think I will. He's wrong. "You sure you're okay with that?"

"Are you?" he challenges, turning to face me as he takes a long pull from the water

bottle in his hands. His eyes never leave my body the entire time he drinks, and when I grab the hem of my tank and pull it up over my head, tossing the fabric to the kitchen floor, he squeezes the bottle too hard. Liquid rushes out around his mouth and down over his chest. I stare at him, at the water cascading down his hard abdomen, and I've never been so thirsty in all my life. He's so much bigger than me. I wonder what it feels like being pinned underneath him.

August tosses the bottle aside. It lands with a thud, leaking what little water remained onto the floor. Three angry strides and he stands in front of me. My cheeks pink up. I can't believe I've just done this, but I don't look away.

"Don't tease," he snaps in a gravel-rough voice. He picks up my tank from the floor and shoves it at me. I take it, but I tilt my chin defiantly.

"I wasn't." I sound far more courageous than I feel.

His hands clench into fists at his sides. I wish he'd place them on my body. I let my tank fall away again. A tormented groan escapes him. "I don't tease, August."

I'm covered in sweat, I don't feel the least bit sexy, but I move closer, until my bare toes are flush with the tips of his boots. Still, he doesn't touch me. I lean up on my tiptoes and kiss his downturned mouth. He freezes. He doesn't kiss me back. That hurts like a bitch, but I hold my head high as I pull away and brush past him.

He grabs my wrist tightly, too tight, and yanks me to him with a growl. My breath catches, and I search his gaze, hopeful. August kisses me. A toe-curling, heart-pounding kiss that sets my insides all to flame. I kiss him back, thrusting my hands into his hair, my mouth working as furiously as his. With his hands propped up under my ass, he lifts me as if I weighed nothing and sits me down on the kitchen table. His hands are everywhere, his mouth is everywhere, and mine is too.

I press my lips to the scar on his shoulder, and he pauses for a beat, and stares at me. I coax him with my eyes and wrap my legs around his hips, drawing him closer. One hand tugs at my hair, while the other slides across my breast and he roughly palms one nipple. I break away from his mouth and moan, but August is greedy, and his lips smother mine again, swallowing my soft sighs.

He trails a hand down my stomach and pushes my skirt out of the way in order to slide those thick fingers inside my panties. He parts my flesh with his index finger, shoving two digits inside me. It's as violent as it is thrilling. His thumb traces my clit. I moan. It's been so long since I've been touched like this. I close my eyes, throw my head back, and he works me faster, his fingers stroking my G-spot in a come-hither motion. My lungs expel the air in hard laboring pants, and right when I'm teetering on the edge, standing on the precipice, waiting for everything to fall away into sensation, he pulls his fingers free of my body. I cry out. He clamps one hand over my mouth while the other unfastens his jeans and releases his cock.

"Quiet, or they come in and this ends right now," August says in an angry whisper.

Outside, Bett shrieks. The older boys laugh and Zora yips. I glare at August. His eyes glitter with menace. He doesn't take his hand from my mouth, but I don't mind. I dart my tongue out to taste. His grip loosens, and I suck a thick finger between my lips. He tastes like me. His gaze softens, his eyes flutter closed and then he groans. For a moment, I think all the anger and aggression is gone. I feel as if the hard exterior has been burned away, peeled back, and he's exposing his soft underbelly for me, but then his eyes snap open, and I'm somehow met with more anger than before.

With my skirt bunched up around my waist and my panties pushed aside, August shoves inside me. I gasp, and he clamps his hand over my mouth again. I dig my nails into broad shoulders. August pumps into me hard and fast, mercilessly. His hand slips from my mouth and I kiss his shoulder, lick the scars. He fists my hair, tugging my neck back sharply until it's exposed to him. My scalp prickles. Tears sting my eyes,

and his mouth devours my neck and breasts. I'm lost to sensation, to my feelings for him, to my own anger, to need. He slams into me again, angles his hips a little more and I cry out, my orgasm smashing into me with such shocking brutality that my whole body trembles. August's thrusts don't cease or slow, and within seconds I'm coming again. This time, despite our frenzied movements, it's agonizingly slow. It's achingly beautiful and bitter at the same time, and when I open my eyes, he's watching me closely. He owns me in this moment, and we both know it. I'm too sensitive, too raw, and he's too close and not close enough.

With a groan in my ear that sends a shiver down my spine, August comes, his thick semen spurting into me in hot jets, and I have to keep from sliding my hand between us and making myself come again. I want to. God, do I want to. But I stay still, frightened that even the smallest movement might spook him.

He kisses my shoulder then pulls me closer, pressing a kiss to my forehead. We stay there for a beat, breathing heavily, his big arms wrapped around my body, my legs wrapped around his hips, his full lips against my temple as we breathe the same air. Then he steps back, tucks himself inside his jeans, and helps me down from the table.

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August walks away, and I'm left standing in the kitchen on shaking legs, aching all over with a pang of grief in my heart as I watch him go with angry red marks on his skin where my nails were.

Back and forth, we continue to hurt one another. We push and shove, scratch and claw until we're both broken and bleeding, a never-ending cycle of pain and hurt and torment. And yet I still can't walk away, but it appears I'm the only one.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Olivia

IRUN MY HANDS THROUGH the tepid milky water of my bath. It's a Friday, and Dalton is opening the shelter so I can start late. I don't know how that wound up meaning that I was giving Josiah the morning off too, but I didn't argue. The boy is a hard worker, and he deserves a lot more than the small wage I can give him, so I let him take the morning off. August and Bett have a doctor's appointment, and I've been looking forward to having the house all to myself, but that wasn't to be. Still, even though it is hot as the burning blacktop outside, I can't resist a soak in the tub with my new bath milk. It's been forever since I had time to do this now that I'm sharing a bathroom with a teenage boy.

The phone rings and I turn off the tap and yell downstairs for Josiah to pick it up. He ignores it, and I wrap a towel around me and open the door. "Josiah! Will you get that please?"

"Why can't you get it?" he shouts up the stairs. "It ain't my damn phone."

“Watch your mouth and just answer it.”

Just when I’m afraid it’s going to ring off the hook, he answers it with a gruff, “Yeah?”

Silence.

“Well, who is it?” I ask.

“It’s my aunt. You better come real quick.” He doesn’t need to tell me twice. I fasten the towel around my body and dart down the stairs.

“Sheriff?” I ask into the receiver as I take the phone from Josiah.

“Mmhmm, one and the same. Later we’re gonna have ourselves a little chat about my nephew answering your phone and living in the damn bed and breakfast with you and August Cotton, but right now, I need your skinny white ass down here to Jesse’s. That employee of yours is a menace, scaring kids, ranting and raving about how the government is watching.”

“What?”

“The sooner you can get down here, the sooner I can make sure this town is safe from loons like Dalton Brooks.”

“I’m coming, okay? Just don’t touch him. I’ll deal with it. You wait for me before you do anything rash.”

“Girly, does it look like I take orders from you?”

“Please, Shona?” I beg.

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“Just get down here quick before he does something he’s gonna regret.”

“I’m on my way.” I hang up the receiver and turn to Josiah, about to tell him to wait here for August, but he shakes his head.

“I’m comin’ with you.”

“Josiah, no.”

“I’m comin’ with you. Either you let me in the passenger seat of your car, or I take your bike, but I’m coming either way.”

I nod as I start up the stairs. “Fine. Grab my keys, I’ll be down in a minute.”

I PULL INTO THE DISABLED park in front of Jessie’s Restaurant. There’s a crowd of people gathered around, staring, probably drawn by the flashing lights of the sheriff’s cruiser parked beside us.

I climb out of the car and push through the throng of people who’re packed in like sardines watching a grown man fall apart.

He’s backed up against the wall of the restaurant, crouched down on his haunches with his arms wrapped around his knees. He rocks gently back and forth.

“Dalton, look at me.”

“S-s-stay back. D-d-d-don’t touch me,” he shouts. “Where’s my rifle? Who t-t-took my rifle?”

“You don’t need your rifle. You’re not in a war zone anymore, okay?” I say, crouching down in front of him. “You’re here in Magnolia Springs, with me. No one’s going to touch you, Dalton. You’re safe.”

“No. We’re n-n-not s-s-safe. No one’s s-s-safe.” He looks at me for the first time, and the fervor in his eyes is both frightening and heartbreaking all at once. “S-s-see? They want you to think that, b-b-but we ain’t safe. None of y’all are s-s-safe.”

“Where’s Xena, Dalton? Why isn’t she here?”

“She d-d-d-don’t like me much. I can f-f-feel it.”

“No, she loves you. I’ve seen the way she is with you.”

“You should t-t-take her b-b-back. Give her to s-s-someone who needs her, someone who can l-l-love her.”

“Dalton, why don’t you come with me and tell me all about it, huh? We can take a drive, go back to the cabin? Or out to the lake?”

“No! I don’t wanna go t-t-to t-t-the lake. It’s too open. T-t-there are drones everywhere, watching, always w-w-watching.”

“Okay, the cabin then. Why don’t we go to the cabin, and we’ll get your pills? We’ll chat.”

He nods, but he glances at the audience around us and cowers back against the railing. “What are y’all s-s-starin’ for?”

I take a step back and turn to the sheriff and ask, “Can we clear the area?” She glares at me. “Please? He doesn’t do well in crowds.”

“Looks to me like he doesn’t do well out of the psych ward,” Shona says, and gives me an unimpressed look as she turns to the gathering around us and claps loudly. Dalton covers his ears. “Alright, people. Move it along. Nothing to see here. Let’s clear a path for Miss Anders, shall we? Go on, now. I know y’all got better things to do than watching some old drunk throw a tantrum.”

It’s my turn to glare. Dalton isn’t a drunk; he’s a Marine who went to war and came back with traumatic brain injury. But I guess to uneducated outsiders, a PTSD meltdown looks very much like a drunk-and-disorderly nightmare.

Once the area is cleared of onlookers, it’s another ten minutes before I have Dalton calm enough to leave the wall and get him tucked safely in the car. I have the windows down, but he reaches over to the driver’s side and rolls them up, shutting himself inside as if it were a tomb.

Josiah moves to the back door of the vehicle and opens it, about to climb in when his aunt’s voice booms across the burning concrete lot toward us. “Where do you think you’re going, boy?”

“Home,” Josiah says. “With Olivia.”

She chuckles, “Home? That ain’t your home. Just ’cause you’re playing house with a bunch of white folks don’t mean that’s your home. She ain’t your mamma. In fact, it’s downright creepy, a single woman taking in a young black man.”

“Go get in the car, Josiah,” I say. He glances between his aunt and me.

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“You stay here, boy. You ain’t going anywhere with her.”

“Tell me, Sheriff, what is it about me that you hate so much? Is it the fact that I took your nephew in when you wouldn’t, to save him from his father? Or is it the fact that I’m white that annoys you more? Would it make a difference if my skin was black?”

“Don’t you sass me, missy.”

“That kid has no one. No one stepped up to take care of him, not even his own aunt, so he’s coming home with me, whether you like it or not.” I turn and walk away, but she calls out behind my back.

