



What I Should Have Felt

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Description: Fifteen years ago, he left without a word. She swore she would never forgive him. He swore he would never return. Now he's the only one who can protect her—even if it means getting stabbed in the heart all over again, because in the Louisiana bayou, some promises are meant to be broken.

Navy SEAL operator Ford Thibodeaux never thought a phone call would bring him back to the place he once called home. Despite the threat that forced him to leave fifteen years ago, staying away is no longer an option with his family's livelihood in danger. He expects trouble, but not the kind with fiery red hair, a sharp tongue, and bright green eyes that have haunted his dreams. When he runs into Colette LeBlanc, the woman he walked away from, he knows there's no reason for her to ever trust or love him again. But his feelings for her never changed and he will do anything to keep her safe. Even if that means getting stabbed by her. Again. And again.

Colette LeBlanc spent fifteen years trying to forget him. Ford disappeared without a word, shattering her heart, and leaving her to pick up the pieces while pretending she didn't care. Forced by a long-standing family rivalry to keep their relationship a secret all those years, she buried her pain, became a doctor, and made a life without him. But now he's back. Older. Harder. And even more maddening than she remembers. Her family's restaurant is hanging on by a thread, and the same ruthless developer threatening the Thibodeauxs is aiming to destroy everything she's worked for. She doesn't want his help. She definitely doesn't want him. But it seems her heart hasn't gotten the memo.

As tensions rise and the attacks on both families turn violent, this fight becomes more than just about the businesses or money. It's personal. The walls Colette and Ford have built around their hearts start to crack, but old wounds and buried secrets still stand between them. If they want to survive, both of them have to face the past and decide if love and vulnerability are worth it. Or they risk more than their own broken hearts.

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Chapter 1

FORD

Everything and nothing was the same.

Fifteen years wasn't an insignificant amount of time to be away, I knew that, but I'd thought more would've changed. The trees were only maybe a smidge taller, denser. But the groan of bark, the ripple of the swamp behind the house all sounded the same. In front of me, the door to my childhood home was exactly how I remembered it.

With white paint peeling from the corners and the brass knob dull and smudged, I stared at the final obstacle in my path. Fear hadn't driven me to leave, but it certainly had kept me away. Fear for what they would think if I ever returned. Fear for how betrayed my mother must have felt, and likely still felt. Fear.

An emotion I'd become so intimately in tune with recently.

But when Mawmaw called... I knew it was time.

Shrugging my rucksack tighter up my shoulder, I couldn't find the strength to take a step forward. The wooden planks beneath my feet seemed to be coated in glue. I wasn't sure whether to knock or just go on inside, but the silence outside of the breeze was deafening.

The bellow of an alligator sent a shiver down my spine. Such a familiar sound I'd long since forgotten, reminding me of just how much time had passed since I'd slept

with the bayou beneath my window.

“You lookin’ for the Thibodeauxs?” An oddly familiar voice with a thick Cajun accent pierced my stupor.

Glancing to my right, I gave the neighbor approaching me a small smile. I knew her. She’d been my babysitter. Thinning gray hair had replaced the once stark, black strands. Her skin had become weathered, but the kindness in her eyes had yet to fade.

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied politely, keeping the accent in my words absent. She clearly didn’t recognize me.

“Oh, you missed them. They’ve all gone to town to prep the restaurant for tomorrow’s music festival.” Her smile widened as her flip-flops slapped against the porch steps.

“Thanks, I guess I’ll come back later.” I nodded and hoisted my duffel bag up off the ground.

She tipped her head and narrowed her eyes. “I feel like I’ve seen you before.” The Cajun accent in her voice lessened with each sentence. Remaining silent, my heart trilled in my chest. Maybe she did recognize me...

Slowly, her shoulders rose and she exhaled loudly. “Just can’t be too careful these days with the sneaky realtor man sending his cronies around here.”

My stomach dropped to my feet. “How often are they sneaking around?” I asked, once again feeling that dreadful worry creeping up my throat, and accidentally let the vowels on my words shift with an accent.

Her downturned eyes narrowed as she furrowed her brows. “I know all the people in

these parts, but not you. Yet, you ask as if you have some connection..."