“It ain’t right you taking an interest in a young boy like that.”

I whirl around, glance at the stragglers and patrons that remain, and stalk toward her. “Don’t you dare turn this into something it’s not. The only interest I have in this boy is protecting him from his own family, and making sure that he gets the hell out of this town, and as far away from you and your brother as possible, before either one of you can pollute him any more than you already have.”

I turn around. Josiah is leaning against the car door with a shocked and maybe even slightly awed expression on his face. I stalk around the hood and make a shooing gesture “Get in the car.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says, and ducks his head as if to hide his grin from me. Once I make sure Dalton is okay, I start the engine and throw a glance at the boy in my review mirror. He’s all-out grinning now, and I shake my head and release a shaky

breath.

“Don’t start with me,” I snap, but even I wind up smiling a little, though I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t terrified of seeing those flashing lights in the rearview coming to cart me off to jail. I’ve just started a very public war with the sheriff, and I’m certain it isn’t going to end well for me.

I let out a deep breath and glance at the kid in my backseat. He’s so carefree these days, so changed and polite, and I know that some things are worth fighting for. Some people are worth the risk. Some are even worth risking everything for.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Olivia

IPULL UP TO THE FRONTdoor of Dalton’s cottage. Inside the one-room shack, Xena barks and scratches at the front door until Josiah gets out of the car and lets her out. She bolts for the passenger side, jumping at the door that Dalton hasn’t yet bothered to open.

“You need to let her in,” I say, maybe a little too sternly for what he’s endured this morning. “You need to stop shutting her out. Right now, that dog exists to make you happy.”

“I don’t t-t-think it’s working out,” he murmurs in a monotone.

“You’re not giving her a chance,” I say honestly. “I can give you the tools to get through this, but at the end of the day, it’s up to you how you use them. You have to take your meds.”

“I d-d-don’t like the way that t-t-they make me f-f-feel. I can’t be alert and on m-m-

my guard with them. Can't as-s-sess p-p-possible t-t-threats."

"You're not in danger, Dalton. You're not back in Sangin, and you don't need to keep your guard up anymore. You can let it go—"

"No, I c-c-can't." He shakes his head and yanks open the door. Xena gives a little yelping cry, as if he's hit her. She whines and skitters away from the car. I'm assuming Dalton had forgotten she was even there, because the alternative gives me some cause for concern. He climbs out, and she follows after him, jumping up and weaving in and out between his legs, despite the fact that a second ago she was scampering back in the other direction. She can sense his unease, and she's just trying to do her job, but it appears that Dalton isn't letting her. I wonder how long that's been going on. She's been in his care for days now, and even though we've only done a handful of training sessions, they should have a stronger bond than the one I'm seeing. I sigh and follow him inside, and Josiah sticks closer than my shadow.

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It's not the first time I've been inside Dalton's house. I drove him home after pancakes last Sunday with Xena and he invited me in, but walking in now I feel uneasy, and I shiver despite the sweltering heat. The man has no electricity, no phone, and no means of communication with the outside world. I don't want to leave him here alone, but I don't see what choice I have. I can't take him back to Tanglewood, not like this; he could lash out and hurt Bettina, and I won't have that on my conscience. But I don't know what else to do. It's a one-room shack with one couch and no bed—there isn't even so much as another armchair to sit in. There's a tiny kitchenette, and it's as clean and uniform as any Marine's room would be, but it's hardly a home, and apart from Xena's dog bowls and the folded up bedding sitting on the end of the sofa, you'd never know anyone lived here.

Dalton sits on the couch while Xena attempts to nudge his lap, a trick we teach the dogs to distract their handler from themselves. Today, it isn't working, and I can see how frustrated Xena's becoming with his lack of response. She paces, she nudges, and when all that doesn't work, she climbs on into his lap and demands his attention by barking. Dalton absentmindedly scratches behind her ears, and she pants, but I can tell from the way she bows her head and whines that she knows as well as I do that he's not responding to her the way he should.

“Listen, I can give you the number of a great psychologist—”

“You t-t-think I need someone else inside my head, p-p-poking around and p-p-probing, handing me another b-b-bottle of pills to swallow?”

“You need to listen to your doctors, and you need to talk to someone.”

“I need t-t-to be left a-a-alone.”

I sigh. “Well, unfortunately for you, I can’t do that. I care about what happens to you, Dalton—we all do.”

He shakes his head and extricates Xena from his lap, setting her down on the floor so he can lie out on the couch, and I can take a hint. Emotional episodes like the one he just had outside Jesse’s take it out of you, and I know he probably just wants to sleep it off.

“Take the day off tomorrow. I’ll be back to check on you after the shelter closes. But you come by Tanglewood if you need me, you hear?”

“Y-y-yes ma’am,” he whispers without opening his eyes, and I motion for Josiah to head out the door while I scratch behind Xena’s ears and fill her bowl with fresh water and dry food. I take one last look at the man sprawled out on the couch, and for the first time in fifteen years, I begin to doubt my ability to help anyone.

I know my program works. We’ve saved thousands of ex-servicemen and women, and yet everywhere I turn in this town it feels as if I’m banging my head against brick walls and still never making any leeway. I’ve been so distracted with August and everyone else since the moment I arrived that I feel as if I’m forgetting why Paws for Cause is so important for Magnolia Springs. I’m preoccupied, spread too thin. I’m failing Dalton—and possibly August too—and I don’t know how much longer I can hide the fact that I’m in way over my head.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Olivia

THE NEXT DAY, BETTINA colors her Frozen book at the table as I top and tail the

beans for supper. I still can't look her brother in the eye, and we haven't said two words to each other since the incredible sex at the very table I'm leaning on. Josiah is helping August in the front yard, and Bett has been talking my ear off. From outside, the crunch of tires over the unsealed drive can be heard. I glance at the clock and wonder who could be calling right on supper time, and then when I hear the sheriff and Josiah raising their voices, fear twists my stomach.

I wipe my hands on a dish towel and glance at Bett. "Honey, can you take these things on up to your room?"

"But you said I could help you."

"And you can, but I need a clear table, and I need to talk to the sheriff with your brother first, okay?"

"Ohwokay, Wivvie," she mumbles and slides off the chair, carrying her coloring upstairs to her room. I take a deep breath and head outside. August is shouting now too, his face red, and his strong features pulled into an angry expression.

"That's bullshit, and you know it. That woman's done nothing but good for Josiah since you introduced them. Hell, all she's done from the second she arrived is give her free time, her heart, to everyone who needed it, and now you come out here accusing her of something sick and vile? She looks on both of those boys like sons, and you're damn lucky she does, or you'd probably be a nephew short. You make him go back to that house, and that's what you're handing him—a death sentence. Either he comes out of there in a body bag or wearing cuffs as he's carted off to jail."

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“You ain’t family,” she snaps, and her gaze shoots to me as the screen door slams closed. “You got no hold on him. You ain’t blood, and you’re never gonna be blood.”

“I ain’t going back there,” Josiah says.

“Then you’ll come stay with me. It ain’t right you living out here with a bunch of white folk you barely know.”

“For how long?” Josiah says. His hands are balled into fists at his sides, and his eyes glisten with unshed tears. “You told me I could live with you before, and I was right back home the very next day.”

“I know you don’t like it, but he’s your daddy,” Shona says. “You’re a minor, and he’s your legal guardian. If he wants you home, then the law says I gotta take you home.”

“And what does the law say about a man beating his son bloody, huh?” I demand, fighting back my own tears of frustration. “What about that? You saw his face. You saw my face—you know what he did.”

“All I know is that you didn’t report it,” she snaps.

“Because he was frightened you’d send him back,” August says, shaking his head.

“And if I had reported it, what then? Would Cole be behind bars? Or would he still be terrorizing his son and dealing drugs to the neighborhood?”

“Miss Anders, I think you best be quiet now. You got enough to worry about with what people are sayin’ around here about you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Turns out I’m not the only one thinkin’ it’s a little odd that you’re keeping company with young boys and strange men.”

I clench my jaw tightly to keep from lashing out at her and calling her every damn name under the sun. She just smirks and laughs, but it’s August who surprises me by yelling. “That’s enough. This is bullshit, Shona. You know there’s nothing going on here. We’re just helping the kid out of a rough patch.”

“All I know is he ain’t family. He’s my family, and we don’t need your handouts. Josiah, go on and collect your things.”

I wanna wipe the sneer clean off her face. “No. He’s not going anywhere.” Josiah makes to head inside, and I grab his arm and clutch him to me. “You don’t have to go.”

“Yeah, I do.” A tear runs down his face unchecked, and the lump in my throat becomes impossible to swallow. My own tears burst free, and this kid, this seventeen-year-old who’s impacted my life in ways I never imagined, gives me a reassuring smile. “Don’t you worry about me. I can take care of myself.”

Josiah hurries inside.

“You can’t do this,” I beg of the sheriff, placing my hand on her shoulder as she turns to head back to the cruiser. She glances at my hand and gives me a look that says I better remove it before she moves me to the back of her squad car. “He can’t go back to that house.”

“Take your hands off of me,” she says, slowly. Her voice is calm, but a fire rages in her eyes. I do as she asks.

A few moments later, Josiah comes back with his belongings hastily shoved inside the backpack I bought him. I grab his hand as he walks by. “You don’t have to go.”

“Yeah, I do. Thanks, though.” He gives me a sad smile and glances at August. “Both of you.”

He climbs in the cruiser and doesn’t look back.

Shona slips into the driver’s seat and pulls away, tearing down the drive almost triumphantly. I watch the taillights get smaller in the evening light, farther away, and when she pulls out onto the road, I collapse in a sobbing heap on the ground. The blood whooshes in my ears; my face burns. August’s big arms wrap around me from behind, and he pulls me up against him, my back to his front. He tucks his head in against my neck, and I sob uncontrollably. I feel like a mother whose baby was just snatched from her arms and who was told she’ll never see him again. I know it isn’t the same thing. I know he’ll be okay, as long as he stays with his aunt, he’ll be okay, but I also believe she has no intention of keeping him. And that’s what hurts the most, because we may not be blood, I may have no legal rights to him, but that boy is family. He’s as much a part of me now as August and Bettina are.

“Come on, now. He’s gonna be okay,” August whispers against my ear. “You did what you could for him. You gave that kid a purpose, and you believed in him when no one else did.”

“I should have fought harder. I should have made him stay. I should have knocked her on her damn ass.”

“And you would have gone to jail for it.”

“So what? At least he’d be here, safe. Away from that monster.”

“I can’t have you locked up in a jail cell.” He turns me to face him and wipes the tears from off my cheeks. “We need you here. Bett needs you. Those dogs need you. I need you.” He takes my face in his big hands and presses a kiss to my forehead. I close my eyes and lean in against his warmth. Sweat trickles down my spine, and I feel as if I’m running a fever, but I stay wrapped in his embrace because those three little words mean everything to me. I need you.

He needs me, just like I need him. Every cell in my body wishes that were enough.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Olivia

IGLANCE AT THE CLOCK. Three a.m. greets me in a wash of big pale green numbers illuminating my room. I stare at the sheer curtains, so still. There isn't even a hint of a breeze. I'm so exhausted. The nights seem to stretch out, longer than the days, hotter, lonelier, and my mind won't ease. It's been three days since Josiah left, and not a single second has gone by that I haven't been worried sick about where he is. It's been five days since that incredible sex with August, and aside from him comforting me when Josiah was taken away, we've barely said a word to one another.

Frustrated, I kick the sheet from off the end of the bed and sit up. I can't bear this heat anymore. I can't bear to lie here a moment longer staring at the ceiling, as if it holds the answers to my questions, so I rise and reach for the lightest robe I have. I guess it shouldn't really matter. Everyone is asleep, there are no longer two hormonal teens occupying the house, and the only man who I should be concerned about seeing me in my unmentionables isn't as affected by me as I am by him.

I forgo the robe, open my door, and creep downstairs. I don't bother turning on the lights; I don't want to wake anyone, so I navigate my way in the dark toward the kitchen. Once there, I open the fridge and pull out the milk. I press my nose to the mouth of the bottle and inhale, then I take a swig.

"Not everyone wants your cooties, you know? You should use a glass," he says, and I about jump out of my skin. I gasp and whirl around to find August sitting at the dining table, feeding me the same lines I once said to him from that very position.

I press my free hand to my chest, breathing far too rapidly. “You scared the shit outta me.”

He chuckles and kicks out the chair opposite him. Zora lifts her head from the floor to glance at me, but relaxes and goes back to sleep beside August’s feet. I grab myself a glass and sit. August is shirtless, that much I can see in the slither of moonlight spilling in the kitchen window. It’s a sight I never get used to seeing—how beautiful he is, how every line and angle seems to be carved from marble. Solid and unyielding, just like the man within. A frisson of heat moves through me, and I remember being pressed between the hardness of him and this very table.

August takes the carton from my hand and pours the milk. He pushes a packet of cookies towards me. That bastard’s been eating my Oreos. I take one from the plastic and separate it, peeling off the creamy filling and popping it in my mouth before sandwiching the two halves together and dunking them into my glass. He watches all this closely, as if I fascinate him.

“Can’t sleep?” I ask when I’m done chewing. He shakes his head. “Me either. What are you doing sitting down here all alone in the dark?”

“I don’t know. Thinkin’. Wishing I had something stronger than milk to drink. Wishing I didn’t turn into an asshole when I did take a sip.”

“An asshole? You?” I tease.

“Very funny,” he says, pouring himself another round.

“Well, we’ve covered the wishing part, but you haven’t told me what you’re thinking about.”

“I think I’ve never been so lost, yet so found, as I am now. As I’ve been since you

came barging in my door.”

I’m floored by this admission. I don’t have any idea what to say to that, so I do what I always do when it comes to August. Avoid, avoid, avoid. “Barging? I’ll have you remember, mister, that I walked away. I was content to sleep with the coyotes that night, but you practically dragged me back, kicking and screaming to your door.”

“I don’t remember any kicking and screaming. You barely put up a fight at all.” He grins, his teeth a bright flash of white in the darkness.

For a long time, we say nothing. The silence stretches out between us, yawning into the night, swallowing what little peace we’ve found in this moment. I look away, stare at my hands on the tabletop, the table we made love on. Though I suppose you couldn’t really call it making love. Because he doesn’t love me, that much is clear. If he did, he’d be suffering as much as I am right now. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to ignore the anger that twists in my gut like a worm on a hook.

“Are we going to ignore it forever?” The words are sharper than I intend, and they slice through the silence as if they were a roar, bitter and bruised with frustration.

His whole body stills. “No.”

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“Then why won’t you say something?”

“What am I supposed to say?” he shoots back, equally as angry, and I’m stunned for a second, because it’s he who walked away, it’s he who’s been avoiding me, and he who seems to be perfectly fine, while I’m the one feeling like I just handed him my heart and he stomped all over it.

“What do you want to say?” I snap. “Obviously, you’re angry with me. You can’t even look at me. You haven’t looked at me since—”

“I can’t stop looking at you,” he hisses. “It’s all I’ve done since you got here, seen you and nothing else.”

“Then what?” I plead. “What aren’t you saying?”

“I’m terrified, okay?” he shouts, standing up and slamming his fist down on the table. I flinch. Zora sits up and growls. “I’m absolutely fucking terrified.”

“Of what?”

“Of you, of this.” He rakes a hand through his hair. Zora barks and August tells her to be quiet, but she takes off toward the front door, snapping and snarling. I stare at August with a confused expression as I get to my feet. A beat later there’s a thudding from the door, like someone has fallen against it, and we both hurry towards the hall.

“Stay here,” he commands as he walks through the entryway. Of course, I don’t listen. Instead, I run after him, breezing past and reaching the door first when he stops

to flip on the light. I blink against the blinding brightness. From the porch comes a faint cry.

“Olivia,” August warns, but I pull the door open to reveal a kid who resembles a bloody pulp rather than a seventeen-year-old boy.

“Josiah.”

He falls against me. He might be half my age, but I’m half his size, and I almost topple under the weight as he collapses. August helps me keep the boy upright. He’s passed out. His young face, once so beautiful, is a complete mess. Josiah’s covered in blood.

“He needs a hospital,” I say to August in a panicked voice, but he’s already two steps ahead of me, scooping up the teen as if he didn’t weigh 170 pounds and carrying him through the open door. I don’t know how he navigates the stairs with his prosthetic, but he does.

“Liv, get the door,” he says, once we’re standing beside his truck. I grasp the handle and yank it open, and he lays Josiah’s prone body out on the seat. I run back inside for the keys, but August snatches them from my hand. “I need you to stay with Bett.”

“But . . .”

“I got him. I’m better in emergencies than you are. Just stay with Bett.”

“Wait, what about insurance?”

“I’ll deal with it,” he says, pointedly, staring at my hand on the doorframe. “Olivia, let go of the door. I’m not gonna let anything happen to him.”

I let go like he asks and step away from the vehicle. The taillights fade into the darkness, and I stand there shivering in the early Alabama morning with Zora waiting at my side.

I STARTLE AWAKE WHEN the truck pulls in the drive. The TV is on, playing through its third run of Frozen. I glance at the eager four-year-old quietly singing along on the couch beside me. “You felled asleep, Wivvie.”

I yawn. “I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

“That’s okay. You missed Owaf’s song, but we can just weewind it if you want?”

“Why don’t you just keep watching?” I rise, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. My nightgown had been covered in Josiah’s blood, so after August had taken him to the hospital I’d run upstairs and tried to scrub it clean. I’d showered under the blistering-hot spray and then I’d about scoured every inch of the house clean before Bett woke and insisted I watch her favorite Disney film. Over and over again.

I race over to the entryway and pull back the door. August is coming up the stairs, followed by a broken but thankfully no longer bleeding Josiah. I run out onto the porch and wrap him up in a huge hug.

“Ow,” he whispers, and I pull back to stare at him.

“Sorry, I’m just . . . are you okay?” I turn to August. “He’s okay, right?”

“I’m okay,” Josiah says with a small smile that quickly turns to a wince. His face is a mess, swollen with several nasty cuts, a couple large enough for sutures.

August folds his arms over his chest. He's wearing a T-shirt that's two sizes too small for him, and I'm assuming it's one given to him by the hospital. "Docs say he has a fractured arm, a couple of busted up ribs, and his cheek and eye socket are badly bruised, but not broken. He has a couple stitches here and there, too, but he'll live."

"What happened?" I ask Josiah.

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“Three guesses and the first two don’t count,” he mutters, shaking his head, but it looks like even that hurts. “I stayed with my aunt for all of a day, and then my dad came to collect me.”

“Why? I thought he told you not to come back.”

“He needed someone to sell his drugs for him.” Josiah swallows, his gaze cast down at our feet. I clasp my hand over my mouth and glance at August. “The bastard’s too fucking lazy to do it himself.”

“I’m so sorry.” Before I’m even finished saying the words a police cruiser pulls into the drive, and I see red. “Go on inside, Josiah.”

“Olivia,” August warns. Josiah glances between us and steps inside, no doubt being accosted by an overly excited Bettina while August stares down at me with a knowing expression.

“What?” I demand, folding my arms across my chest.

“You can’t beat up the sheriff. You know that, right?”

“She should never have taken him away from us.”

“I agree, but she had to. You know Josiah’s daddy would have just shown up here if she hadn’t.”

“Yeah, but we would have been here to protect him,” I hiss, and then frown with the

worried look he gives me. I know it's not fair of me to take my anger out on him. No. The person I should be angry at pulls to a stop in front of the house and opens her car door.

I glare at her through the windshield.

"Is he here?"

"No," I snap, racing down the stairs before August can stop me. "You do not get to set foot in this house, and you are not coming anywhere near that boy. This is all your fault. You said you would keep him safe. He's lucky to be alive right now."

"Miss Anders, calm—"

"Don't you dare tell me to calm down. That boy showed up on this doorstep at three a.m. with a beat up face and broken bones. He walked three miles to our door, because he knew you wouldn't protect him, and we would."

"I know, I shouldn't have taken him, but it's the law. He's still a minor, and if my brother wants him back, there's nothing either one of us can do about it unless it's court mandated."

"Your brother should be locked up. If you were doing your job properly, he would be, and that boy wouldn't be sitting on our couch with a fractured arm, broken ribs, and a bruised eye socket."

All the fight seems to go out of her body. She looks to August, and then back at me.

"Is he okay?"

"Physically, he'll heal, but you can't even begin to imagine what this has done to him mentally."

She swallows hard. “I know you won’t let me in to see him.”

“You’re damn right I won’t,” I snap.

She lets out a loud exhalation. “Just tell him I’m here if he needs me.”

“Don’t hold your breath.” I stare her down. It’s the first time I’ve seen any remorse in her eyes, and for a brief moment, I feel a pang of regret. Then I remember her nephew’s face as he collapsed into me last night and the blood that soiled my clothing, a stain I couldn’t remove no matter how hard I tried to scrub it out, and any shred of pity that I had for this woman vanishes.

She climbs into the cruiser and starts the engine, then backs down the drive and turns onto the main road. I let out a ragged breath. My hands shake, and my heart hammers out an uneven staccato rhythm. I glance at August, who’s watching me with an awed expression. Awe and something else I can’t put my finger on. Respect, maybe?

“You done good, princess,” he murmurs, and slides his hand into my hair. It’s the first time he’s touched me since Josiah was taken away. My heart kicks into overdrive. He moves a fraction of an inch closer, and I think he’s going to kiss me, but his lips find my forehead and my stomach sinks as he presses a chaste kiss to my hair. “You done good.”

All the air leaves me in a rush as I melt into his touch, the adrenaline of facing off with the sheriff burnt away by my longing and need for this man. A man I clearly can’t have because I’m here, waving a damn white flag in front of his face, holding my heart out with desperate hope, begging him to take it from me, but he doesn’t. His refusal to acknowledge me—acknowledge us—cuts so deep that there isn’t a doctor in the world clever enough to suture me back together.