Glancing over her shoulder, I tipped my head to the sky. Midday sun beat down upon my skin, and the humid air of the bayou coated my tongue. "Shoulda brought a bottle of liquor to share with a neighbor, wouldn't ya say, Mrs. Dupre," I replied, loosing the hold on my tongue.

I brought my gaze back to her as she placed a hand over her mouth and her eyes widened. "It can't be," she whispered. "Ford?"

With a brief, curt nod, I dropped my duffel to the ground as she launched herself and wrapped her arms around me. "It's been too long. Too long, ya feel me?" she continued, tucking her face against my chest.

"You sold?"

"Absolutely not. Well, not the house at least," she muttered, twisting my shirt in her fingers before releasing the hug.

"But the business?" I questioned, and her brows tightened with grief.

"Couldn't afford not to. They came in with money that priced us out, ya know?" Mrs. Dupre wrapped her arms around her body, her yellow tank top bright against her dark skin. "It's just your family and the LeBlancs holdin' out. Stubborn fools."

"You mean everyone?" I furrowed my brows, and she slowly nodded.

"The money was unlike any of us have ever seen. You're the only one who's ever made it out, and you know that. Nobody can leave, even if they wanna. Even Colette, ya feel me?"

The blood in my veins stilled. “She’s still here?”

Mrs. Dupre chuckled and blew out some air. “You think the LeBlancs could manage without her? Son, you and I both know what she means to their family.”

I nodded and ran my fingertips across the palms of my hands. Knowing that didn’t lessen the guilt that swam warm within my stomach. Twisted between excitement that she was here, yet sick knowing she was still here.

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“Anyway, ya might as well drop your stuff off and head back into town. How’d ya get here, anyway?” she asked with a smile.

“Uber.” I clicked my tongue as her brows raised. “I’m as surprised as you are.”

“That showed up when the realtor did.”

“Figured,” I muttered and lifted the ball cap from my head. Tightening my fingers around the brim, I offered a small smile once more. “More’s changed than I thought, hasn’t it?”

She scoffed and turned around. “Everything except the people.”

“That’ll change, too, if we don’t stop it,” I replied, placing the hat backwards on my head as her feet clapped down the sidewalk.

“Always the optimist, aren’t ya?”

I didn’t respond as she faded back down to the gravel road and headed off to her house in the thicket.

No, I’d long become something much else.

Something even I failed to recognize. But at least I’d managed to drag my ass back here. Maybe time could heal the wounds I’d created. Maybe my desire to run away was coming to an end. But walking down these painful paths of memories wasn’t exactly the challenge I desired to face.

All I could think about was seeing the one place that held nothing but beautiful experiences from a life I'd left behind. The one thing that had fueled my feet this far lay around a bend. In the opposite direction Mrs. Dupre had gone. It rested far back in the thick of cypress trees and Spanish moss.

I wondered how much it had changed, or if it remained just the same as every rundown home lining this desolate back road. Gripping the handle of my duffel, I wandered off the porch. There was no need to leave random signs that I'd returned. My family deserved to hear I was back from me, not from a bag with my name on it.

Wandering down the road, I allowed the world around me to saturate my skin. The moisture laden in the air felt dewy upon my body, as hot and thick as the summer heat back in the desert overseas—where I'd left a piece of my soul. Except that was a dry heat, something different than the world around me.

As the branches of the cypress and oak trees stretched higher and higher, the sun faded behind deep, vibrant greens. And there it was—the almost hidden path I'd last set foot upon fifteen years ago. It was so easily disguised with moss and wild vegetation that it was often missed, but I knew this path by heart.

Turning off the road, I disappeared into the thicket, listening for sounds that I wasn't alone. But other than the white noise of the Bayuk, there was not another soul around me. The tall blades of grass brushed against the ankles of my black joggers as I rounded another corner and slid my fingers across the damp bark of a cypress.

I paused and raised my brows. The once crudely built shack that had served as a hideout now resembled something more mature and stable. It was a simple cabin in the woods, and the mismatched boards camouflaged by the moss crawling up the sides looked sturdy.

The green metal roof was tall enough that I wouldn't have to duck to enter now, and

the two windows beside the front door were made with panes of actual glass. I crept forward, meandering around some cattails and up the three steps onto the small porch. To either side, the beginning buds of spider lilies slithered their way up the railing. Once bloomed, they'd be that beautiful, spiced cherry-red color that was her hair.