He walks away, and I deflate and wrap my arms around myself as the heat wave

finally breaks and the first drops of rain spatter against the front porch. The heat wave is over, but the flames scorched everything in their path, and the devastation will smother us in smoke and ash.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

August

Then

IFOLD THE LETTER ANDtuck it into the pocket of my fatigues. We've had no more than an hour's rest. We're the only dog team here, so we're out on back-to-back shifts with only an hour or two to rest my dog in the meantime. You know when you sign up that it's a job that doesn't end. The men and I could keep going for hours, but Havoc is the one with his nose to the ground, he's the one doing all the work, and if he's tired and overworked he's going to miss things.

So far, we've brought every Marine back from patrol. Every pair of boots that marched through that gate have returned again under my watch, but I wonder how long that can last when so many of our brothers are losing their lives on patrols beyond the wire. It's never far from my mind that I could miss something, that Havoc could miss something. That it could all go to hell in a handbasket, and I could lose my men, or worse, my dog.

"Cotton!" Rodriguez shouts, and I glare at him, wondering how long he's been standing there. He's suited up, helmet and all, which means I'm fucked because I should have been ready with Havoc at the gate ten minutes ago. "Aww, you cryin' over letters from your mamacita? Get your fucking shit together, hombre. You ain't even got your dog suited up and the sergeant is gonna kick your ass for making his platoon late."

“Fuck!” I jump out of my cot. My muscles and bones drag, as if the weight of the dry heat and thick dusty air around us was pressing down on me like a lead jacket, pulling me back toward the bed. It’s like moving through soup; you think you’ll acclimatize but I’m not sure that’s ever really the case. I don’t know how Havoc is able to cope hour after hour out here in the baking heat with all that fur, but everything I ask of him he handles with grace and nails it. I throw on my helmet. My boots are already on—ain’t no point in taking them off—and I grab my gear and head for the kennels.

Havoc wags his tail when I round the corner of his den. His A/C is on, but he’s not in it. He knew I was coming and is waiting patiently in the fenced in part of the house. He whines, and I make a show of being excited to see him. I’m excited to see him anyway, but the high-pitched timbre I take with him is deliberate. The stupider you sound with your dog, the more excited they are to do a good job. He’s always ready to work, and pride swells within me when I remember that. He gives me strength, and I have to remember to put my own shit aside, because emotions run down leash just as much as they run up.

When I head around the back and open the kennel, he jumps up and whines. He knows there’s something off and pushes his big skull into my leg. I crouch down to his level and scratch him behind the ears.

“I’m alright, buddy.” Even as I say it, a lump forms in my throat, and I wipe moisture from off my cheek. Sweat, I tell myself, but even Havoc knows that ain’t true. He licks at the saltwater, and for a minute I bury my face in the thick fur of his neck and just breathe. I haven’t told a single soul about Jude’s letter, about the fact that my fiancée is dead. I haven’t told them, because they’d send me on bereavement leave, and I’m needed here. We’re needed here. There’s nothing to be done about her now, nothing I can do for a corpse in the ground, so I take a deep breath. I dry my cheeks and switch the tone. “Come on, buddy. You ready to work?”

For a beat, Havoc just stares at me, tilting his head from side to side. He’s confused. I

shouldn't come here like this, but I have no choice. I grab his vest and show him his favorite KONG. He watches me as I put it in my pocket and his ears go up. He knows we're on duty. Once he's leashed and suited up we head out of the kennel and toward the front gates. I know we're in deep shit when our platoon is standing there waiting for us, and the sergeant's face is fifty shades of pissed off.

"What the fuck time do you call this, Marine?"

"Sir, sorry, sir."

"Sorry? You're fucking sorry? I got ISIS motherfuckers planting IEDs, civilians, little kids dying outside these walls, stepping on bombs while you take a fucking nap, and you're fucking sorry?"

"It won't happen again, sir."

"You bet your goddamn ass it won't happen again. Now get the fuck out there and give these tea towel-headed motherfuckers hell. And Marine? You report your sorry ass to my office when you get back. You're on shit stick duty."

"Sir, yes, sir."

"Get the fuck outta here," he says with a final exasperated cry and indicates for the Marines to open the gate. We file out one by one, scanning the vast, dry terrain with its rudimentary mud walls and sand and dust, always with the dust. We're not even going that far today, just a few miles around the city, and our mission is simple—clear a back alley the supply truck plans on using for its delivery route early tomorrow morning before first light. Of course, a mission like this should be done at night so that the Taliban don't come in after us and plant several more IEDs, but then where's the sense in only doing a job once? Havoc and I will likely be sent out early before the sun rises with yet another platoon to sweep the area again.

I show Havoc the KONG and then place it back in the pocket of my fatigues. The message is clear. Find the bomb, and I'll give you the KONG.

"Go to work, Havoc. Seek it." He wags his tail, and puts his nose to the ground, inhaling dust from the hard sandy soil beneath us, eager to do his job and be rewarded with his favorite toy and dad's love. His lead is clipped to my belt; that way my hands are free to carry my rifle. I let the lead slacken. It's designed so that he can be several feet in front of me and work unhindered. He snuffles as dust collects in his super sensitive nose, and within minutes he's panting from the heat, but he doesn't pause in his efforts. No matter what I ask of him, he never falters. He never misses.

We're not quiet as we walk through the labyrinth of alleyways made from mud walls that have baked in the burning Afghani sun for years. We can't see over them, can't see around them until we're right on top of friend or foe, and that's the problem. For as many innocent civilians as there are here dwelling in Afghanistan's most violent territory, there are just as many Taliban. There are just as many insurgents hiding in plain sight, and the real challenge is knowing who to question, and who to let go. The truth is you never really know. As Marines, we're taught to follow orders, to trust our gut unless it goes against orders. For me? I trust my dog. I trust his nose, and my ability to read him. That's why, when he halts and begins scouring a spot of rocky ground at the east entrance to a compound with his ears up, tail down, and shoulders hunched, I know he's hitting on a scent. He sits at source and I tell him he's a good boy, and then I'm about to call in the explosives team to do a finger sweep over where I suspect the IED is when a man steps out from a door in the compound wall two hundred yards away. He just stands there staring at us. A chill runs down the length of my spine, despite the one hundred and five degree heat. My gut tells me it isn't right, that this whole situation is about to get fucked up every which way from Sunday.

"Havoc, here," I command, at the same time as the man pulls out what looks like an old cell phone. And then I get it. I have one single second of clarity, and I know this

is it. “He’s got a phone!” I shout to my brothers, run toward my dog, attempting to throw my body over his to protect him. The blast knocks me off my feet. My head cracks against the hard-baked earth, and all I see is a plume of dust misted with red, exploding into the air. All I feel is pain, searing and white hot through my entire body.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:57 am

I can't breathe. I can't breathe.

"Havoc!" I shout, but it comes out a gurgled whimper, swallowed by blood in my throat that's as thick and suffocating as the dust around us.

My legs are on fire, my lungs too, and I clutch at the lead that should be connected to my belt. It's not. I grasp at nothing but dust and debris. Moisture runs down my face, hot and sticky, stinging my eyes and turning my vision red. I struggle to sit up, to shift, to call out for my dog, but every breath, every movement is agony.

The voices of my brothers ring out around me between a hail of gunfire and shouting. Someone screams for the medic. Rodriguez is beside me, his voice calm in the midst of chaos, an anchor to cling to, a shining beacon that penetrates the dust and red mist of this hell and guides me back to the pain and present. A lead weight rests on my chest. I can't breathe, but I attempt to call for Havoc anyway. I can't see for the dust. The pain is so consuming that all I can do is squeeze my eyes tightly shut and hope that either death or the enemy's bullets find me, and fast.

But neither do. I wake to the harsh florescent lights of the military field hospital. A team of doctors fill the room, all in bloodied gowns and surgical masks. I reach out and grab the arm of the person closest to me. A female doctor. Her blue eyes stare impatiently down at me, and from behind her mask she says, "I need more anesthesia here."

"My dog," I whisper, but the words are rushed away from my tongue, stolen from me by the drugs coursing through my system.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Olivia

UNABLE TO SLEEP WITH the wind howling against the shutters and the rain hammering the roof, I toss in bed and stare at the bright green numbers of the alarm clock glaring back at me. Though it's pouring outside, my room is suffocating, hot and sticky. It's unbearable. I jump up and stalk toward the French doors, swinging them wide. I startle when I see him on the balcony, leaning up against one of the thick white columns, no shirt, his hair mussed, wearing only a pair of light gray sleep pants. He stiffens. Despite the noise of the rain bucketing down, I know he hears me.

August turns to face me. Wild blue eyes roaming hungrily over my body. He makes no attempt to look away, and I don't try to cover myself even though I know he can see everything underneath the sheer white lace negligee. It's unabashedly revealing, and I know I should cover up. I should close my door and shut him out, lock up my thoughts and throw away the key, but I take a step forward, and it seems this tether that's always between us, an invisible cord pulled taut enough to snap, dissolves into nothing.

I don't know who moves first, him or me. I don't suppose it really matters because his hands grip my hair, and his mouth covers mine, hot and unrelenting. He turns us. The column is at my back, hard stone scratching my skin as August's hands lift my body and push me up against the cool surface. I cry out, but it's as much in ecstasy as it is in pain. His hands tear at the fabric between us, and it falls away in wisps, pooling at his feet along with the rain. His hard length pushes at my entrance, and he shoves inside. My jaw drops open, sharp pants tearing from my throat as he thrusts his hips and buries himself deeper inside me. I slide my hands through his shock of thick hair, dip my head, and kiss his neck, trailing my lips up his hot flesh to his mouth. He stares at me, and I glare back at him, and then his lips meet mine and I'm lost to the feel of him inside me, driving me closer to the brink.

“Fuck, princess, you feel so fucking good,” he groans against my neck, nipping at my flesh. I let my head fall back against the column, not caring that the rain is soaking us both, making our bodies as slick as the feel of him inside me.

“August,” I cry, panting as heat builds low in my belly. I dip my head and kiss his lips again, tasting him, wishing I could get closer, praying for him to release me and silently begging him to hold me tighter, to never let me go.

Our kisses are frenzied. We scratch and claw at one another, punishing, pushing, urging each other on with grunts and thrusts, a language it seems only we know. He roars his frustration, and I grab his face with my hands, smother his lips with my own, and silently scream back, giving over to him, and taking all that he offers, demanding it. I don’t care that he might hate me afterward. I don’t care that this kind of sex punishes us both—if it’s the only way I can have him, then I’ll take it.

He pulls away from my lips, panting just as heavily as I am. I rest a hand between us, against his chest, so I know I’m not alone in this. So I might feel his heart beating as loud and thunderous as mine. It practically pounds right through my flesh, and I smile, and then I’m lost to the demands he whispers in my ear, as my orgasm builds. “Come for me, Liv. I wanna feel your sweet pussy milking my cock. I want you to come for me, and forget any other man ever touched you.”

As if his words were feather-light caresses against my heated flesh, I come and he follows me over the edge, grunting as he grinds out the last of his orgasm and his semen spills inside me. Panting, I cling to him, afraid to let go. Afraid he’ll discard me as easily as he did the last time.