I grabbed the knob and twisted it. The hinges groaned as the door swung inward. Natural light from the windows bathed the front room in gentle rays of gold. Letting the door swing shut behind me, I dropped my duffel and rucksack on the floor to my right and scanned my surroundings.

It was the gentle kiss once shared on the worn striped couch to my left that sent shivers down my spine. Laughter bloomed in my ears as paint splattered all down the front of her shirt while we sat in the two chairs at the cracked round oak table to my right. The faintest whisper of her warm breath danced against my neck as she slipped into a deep slumber in my arms in front of an old television that still only played VHS tapes. The rug where we'd fallen onto from the couch whilst giving everything of ourselves to each other for the first time was no longer the vibrant blue it once had been.

I closed my eyes. It still smelled faintly of cinnamon despite the brand-new walls and larger floor plan. Apparently, she hadn't had the heart to get rid of the memories, since, while the outside was new, everything inside had stayed the same.

Or she simply hadn't been able to afford anything new other than reinforcing the one place that I hoped must have become her peaceful getaway in a world she had never been able to escape.

I knew.

There was no reason to get my hopes up.

Even if, for fifteen years, I'd closed my eyes and it was her fingers against my skin that kept me moving forward. Even if, amidst war and violence, I'd drift away to where she smiled once again at me. Where her blazing green eyes, as vibrant as the leaves in this forest, danced with the fire that lit up by my lips against hers. Even if, when longing for home, it had been her voice I'd heard.

I knew.

As long as she was happy now.

Even if, for fifteen more years, I'd dream of no one but her.

While knowing I couldn't have her because I'd destroyed her.

I knew.

It had all been for the best.

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Choking down the tears that threatened to slip through the cracks in my dams, I gave one last glance around the room. This was supposed to be healing, but instead, I couldn't bring myself to find out what lay in the second room that hadn't been here before.

Except, perhaps entering this new space would wipe away the anguish twisting my depraved heart and the longing for a woman I could never call mine again.

I gulped and allowed myself to cross the floor. My boots tapped heavily against the bare boards, seeing no need to muffle my steps. Despite the room being larger, a few strides carried me quickly to the doorway opening into the next room.

Stepping over the threshold, knuckles cracked against my jaw. Stars danced in my vision as I whipped to my right, adrenaline focusing my senses. Another fist barreled toward me, and I parried it out of the way. Catching the wrist of my attacker, I pulled it across my body, spinning them around and jerking my assailant back against my chest. As I wrapped my arm around the throat of my attacker, a familiar smell of cinnamon and clove danced up my nose.

Colette?

I snaked another hand around her stomach, pressing her frame tighter into my body. She squirmed and grunted, throwing her free fist backward toward me. I collected both wrists into one hand, keeping my forearm pressed against her windpipe.

"Let. Go," she snapped, attempting to jerk away from me. Warmth spread up my spine. Disbelief swirling low in my belly as I tucked my nose against her neck. Her

coily, fiery red hair tickled my skin as she continued to fight against my hold.

“You fucker! You’re trespassing,” she snarled, her voice low and intimidating.

Everything in my body soared high like a June bug on a summer night. I couldn’t believe it was her. She twisted her left hand, her skin wringing tightly against mine, burning slightly.

I carefully opened my fingers, releasing her one hand. “Hi, Cher,” I whispered into her ear.

Her body stiffened immediately within my embrace.

“F-Ford?” she stammered.

“Still got a mean right hook,” I replied, relaxing my hold a little more. She remained still, and the heat from her skin against my arm sent goosebumps sailing across my body. I heard and felt every breath she inhaled against my arm. The room spun around us, yet neither of us moved.

She was here. I was touching her. Fifteen years, and the feel of her against me was just as visceral as the first time she’d let me brush wisps of hair behind her ear. For the first time in years, I felt...free. I’d known then that what I felt had been a once-in-a-lifetime love.

But not one meant to be.

Now, as she remained within my embrace, breathing hard, I dared to wish upon any spider lily I could find that she’d be mine. That this time, fate wouldn’t rip us apart.

And an agonizing pain flared up my left leg as if fire and ice had exploded in my

muscle. I released Colette with a grunt and glanced down at the blade sending shockwaves up my thigh.

“You fucking fucker. You piece of shit asshole,” she sneered at me. Her palm sang against my cheek. The slap clacked my teeth together as I finally locked onto a gaze I’d only seen recently in my memories.

She blew out heavily, sending a coil of red hair away from her forehead, spun on her heels, and marched out of the small kitchen. I watched her leave in a trail of anger, frustration, and shock as the front door slammed shut.

Despite the sharp waves of pain shooting from the knife she’d left in my quad and the heat radiating from my cheekbone, I couldn’t help but smile.

Damn, I really missed her.

Chapter 2

FORD

Blood seeped around the knife as I hobbled from the kitchen and over to one of the oak chairs. I’d been stabbed before, and the burning sensation wasn’t new, but being stabbed by her with a small knife I’d made her before I’d left was new.

My feelings for her had never dwindled, but now those faint embers burst into flames of obsession. Even though I knew it was wrong, I would not be leaving without her. Even though I knew it was impossible, she would somehow be mine. Fuck the feud between our families. Fuck whatever reasoning I had justified for leaving the first time. Fuck any other man that might stand in my way. Fuck the kid I was when I left. Fuck who she once knew me as. This time, she was going to have to pick.

And I'd be damned if she didn't pick me.

The new me.

I'd stayed away long enough out of respect for what I'd seen, the one and only time I'd returned, but no longer.

Stretching my leg out, I studied the forest-green hilt protruding from my thigh. If I pulled it and it had punctured an artery, I'd bleed out unless I could find something to apply pressure long enough to make my way to a hospital. However, where she'd plunged it, and seeing as the blade was only two or so inches long, I doubted it had hit anything vital.

As I gripped the hilt, the door to this hideaway hut flew open with a clang. Glancing to my right, a short figure filled the frame. Her red curls, backlit by the sun, danced like a fire around her head, as if they were beautiful flames, highlighting a face that had existed only in my dreams.

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“Get your damn hand off of that,” Colette hissed. She stomped into the cabin and slammed the door behind her. As bright green as the spider lilies before they bloomed, her eyes were the first thing to catch the light as she padded over to me.

I’d forgotten just how short she was. Just how much of a height difference there was between the two of us. Or I’d grown a lot since I’d last seen her. I’d forgotten how wildly beautiful her large, round eyes were, with lashes that curled upward. They brushed against the base of her brows, as cherry wine red as her hair.

Without speaking, I watched her saunter over to me with a small bag hanging from one hand. The softness of her face had faded with age, replaced by a fierce temper I knew boiled behind skin that was paper white and freckled like the sands of the ocean. She was my ocean—the one place I always returned to when things burned like hell.

“What are you doing?” I asked as she knelt down in front of me and placed her leather bag beside her.

“Making sure you don’t bleed out,” she snapped and unzipped the bag.

Pushing some curls behind her ear, she pulled her gaze away from me and rummaged through the case. I studied her, assessing how to proceed, knowing just how different I was from the kid I’d been. Knowing what I did for a living, knowing that this wasn’t the first time I’d been stabbed, didn’t seem to be important and necessary information to give her at this time.

“It didn’t hit anything vital, so I’ll be fine,” I replied and yanked the knife from my

leg.

“You stupid shit.” She clamped a hand on top of the wound right before I slammed my palm against it.

Capturing her hand beneath mine, warmth seeped from her skin into my own. Small. Rough but steady. Her touch swallowed beneath my fingers as if made to be held by me. All the time that had passed between us paused. It was as if I’d never hurt her. As if I’d never run away. As if I’d merely gone to bed the night before and we’d met back up the very next day. As if the silence draped between us was merely the thread of time resuming its weave through the life’s loom without a pause between the last loop and this one.

I dared not move.

I was holding her hand for the first time in fifteen years. For fifteen years, I’d dreamt of nothing but her, nothing but the ghost of her touch. And finally, here we were, with nothing but a breeze and two hearts beating between us.

Staring at the back of my hand, all thought was lost to time. My heart beat steadily—wild in my chest, like the storm that she always was and seemed to still be. She was the piece of my soul I’d left behind all those years ago. Colette was the only part of my being that hadn’t turned black and numb from the life I’d lived.