He pulls out. I gasp with the slide of our bodies, but he carefully sets me on my feet.

Regret washes over his features, and my heart sinks. It’s the scene in the kitchen all over again. He wants me, but he doesn’t want me enough. The weight of his rejection

slams into me, and I hold too tightly to his neck as I beg, “Please don’t shut me out.”

He frowns and wipes the moisture from my cheeks. I don’t know if he knows they’re tears and not rainwater but he takes my hand, interlacing our fingers which are hot and slick with sweat and rain, just like the rest of our bodies. “I don’t think I can anymore.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:57 am

My hearts soars hearing those words from his lips, and when he takes a step back and tugs me along behind him down the length of the porch to his room, I follow, because what else can I do?

As much as I'm under his skin, he's under mine, has been since the day I arrived, and I don't think there's anything either one of us can do about it now.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Olivia

Two days later

I'M WOKEN BY AUGUST'S moans, deafening and horrifying in the still of the night. I come up on my elbow to see what the matter is. Moonlight spills across the pillow. His body is ramrod straight, every muscle clenched tight, his face and hair soaked with sweat that glistens in the beam of light from the French doors.

"August." I'm afraid to reach out and touch him but with a shout, he rolls, grips my arm, and pins me beneath his frame as he straddles my hips, his good leg out flush with mine and his other pressed against the mattress. Half a leg missing or not, he still has me pinned as well as any other man might. He holds me down with a heavy hand against my chest, but that's not what forces my breath to catch. The cool bite of a blade presses against my throat. Moonlight pools in through his window and glints off the hunting knife in his hand. I gasp.

He's panting hard, and this isn't like the last two times he's held me by the throat

when he had no idea what he was doing. This time he knows exactly who I am, though I'm sure I frightened the hell out of him.

The knife falls from his hand and clatters to the floor. His grip on my chest loosens. A whimper escapes me. August hisses and clambers to the other side of the bed. I gasp and dry retch, close my eyes. Tears stain my cheeks and the soft sheet.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, his voice thick with emotion. He drives his hands through his hair. "Fuck! Liv, I'm so sorry."

I don't say a word. I just curl into the mattress and try to ignore the burn in my throat and the aching in my chest, not from the brutality of his hands on me, but because I can't breathe. Because I can't stay. I want this so much, want him so much, but I can't stay. Staying means endless nights of being choked, waking up with a hunting knife thrust against my throat or maybe never waking up at all. "Liv, say something, please?"

"You keep hurting me," I sob. My voice scratches, a sandpaper-against-glass sound. Grating. "I know it isn't intentional; I know that's not who you are. But I also know this situation doesn't end well for someone like me."

"Liv, please?" He grabs hold of my arm and won't let me go.

"I can't do this, August. I've fallen in love with you, but I can't go to sleep every night not knowing if I'm gonna wake up in the morning."

"Please?"

"I'll pack my things tomorrow. You've got a little girl to focus on, and she needs you now more than ever. Josiah will be here to help—"

“Olivia.”

“Let me go,” I say, staring down at the brutal grip he has on my wrist. “Please? Just let me go.”

I leave the room, walking down the hall to the bedroom that’s been my home since the day I arrived in this backward little town. I know where I need to go. August sure as hell isn’t gonna like it, but we’ve made our bed, and now we have to lie in it.

CHAPTER FORTY

August

IDIDN'T LEAVE BETT'S room all morning. I couldn't. I didn't wanna see Olivia packing up her stuff. If she wants to leave I won't stop her. She's right. Olivia Anders is better off without me. I can't make her stay because I don't deserve her.

Bett is miserable about it. She tried throwing me out of her room, but luckily for me, she is just four years old and too weak to physically remove me.

Olivia closes the front door, and her footsteps echo up the stairs, and then the hallway toward us. She knocks on Bett's door, even though it's open and we're both already looking up at her. "Hey, I'm about ready to leave. I just wanted to say goodbye, and thank you." She ducks her head to meet Bett's gaze. "Both of you."

"Do you weally have to go, Wivvie?" Bett asks, bursting into tears again.

"I really do," she says, jamming her hands in the back pockets of her shorts. There are tears in her eyes, but she clears her throat and blinks them back as Bettina tucks her head into my chest and sobs. "But hey, you'll see me soon, and if it's okay with your brother you can come visit Betty and me any time you want."

"I don't want you to go." She rubs her eyes with her tiny fists. She can barely get a breath, and it breaks my damn heart. "I don't wanna vvisit. I want you hewre with me and Auggie."

“I know, baby girl, but I can’t.”

“Why?”

Why? Wasn’t that the fucking million-dollar question?

I wait to see what she’ll tell my kid sister. I know it won’t be about me, even though I am the reason she’s leaving, the only reason. Because I can’t be trusted. Because I couldn’t keep from hurting her, and that makes me the worst kind of monster because I’m not even aware I was doing it half of the time.

“It’s just time I moved out and you and Auggie went back to having your house back.”

“But I don’t want you to go.”

“I know, sweetheart. But I promise I will come by and see you in a few days’ time. When you’re all better, maybe we can have some girl time, go get our hair done, paint our toes?”

“Otay,” she says between sobs, and my heart breaks. I know most people think I don’t have one. I’ve always kept it guarded, well before war. I’ve lost friends that way, because it seemed like I didn’t care—hell, for the most part, I don’t care—but that doesn’t count when it comes to my baby sister, and apparently not when it comes to Olivia. It’s funny that for so long I’ve felt half alive, a zombie, hollow-boned and empty inside, but I don’t feel half alive now. Now I’m wide awake, gasping for breath, hanging on to my humanity for dear life, and I’m fucking miserable for it. I’d rather be dead, because she’s leaving. She made me feel things I had no right to, and here I am, handing over what’s left of me, watching her walk away, and I only have myself to blame.

“Hey, don’t cry,” Olivia says as she hugs my sister, and Bett sobs into her arms.
“This isn’t goodbye, Bettina.”

Bett cries harder, and I have to pull her away from Liv, protect her from the pain even though I’m the one who caused it. A clean break. Yeah, about as clean as walking away from a grenade. I hug my sister who cries out for Liv, and it breaks both our hearts, I can see that from the look in her eyes.

“Would you go already?” I snap.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:57 am

Tears well in her eyes, and she turns away from me, hurrying down the stairs. The front door slams behind her. The car starts, and I lean back in my chair as all the air leaves my lungs in a rush.

Josiah stands in the doorway, staring at me with accusation in his eyes. You did this, he says without saying a word. I know. He walks away, thundering down the hall, and then the stairs, and the front door slams again. I don't know where he's going, or if he'll be back at all. My little sister, my only remaining family, curls into me. Gut-wrenching sobs rack her tiny body.

“Shh. Come on now, Bett. You gotta breathe, darlin’.”

If anything, she wails louder, and a part of me knows exactly how she feels. I don't want Olivia to leave any more than she does.

But we don't always get what we want.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Olivia

FOR THE RECORD, SPENDING the night with an entire kennel full of dogs is never a wise idea. I barely have ten minutes of sleep before one dog barks, and then another, and then a whole chain of barking starts up, and Betty squeals, and the sound is so loud that my ears ring. It's only temporary, I keep reminding myself, though I can't be sure if that is true until I'm holding a new set of keys in my hands.

Now, I pack up my sleeping quarters and move the cot back to my office, and then I head to the bathroom. There's a working toilet, thank the good Lord, and a mirror with a basin and fresh water. If I want to shower, I'll have to use one of the doggy baths, which is so not happening. So I pull a little antiperspirant out of my purse and spray myself from head to toe. I tie a bandana around my throat, wincing at the pressure of the scratchy cloth against my wound, and I slick on some gloss and face powder, only because I need to look halfway presentable.

Yesterday, after I left Tanglewood, I called Georgia. She still had nothing for me, though this time, I think she actually looked. That meant there was one place I was headed, and I didn't love the idea, but I knew if I wanted to wash in a shower that wasn't intended for pooches, I was going to have to grovel.

I lock up and leave the shelter, and then I drive to Jude's doorstep, where I'm hoping to catch him before he goes into consults or surgery. With Betty under one arm, I push the buzzer, and a voice comes over the intercom. "Hello?"

"Jude?"

There's a brief pause, and an edge to his tone when he says, "Olivia?"

"Hi," I say with a little wave of my hand. I don't know if there's a camera and if he can see me or not, but I guess it's just reflex.

"Hi," he says. Definitely an edge to his tone.

"So, I was kind of hoping we could talk," I say, attempting to keep the desperation from my voice and failing miserably.

"About Betty?"

“Not exactly.”

“Hold on.” Jude’s footsteps echo up the hallway, and after pausing to fiddle with the lock, he opens the door.

“Hi,” I say quietly.

“Hi.” His gaze rolls over me. I probably look like death on a cracker, but he’s too polite to say as much, and I could kiss him for it. Jude moves aside, motioning for me to go first. “Come on in. You want some coffee?”

“Oh, Lord, you are an angel,” I blurt out. “Wait, I’m not keeping you from another date, am I?”

“Only the anal gland squeezing of a Great Dane at eight thirty, but she won’t mind being kept waiting.”

“Well, I hope you buy her dinner first,” I say.

“She’d likely eat me for dinner.” He closes the door and leads the way through the clinic to the house. Once in the kitchen, I set Betty on the ground and take a seat at the breakfast bar across from him. Jude pours us both a coffee, and I lean over the counter and inhale the rich, earthy scent, and sigh. I take a sip and feel the bandana bob against my throat.

“Kind of warm for scarves, ain’t it?” Jude says, glaring at the offending piece of fabric.

I swallow hard. “I hear it’s what all the kids are wearing these days.”

“Right, except it’s a hundred degrees out. And the dark circles under your eyes, are they fashionable too?” Jude’s gaze is full of challenge, of knowing, and I shift

uneasily in my seat. “Why do I get the feeling you ain’t sleepin’ too well?”

“Because I spent the night with six dogs and a squealing piglet for company.” As if she could understand every word from my mouth Betty snorts loudly and hobbles excitedly around the rug in Jude’s lounge room, rubbing her face and snout all over the plush carpet. If she didn’t have on that cast, she’d likely be tearing around the room. It seems my little piglet loves to run.

“Why?”

“August and I are—”

“A big mistake?”

“I love him, Jude,” I whisper. I don’t mean to; it just comes tumbling out. He winces, clears his throat, and takes a sip of his coffee.

“You hear about what happened to the last girl that loved him?” I give him a puzzled expression, and he continues, “It killed her. I don’t know, I guess we killed her.”

“What?”

“After he . . . walked in on us, beat the shit outta me, and rearranged my face, he wouldn’t see her. Wouldn’t talk to her. He went back to Lackland that weekend and was deployed immediately after his training was done. He wouldn’t call her, wouldn’t write her back. Hell, I don’t even know if he got her letters. All I know is, she wasn’t right after he found out about us, and she died tryin’ to win him back.” He scrubs a hand down over his cleanly shaven jaw. There’s so much pain in his eyes, so much torment. “I don’t think she ever planned on killing herself. I think she just wanted to get his attention. She got it, but by then it was too late.”

“Oh, Jude,” I reach out and place my hand on top of his on the counter, giving him a reassuring squeeze. “I’m so sorry.”

“I loved her too. I know he can’t see that; I don’t even think she knew how crushed I was when she wouldn’t see or talk to me, but I loved her.” He shakes his head, draws his hand out from under mine. “What is it about him?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play with me, Olivia.”

“I don’t know, maybe I just have a thing for the strong, sullen type.” Tears prick my eyes, and I blow out a huge breath.

“He hurt you?” he asks glancing again at my throat. I unfasten the scarf and expose the angry cut August’s blade left on my skin, and the bruises that I know are a hideous purple blue. He sucks in a sharp breath. “I’m gonna kill him. I’m gonna fucking kill him.”

“It isn’t his fault.”

“Jesus, really?” he snaps, looking horrified. “Whose fault is it, yours?”

“He’s suffering from PTSD blackouts, which is ironic because if it were anyone else, I’d know exactly what to do, what to say. I know how to fix men like August, but I don’t think I can fix him. I can’t make it better, Jude.”

The dam breaks, my tears spill over, and those words replay on a loop inside my head. I can’t fix the man I love, but I can’t quit him either, and I don’t know where that leaves me. Right now, it’s seeking refuge in a place where he can’t hurt me. At least not physically, anyway.

IFEED THE DOGS, GIVE them water, and lock up for the night. I would have finished much sooner, but Dalton didn't come in today, for the second day in a row. I need to go see him, I need to make sure he is okay, but Josiah, Beau and I were swamped with adoptions all day. I let the boys go early. They have a party they want to go to, and I don't want Josiah seeing Jude show up here. I don't know why; August will find out soon enough that I'm going to be living in Jude's cabin—the whole town will know soon enough. The Cottons and I will be neighbors. Our cars will drive down the same road every day. We'll dodge the same potholes and slow down for the same bends. He's bound to find out, and while I have no interest in Jude as anything more than a friend, it still feels like a betrayal.

Doc's waiting in the lot, and I climb in my car with Betty and follow him. Ten minutes later, he pulls in the drive of a huge log cabin, and I do a double take.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:58 am

“This is it,” he says, holding his hands out in a gesture that says, “this is all there is.” I think the man may actually be crazy.

“It’s a little bigger than I imagined,” I say, setting Betty down to explore. “Why don’t you live here?”

“I don’t know. It just always felt like my parents’ place,” he says. “When I was fifteen, my mamma and daddy got divorced, and I moved here with her. It just never felt like home. I only ever come out here when I want to clear my head.”

“Why haven’t you sold it?”

“I can’t,” he says, matter-of-factly. “It’s the only thing I have left of her—the only place in the world I can go and feel like someone still cares about me, even though she ain’t here.”

“Listen, I can find somewhere else. I don’t want you to feel like you can’t escape to this place anymore because I’m here.”

“No, I want you to stay here, as long as you need. Besides, it’s about time someone used this old house.”

“Well, at least now you’ll know that there’s definitely someone other than your mamma who cares about you here.”

“That’d be nice,” he says and tilts his head toward the huge house. “You ready to come on inside?”

“Sure.”

He walks up the stairs and pulls a set of keys from out of his pocket, handing them to me before using a key on his own ring to open the door. “It’s fully furnished. I was just here on the weekend so some of the dust will be moved already, but it might take a little extra cleaning. I try and get out here at least twice a season to do repairs, but since I ain’t stayed here in years, I don’t know if everything works the way it should, but you just give me a call if anythin’ gives you trouble, and I’ll come fix it.”

“Okay.” I let him lead me inside. The house is pristine with a big wrought-iron chandelier and a bunch of furniture that looks like it belongs in a Cracker Barrel catalog. It’s definitely not how I pictured it when Doc said he had a cabin; it’s so much more beautiful and bigger, definitely bigger.

“Bedrooms are upstairs. There are three bathrooms and a full kitchen with a deck out the back. Linens are in the closet,” he says. “Electric is on—water, too. I keep thinking one day I’ll come out here and stay, but I never do.”

“I can’t tell you what this means to me.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’ll be good to see this place have a little life again,” Jude says. “Well, I’ll leave you to get settled in, if you need anything you just holler at me.”

“I will.” I nod and see him out, collect my bags, and then I lean against the door and stare at my new surroundings. It’s quiet as hell. I walk over to the sheet-covered couch and fall into it. As I pick up Betty from the floor, I try to ignore the ache in my chest and the pit of grief in my stomach. I fell in love with a man who’s broken. And this is the price I pay for that.

In all the years since I tried to end my own life, I’ve never felt this alone. I’ve never

felt this despair, and this desperate to hold onto something that could destroy me. In the beginning, August had been a project I could sink my teeth into. I'd treated him the same as I would any other Marine suffering with the weight of returning from war, but I never planned on falling. I never planned on being something his PTSD could sink its teeth into. I should have known from the start that I was too close to this, and if I didn't already know, now I have the marks to remind me.

Stupid. So stupid. How could I have done this? How could I have fallen in love with him? My heart's in tatters, my head filled with all of the sweetness we could have had, and it tastes like poison in my mouth. I'm miserable, alone, and broken because I climbed my way to the top of his high walls, I scaled the tower, cut myself on the iron thorns, and I fell all the way to the ground.

And there is nothing to be done for it now.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Olivia

ONE WEEK LATER, ANDI haven't seen hide nor hair of August. I've broken my promise to go see Bett. I hadn't planned to. I'd driven to Tanglewood, parked outside the gate, but I couldn't bring myself to go any farther. It hurt too much, like pulling stitches on a fresh wound that hadn't yet had a chance to scab over.

Course, it doesn't matter if I am walking through the front door of Tanglewood or sitting on the front porch of the Du Ponts' cabin watching the sunlight dance through the trees as summer dwindles down to fall. I am hurting anyway, and there isn't a damn thing I can do about it.

I sip my wine and stare down at Betty in her little sweater on my lap. She sits up, snuffling as she lifts her nose to the air. "What's the matter, baby?"

She grunts. Her stumpy little legs wiggle as if she's contemplating jumping off my knee. It must be dinner time. "Okay miss thang, I'm getting up."

I set her down on the floor, and she scurries to the end of the porch, but by the time I've put my wine glass on the table and stood up, shaking out the thin afghan throw, her snuffling has turned to an all-out piggy bark. I glance up and Dalton is standing in my front yard looking like he hasn't slept in days.

"Oh, my God," I say, clutching my chest. "You scared the hell outta me, Dalton."

“I n-n-need to t-t-talk t-t-to y-y-you.”

“Okay.” Unease prickles down my spine. He’s more haggard then before, gaunt-faced and jittery, and Xena isn’t with him. I’d seen him only two times in as many weeks. Once, at his cabin the day after his meltdown, and again six days ago when he was heading out of town with Xena to visit a Marine buddy in Mobile. I didn’t know that he’d returned since. “Where’s Xena, Dalton?”

“At h-h-h-home. I d-d-don’t t-t-t-trust t-t-that d-dog.”

“Come on now. Xena is the sweetest dog I ever met. She’s there to help you.”

“I’ve been t-t-thinking real h-h-heavy t-t-thoughts, Olivia.”

“What kind of thoughts?”

“Thoughts ab-b-bout n-n-not b-b-being here,” he admits, glancing down at his feet. “A-a-about hurting my-s-s-self and others.”

“Okay, well, why don’t you come sit, and I’ll go fix you a glass of sweet tea and we can talk about them, okay?”

“I think my apartment is b-b-bugged,” he whispers, his wild-eyed gaze darting around the clearing.

Dalton’s paranoia has been a cause for concern for a little while now, but with everything going on with August, Josiah, and the shelter, I haven’t had a chance to address it like I should. I see now how big a mistake that was. I see that I’ve not only failed August, but I’ve failed Dalton too. “Come sit down. I’m gonna head on inside and get you a drink, and then we can talk, okay?”

“Okay,” he agrees, pulling his jeans—that appear two sizes too big—up by the waistband. The afternoon sunlight glints off something shiny tucked into his pants, and I’m blinded by the bright silver surface. For a moment, I think it’s just his belt buckle, and when I glance again whatever it was is covered by his clothing, and I realize Dalton’s not wearing a belt. A bolt of fear shoots through me, and I try my best to look unfazed as I smile down at him, but I know he knows. I know he senses my unease, my fear.

“You want sweet tea?” I say, trying for calm, but the warble in my voice is unmistakable.

“You got h-h-home-made?”

I nod, because what Southern woman worth her salt doesn’t make her own sweet tea? “I’m gonna get Betty’s dinner while I’m in there, okay?”

He nods, and I walk as slowly and calmly as I can inside. This man trusts me, and right up until this very minute, I’ve always trusted him. My gut’s never led me wrong before, and I’m sure I’m just overreacting. I’m strung tighter than a bow after the last week, and making a big deal out of nothing.

Betty scampers through the hall in front of me toward the kitchen, squealing with excitement, and I don’t notice the quiet footfalls behind me until he speaks, “I d-d-don’t w-w-wanna be out in t-t-t-the open. Ex-p-p-posed.”

I try my best not to jump, but every fiber within me is telling me to run. Instead, I casually walk to the refrigerator and say conversationally, “Are you taking your meds, Dalton?”

Of course, I already know the answer, but I listen to him stammer out a reply as I set the pitcher of tea on the bench and take a glass from the cabinet. “I t-t-told you. I d-d-

d-don't like w-w-what they d-do to my h-h-head."

My phone is resting on the counter, and while my back is to him I open my contacts and dial August's number. I don't know if he has his phone near him or if he'll even get this, if he'll understand what's going on, but I tap the button on the side to turn the volume down, so Dalton won't hear August's voice through the speaker. With my heart hammering so hard I'm sure Dalton can hear it across the room, I turn with the tea in my hands. I'm shaking like a leaf, because I already know what I'm turning around to face, but the sight of it breaks my heart and sends ice through my veins. Dalton has a gun trained on me.

A sob escapes me, and the glass slips from my hand, shattering on the floor. Knowing you might be in danger and being faced with the harsh reality of it are two different things altogether.

"I k-n-n-new y-you were one of t-t-them." His face is beet red, his eyes narrowed on me in fury. "T-they p-planted you here, d-d-didn't t-they?"

"Dalton, put the gun away. I wasn't callin' anyone. Put the gun down, and we'll go outside on the porch and talk," I say as calmly and clearly as I can. I don't know if August even answered his phone, I just hope that he's on the other end of that line, or the next time he looks on my face may be when he's asked to make a positive ID on my body at the morgue.

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“G-g-give me the f-f-f-fucking phone and g-g-get on the f-f-floor. Y-y-you’re ju-ju-just like t-t-them.”

“No! Dalton, I’m not. I’m here for you, okay? Just put the gun down. We’ll talk—”

“Get on the fucking floor!” he yells, and there’s no stutter this time. Betty squeals and charges for him, ramming her tiny head into his leg, but he kicks her, and she lands with a screech and a wounded animal cry against the refrigerator. I gasp and move toward her tiny body, but the cool bite of metal against the nape of my neck convinces me otherwise. I stick my hands up, and lower myself to the ground, kneeling in front of him. Shards of broken glass pierce the soft skin of my legs. I swallow back a scream.

“Dalton, please. You don’t want to do this; you don’t want to hurt me.”

“Shut up, shut up, sh-hut up!” he screams smacking his temple with the butt of his gun. What seems like forever—but is more than likely just a few minutes—later, a dog barks at my front door, a sharp, loud report echoing around the porch outside. Zora. I breathe a sigh of relief, but it’s short-lived because if something happens to August, I couldn’t live with that. I can’t live with that.

I whimper. Dalton covers my mouth with a dirty hand that reeks of tobacco. He grabs my hair and yanks me to my feet. I cry out, but his hand tightens on my mouth. I feel as if I’m suffocating, drowning in fear, panic, and desperation. I stare at Dalton’s wild-eyed gaze in the reflection from the glass cabinets. I don’t even know this man. This isn’t the shy, sweet-natured veteran who’d shown up at my shelter asking for a job. This is a man ravaged by war, by violence and the demons in his head. Illness

has raped his mind and left only madness in its place.

Glass shatters. August crashes through the door, and panic seizes my heart. Faced with a bigger threat, Dalton turns and releases his hold on me. I grab a knife from the block on the counter, and lunge at him. He screams as I sink the sharp blade into his arm. He raises the gun and fires. The report echoes around the small kitchen, and I dart out of the way, feeling the sharp sting of pain as my muscles protest their misuse. August is on his feet. The two men tussle and more shots go off, but August has Dalton in a headlock. He shoves the butt of the gun up under the other man's chin. He squeezes. Dalton's hand is still on the trigger, and a final shot rings out as the man slumps against August.

For a beat, we both just stand there, shaken, bloody, and then August lays Dalton's inert body on the ground. His face is covered in blood, chunks of meat, and shards of bone. I gasp, and it hurts all over. Bile rises in my throat. My vision goes dark, my head spinning, over and over, as if it were a top. August takes a step closer, and I hold up my hand for him to stop but then the ground rushes toward me, and he catches me in his arms.

"Liv," August cries out. My whole body is burning, set alight, razed by fire and pain.

"I don't . . . feel so good."

"Olivia, just stay with me. I got you, princess," he says, but I slip through his fingers, into the black watery depths of fear, and pain, and then nothingness.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Olivia

SLEEP. Is that too much to ask for? All around me there's an incessant beeping, the

sound of trolleys, and hushed voices, and the cloying scent of flowers fills the room. There are warm hands, though—or at least there's one warm hand tracing patterns on my palm. August. I open my eyes, blinking up at the stark white light above my bed.

I groan. My throat is dry and scratchy from misuse. My whole body aches, and my head feels as if it's been stuffed full of cotton. Did I die? Surely Heaven wouldn't be this annoying, would it? "Am I dead?"

August smiles. "You think I'd let them take you away from me? Darlin', even God is afraid of Marines. He knows I'd beat down his door until he gave you back. I'm afraid you're stuck with me a bit longer, princess."

"I like stuck," I mumble, more to myself than to him. Drugs cloud my head, making my thoughts foggy and incoherent.

"How you feelin'?"

"Like I got shot," I say, giving him a sleepy smile. "I don't ... I remember the pain, knowing I'd been hit and looking down at all the blood, but the rest is hazy."

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“The bullet grazed your side, it’s pretty deep,” he shakes his head. “But you got damn lucky.”

I know he’s right, I am lucky, but it feels like a slap in the face because I still lost my friend. I wasn’t there for him, and now he’s dead. “What happened to your face?”

“The Du Ponts’ back door. Cut me all to ribbons.” He rolls up his sleeve, displaying the long angry scratches marring his biceps and forearms.

“Are you okay?”

He chuckles and leans in to kiss my hand. “Now that you’re awake, yeah. You scared the shit outta me, princess.”

“Where’s Bettina?” I say, and my heart squeezes when I remember August and I weren’t the only ones caught up in Dalton’s madness. “Where’s Betty?”

“Bettina’s out in the waiting room with the boys, and Jude has your piglet. She’s stable, but a little beat up. She had a broken rib or two, and a twisted stomach.”

I put my hand over my mouth. “Oh, my God.”

“Doc tells me she’s doing fine.”

I stare blankly at August. “You’ve spoken to him?”

A muscle in August’s jaw ticks. “Yeah, I talked to him.”

“Without kicking his ass?”

“Let’s just say he’s lucky there was a wounded piglet between us.”

I attempt to shift into a more comfortable position and it feels as if my torso is on fire. Resigned, I lay my head back on the pillow. “He knows he did wrong by you, but he’s trying, August.”

“Yeah, tryin’ my last freakin’ nerve.” He trails his lips up my wrist. “Olivia, I don’t want you doing this anymore.”

“It’s part of who I am.” Tears well in my eyes and I blink them back, but they spill over anyway. “If I don’t . . . if I don’t help men like Dalton, who will?”

“Someone who ain’t you. Someone who ain’t mine.”

I lift my hand and wipe the salt from my cheeks. “I’m not yours.”

“Who says?”

“I do.”

“Then you’re lying to yourself.”

“I can’t fight with you anymore,” I whisper. “I can’t fight anymore.”

“Then come home, where you belong. We need you.” He winces as if he’s in pain. “I need you.”

I shake my head, but I don’t say a word, because I’m not sure I can trust my mouth not to betray me. I want to come home with him, but it’s not that simple.

“You might not want a fight, but I’m a Marine. It’s what we do, and I won’t give up without one. I’m not perfect; the last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt you, but I’m working on it. Put me in your program. Help me be a better man.” He squeezes my hand tight. Too tight. I should pull away, but I don’t because that pain is the only thing keeping me from losing it and giving into sorrow. “Help me be the kind of man you deserve. I know it ain’t foolproof, but I love you, Liv. And I can’t let go. Please?”

I don’t want to go back to Jude’s. I don’t think I could deal with standing in that kitchen, where August killed another man—my friend—to protect me. I don’t blame him. Dalton would have killed us both. I failed him, and I’ll live with that for the rest of my days. The choices August made are the reason I have more days to live through, but I’m not sure I can return to Tanglewood and fall back into the way things were with him either. He needs help. We both do. “I need to think about it.”

“Come home, Liv.”

A nurse chooses that time to enter my room and check my vitals. She asks me a bunch of questions that I feel too exhausted to answer, and tells August that it’s time to let me rest. The stubborn ass doesn’t like it, but he leaves with the promise to be here again soon, the second that visiting hours start up.

I watch him go and I’m thankful for the reprieve, because I don’t think I could stomach saying no to him again. I don’t think I’m capable of it, and that frightens me more than the idea of Dalton holding a gun to my head. My heart is stuffed full of explosives, and August Cotton holds the trigger, and I don’t know how either of us will survive the blast when it detonates.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Olivia

One month later

I HOBBLE DOWN THE STAIRS as fast as my body will carry me, afraid I'm too late. Ever since I came back to Tanglewood, August has started running with Zora and Josiah every morning. Josiah is a month away from being legally able to enlist, something that both terrifies me and makes me inherently proud. Every day when Josiah runs upstairs to the shower, the big angry Marine comes into the kitchen without a shirt as sweat trickles down that incredible body, and I pretend not to ogle him while I stand at the stove making breakfast for everyone. I haven't missed a single day since this ritual began, and I don't intend for today to be the first.

August had convinced me to return to the big beautiful plantation house because my doctors said the road to recovery after my surgery was going to be painful, and that I'd need support. He'd been right about that. The first few weeks after the shooting had been hell, both physically and mentally.

We'd adopted Xena, and I'd retired her from duty. I figured she'd been through enough in her short life, and she wasn't getting any younger. Ellie and Jake had brought my Chihuahua, Pebbles, over from Fairhope to aid in my recovery too. So here I was, back to living in August's house with a precocious four-year-old, two rambunctious teenagers, three dogs, one piglet, and an angry Marine, who isn't so angry these days.

He's still prone to fits of assholery from time to time, and I hear the shouts of terror coming from his room some nights, but Zora is helping with that. On nights when the walls seemed paper thin and his despair breaches the space between us, it's hard not to go to him, but even though I failed Dalton horribly, I still have faith in my system. August needs to heal; he needs to forgive himself for Havoc, for Savannah, and for Dalton, and he needs Zora's help to do that, not mine. Of course, there are nights when I have nightmares of my own, and I wake to find him occupying the armchair in my room. He never says a word, but his cool, calloused hands brush the hair back from my forehead and temper my fevered brow.

Now, I hurry into the kitchen, almost tripping on Betty—who is getting bigger, and somehow even cuter everyday—as she weaves her way in and out of my legs until finally, I decide it's safer to pick her up. We're both headed to the same place anyway. I dart into the kitchen, set Betty on her hooves, and pinch my cheeks to give them a little color. Then I readjust my robe to reveal a little more cleavage, but not so much that it's obvious. I'll head back upstairs to change before Josiah and Beau come down, but for now, the robe—and more importantly the cleavage—stays.

“Mornin’,” August says. I freeze and spin around to find him leaning up against the counter beside the fridge, wondering how much primping he just witnessed. My eyes roam over every inch of hard muscle, his broad shoulders, defined abs, and the deep V of his hips that render me stupid every time. He has on black basketball shorts and his running blade, a lightweight carbon fiber prosthesis.

“Morning,” I reply, somewhat breathlessly, and I know it isn't just due to my racing to get in here. “You're early . . .” Nice one, Olivia. I shake my head. “I mean, you've finished your run already?”

“Yep. Went out on my own today.” He grins as he puts the cap back on the water bottle and sets it on the bench. “You know, if you want to see me naked and sweaty, all you have to do is ask, darlin’.”

“I do not . . . I wasn’t . . .” My words are stolen from me as he stalks forward with a maddening smirk on his face. “What are you doing?”

“Getting tired of waiting for you to be okay with this.”

“August, we talked about boundaries.” I press my hand to his chest because he's too close, and I can't think straight with the heady scent of his sweat and sandalwood soap distracting me. It wasn't my intention to run my hand over that sweat, to feel the hard-won muscle beneath, but here I am, petting him as if he's my favorite kitty.

“No. You talked about boundaries. I told you I was gonna fight, and I ain’t above fightin’ dirty.”

“How dirty?” I breathe.

August’s lips curl up into a smile. “So dirty.”

Both hands snake around my waist and—careful of my wound—he lifts me onto the counter, wedging his hips between my thighs. He hooks a finger in the sash and unties my robe as if he were opening a gift made just for him. I wrap my legs around his hips to pull him closer, and that’s all the admission he needs. He threads a hand through my hair and pulls my neck back to expose the tender flesh to his mouth. I close my eyes and whisper his name as my whole body turns to flame, starved for the oxygen that only his touch can bring. His hot mouth trails down my neck, his hands cup my breasts, squeezing, kneading, and I slide a hand between us, into the waistband of his shorts. I take his hard length in my hand, stroking him from base to tip. August grunts as he pushes my negligee out of the way with frenzied hands. His fingers find me bare and exposed with no panties.

“So fucking’ dirty,” he groans, wetting his lips.

A frisson of heat surges through me as his thick fingers dip into my wetness and push inside. His thumb circles my clit, slowly at first, and then faster, forcing my legs to shake. I moan. The house is quiet but for our labored breaths and the slick sound of our hands against one another's flesh. The cloying scent of our arousal hangs in the air between us, and it's as heady a thing as the greedy way he kisses me. I work my hand faster on his shaft, and he intensifies the pace and pressure of his stroking. The world erupts into molten heat and flames and frenzied kisses. I don't know who comes first; I don't think it matters.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:58 am

“Jesus, princess. I haven’t come like that since I was a teen,” August says when he’s had time to catch his breath. I lean my head back against the cupboard, and a sleepy laugh escapes me.

“Wanna make it a second time?” I slide my hand over the wet head of his beautiful cock, and his hips jerk. August’s fingers are still inside me and he flexes them. Desire arcs through my body. I’m hot and hungry for more.

“Do you?”

My resounding moan is loud, too loud. As is the “Holy Shit!” that comes from Josiah as he, Beau, and Bett stand at the entrance to the kitchen.

“Oh my God,” I say, mortified.

Beau laughs. “You said that already, over and over.”

“Dude, shut up,” Josiah says.

“What’s Auggie doing to Wivvie?”

“Er . . . they’re . . . it’s . . . nothing a four-year-old should see,” Josiah stammers. “Come on, Bett, let’s . . . go outside for a bit.”

“But they look like they’re just getting started,” Beau complains.

“Get out!” August and I yell all at once.

“Breakfast is gonna be a while,” August shouts after them. He nuzzles my neck, his teeth nipping all along the sensitive flesh as he draws me closer with his free arm wrapped around my waist. “We’re not done yet.”

“No, we’re not,” I whisper, covering his mouth with mine.

EPILOGUE

Olivia

“AND THE PRINCESS LIVED happily ever after,” I say, kissing Bettina’s forehead and sliding my body out from underneath her, careful not to wake her. I set the book on the nightstand and turn out the light. When I glance up, August is standing in the doorway, his hair damp from the shower and his sandalwood soap filling the room. I smile up at him, and call the dogs to my side. Betty decides she wants to stay nestled up in the warmth beside Bettina, so I leave her be, and I climb up on my tiptoes when my Marine leans down for a kiss in the doorway. I peck him on the cheek.

He pulls back with a questioning look. “Does she?”

“What?”

“Does the princess live happily ever after?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:58 am

Hell, yes, she does. August and I aren't exactly a conventional couple. There are always going to be days when it feels as if the two of us are fighting a losing battle with his demons. There are days when I think even my own demons will swallow me whole, but that is the price you pay when you fall in love with a Marine. Some nights I wake to his sweat soaking the sheets, Zora between us, licking his face and bringing him back from the brink of the war he fights inside his mind. Other nights, I wake to his hands and mouth on my body, his gravelly voice whispering my name as if it were a prayer stolen from his lips. Those nights are my favorite.

"Of course." I roll my eyes. "How could she not when the big sullen prince looks like this?" I make a gesture that indicates all of him.

"Prince?" He smiles wryly. "Oh, darlin' how wrong you are. I'm the ogre who comes to steal the princess away." He bends to pick me up. I repress a shriek, because it wouldn't be the first time we'd woken Bett right after I spent twenty minutes putting her to sleep.

"Hero is a far more apt term," I say, wrapping my arms around his neck and squealing when he stalks toward the staircase.

"No, not a hero." He kisses my forehead. "Just a man who'd do anything to protect what's his."

"And I'm just a woman who'd do anything to show her man how much she appreciates him saving her life."

He raises a brow. "Anything?"

“Any-thing.” I sound out the word slowly and bite my lip.

“Well, I can’t wait to see this anything later, but I gotta set you on your feet, darlin’. I can’t carry you down the stairs.”

“August Cotton, are you calling me fat?”

He laughs. “Come on now, you know you’re perfect.”

“I don’t, but say it again and I’ll take your word for it.”

He sets me down and kisses the tip of my nose. “You’re perfect.”

I hurry down the stairs, but I don’t wait for August when I reach the bottom. It takes about zero-point-five of a second for him to catch up to me, and he takes my hand as we walk into the lounge. Josiah and Beau are sprawled on the couch and floor respectively, watching reruns of *The Walking Dead*. The remains of Josiah’s eighteenth birthday cake sit on the coffee table, and there’s a half-empty bowl of popcorn resting on the sofa cushion beside the birthday boy.

“What episode are we up to?” I grab the popcorn, and I’m just about to sit, but August slides his fingers through the belt loop of my jeans and pulls me back against him. The bowl goes flying out of my hands. Popcorn spills out over the floor and Xena hoovers up the buttery treats. I huff and turn to August, who’s grinning down at me. “Now I gotta go pop more.”

“No, you don’t,” he says kissing my neck. “I have a surprise for you.”

“You do?” I ask skeptically. August isn’t big on surprises. “What is it?”

“It’s not here,” he says cryptically.

“We’re going somewhere? What about Bettina?”

“We’re not going far. Besides, I think the boys have got it covered. Right?”

“Right,” Josiah murmurs without taking his eyes from the screen.

Beau chuckles from his position on the floor. “Yeah, and August is gonna have you covered.”

Josiah kicks him in the head. “Shut up, fuck face.”

“Ow, dude. Fuck.”

“Both of you assholes need to shut up,” I snap, glaring at the two of them, and then August covers my eyes from behind and slowly eases us forward. “And you better save me some of that birthday cake.”

“Come on,” he whispers in his low, gravelly voice. “As entertaining as it is watching your dirty mouth fling insults at teens, I’ve got far better uses for it.”

My mouth opens in shock, and I chuckle and let him lead me where he will. He opens the front door, and the cool breeze rushes over me. I shiver a little at the fall evening and inhale deeply of rich earth and the scent of a fire.

“I think maybe I should have put a jacket on.”

“Nah, I’ll keep you warm, princess.”

A nervous laugh bubbles up in my throat. “How much farther are we going?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:58 am

“You know I never realized how much you complained before.”

I gasp, and flail my arms in an attempt to strike him, but I only end up hurting myself because the man is hard. “You take that back, Cotton, or I’ll give you something to complain about.”

He leans forward and whispers in my ear, “Your threats are absolutely terrifying.”

I laugh. “Screw you.”

“Later,” he says, and a shiver runs the length of my spine. August carefully leads me down the front steps, and I’m guessing across the yard toward the back of the property. Dry leaves crunch under my shoes. I’m freezing in my tank top and jeans, but after a little more walking the warmth of a fire washes over me and August removes his hands from my eyes. Before us is a fire in a rusted out metal drum. He places his big hands on my shoulders and turns me. Behind us sits his truck, the tailgate down with a mountain of pillows and blankets in the back.

My mouth drops open. “When did you do this?”

“When you were getting Bett ready for bed.”

“August . . .” I don’t know what to say. I never took him for a hopeless romantic.

“I never actually got to take you on a real date, so I figured I’d do something special, for all you’ve done for us. All of us.”

“Oh my God, you are so getting laid tonight.”

He laughs and leans down to kiss me, walking me backward to the truck bed, where he lifts me up on the tailgate.

“Come on now,” he says in that velvet, gravel tone. “I gotta at least try and be a gentleman.”

“No, you don’t.” I shake my head and bring my lips back to his.

His mouth covers mine, and his tongue pushes inside, tangling with my own. I groan, and he slides his big hand up underneath the fabric of my tank. He squeezes my breast, his blunt nails raking my nipples and causing explosions of color behind my lids. My whole body is electric—a current, a fire, blazing as bright as the one behind him. I slip my hand into the waistband of his jeans and grasp his hard length. I stroke him fast, and he groans. I want him inside me, need to feel him buried as deep as he can possibly go until we’re one.

I grab the lapels of his plaid shirt and rip. Buttons fly off and ping all around the truck bed, and August grins. “If I knew you’d be this handsy on the first date I woulda asked you out the second you came to Magnolia Springs.”

“Liar.” I kiss his chest, trailing my lips over hard puckered flesh. He grunts and threads his fingers into my hair. “You hated me the second you met me.”

“Not true. I think I loved you from the first sight. Listen,” August says, his voice turning serious. He grabs my hand and pulls me away from him. I pout and stare up at him with an annoyed look. “I been meaning to ask you something.”

He reaches under the blanket, his hand comes away cupping something black, but it’s hidden from view by his huge palm. “Normally I’d get down on one knee, but I hope you’ll forgive me because I may not get up again without help, and I have no desire

to be emasculated right now.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I can’t live without you, Olivia Anders. The day you walked into my life, I thought the devil himself must have been in hiding. But I saw hell, I’ve had more glimpses of it than I care to again, and the last was when I held you in my arms and thought you were leaving this world. You’ve never made me feel like half a man. In fact, you make me feel like I got the strength of ten, and God knows, most days there are at least two different people inside my head, but you make all the bad stuff go away. And I don’t intend to ever let you go, so, will you be my wife?”

I shake my head in shock. August’s shoulders slump. “Well shit, this is awkward. Call me cocky, but I didn’t plan on you saying no.”

“Yes! Yes! I’ll be your wife, August,” I shriek. “Yes!”

He leans in to kiss me, and I grin as he places a modest princess-cut diamond on my finger.

“Now I know why you did this out here and not in the house.”

“Well that wasn’t the only reason,” he says, grabbing my body and leaning me back into the soft nest of pillows as he kisses me.

AFTERWARD, I LIE BESIDE him, my head tucked into the crook of his arm, my own outstretched towards the sky as I stare at the twinkling diamond glittering there against a backdrop of stars. August pulls the blanket tighter around me and kisses the top of my head. “You like it, right? Cause if you don’t I can buy you another; it’s just . . . it was my mother’s.”

“It’s perfect.”

“It is,” he murmurs, but he’s not looking at the ring. His eyes are fixed on me. “You’re perfect. All this time, I didn’t know what I was waiting for. I didn’t know why I was still here, but somehow you found me. I didn’t know I was lost until you came walking through my front gate like you owned the place. Walked right into my heart the same way, too—sunk your damn teeth in and wouldn’t let go.”

“I do have the uncanny ability to just irritate a man so much he falls in love with me. It’s my special gift.” I turn and lift up on my elbow so I can kiss his face. “I’m working on fixing it.”

“Don’t you dare,” he says, wrapping his arms around me and tugging me on top of him. I squeal. My whole body turns to goosebumps as he shakes out the duvet around my shoulders and pulls me back into the warmth of his embrace. “You realize that if you ever leave me again, I’m coming with you.”

“And leave all this? Not in a million years.”

He chuckles against my throat and slides his deft hands up my spine to cup the nape of my neck. I sigh. I can’t imagine life without him either, because I tried that once and August was right, it was hell, and now we’re here. We’re home. I finally found my way back home when I didn’t even know I was looking for it.