I’d never imagined the possibility of touching her again, let alone like this. There definitely wasn’t any blood involved in my fantasy. Nor a stab wound in that picture-perfect moment of a reunion.

Nor anger. Because in that world where we’d had a chance, I hadn’t left in the first place. In that perfect life, we would’ve been together from the beginning, and our families wouldn’t be rivals. And there wouldn’t be any hate and anger.

I wouldn't have had to hurt her in order to protect her.

But now, as her fingers flexed beneath mine, yet her gaze remained trained on our hold, I wanted this moment to be...more. To be special. To fill the void I'd created by leaving without a word.

I mindlessly rubbed her fingers, caught up in something that had only existed in my head for years and years. Wait. The expected bump from a wedding ring on her hand was absent beneath my touch.

"I don't remember your hand being this...rough," Colette whispered, pulling my attention away from our touch.

I let myself take half a second to really look at her. To finally soak in the woman who held my heart and had since we were kids. A faint wrinkle creased her forehead, and the dimples on her cheeks were deeper than when I'd last seen her. Plump lips were pulled into a thin line as her brows stitched together. Something haunted danced behind her eyes that held flecks of brown and broken dreams.

Slowly, I released my palm from the back of her hand. As if peeling duct tape from my skin, there was an ache left in place of the ghost of her touch. "Sorry," I muttered.

"That's not—" She closed her eyes with a sharp inhale. "I'm going to move my hand from the wound. Put pressure back on it while I grab my stuff so I can stitch you up," she finished quietly and pried her gaze away with a flutter of her curly lashes.

Placing my palm against the wet wound, I tipped my head back against the chair and stared at the ceiling. Twisting the hilt of the blade between my other fingers, I let the texture glide beneath my thumb. "Wasn't there an alligator head etched into this when I gave it to you?"

She pursed her lips. “So?”

“I can redo it so the—”

“Look, it’s been fifteen years. Things fade over time, so just let it be and hold still. I want to make sure this doesn’t leave a bad scar.”

Swallowing the depraved chuckle creeping up my throat, I kept my gaze steady on the ceiling. A scar. Too many of them littered my skin now for another to be that big of a deal anymore. The ink that covered half of my body was what I was more concerned about her having a chance to study. If she figured out what it was, where the colorful drawings came from, the bridge I intended to build would burn in a second.

“As much as I appreciate that idea, it’s no big deal. Just give me some gauze or something, Cher, and I’ll be right as rain.”

“Will you just shut your fucking mouth? I’ve got this. Besides, I don’t need you passing out from all the blood.” From her bag, she pulled out what looked like actual medical equipment. All sealed in sterile plastic packs.

I pulled my brows together. “How the hell do you have all that? Did this realtor asshole run the doctor out of town too?”

“I am the doctor, Ford. Or at least one of them.” She pulled a pair of cloth scissors from the medical bag. “Now, move your hand so I can widen the hole on your pants and get a clear view of the damage.”

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“Cher, it’s—”

“AND STOP CALLING ME THAT, DAMN IT!” She threw the scissors down on the coffee table and jolted to her feet.

I knotted my jaw as she ran her hand over her face.

“You left. You fucking left. So, you don’t get to waltz back into town like you’re some big hero who has been protecting me and all of us these past fifteen years. You don’t get to show back up and be your charming self, call me that name, when I haven’t heard from you since you left without a word!”

“You could’ve called too, you know...” I muttered under my breath.

And a palm sang against my cheek. Again. I closed my eyes, accepting the sting as her slap reverberated across my skin. “Don’t you fucking dare. Just don’t. You left.” She jabbed a finger into my chest. “You chose to go. You left me here. You left your family here.”

Sorrow as thick as sludge filled my heart. She was right. Every word she spoke was the truth, and I shouldn’t say anything. But I needed her to know why I did it. I needed her to understand.

“I didn’t want you to have to pick between me or your family,” I whispered.

She spun in a slow circle. “You should’ve let me choose.”

I shook my head. “If you’d chosen me, you would’ve resented me for taking you away from your family for the rest of your life. But if you’d chosen your family, you would’ve felt guilty for hurting—”

“Don’t you dare pretend to know what I would’ve felt.”

Shooting up from the chair, I ignored the sway of the room as a sharp jolt shot up my leg. “What would you have picked then, Colette?” I stalked forward. My entire shadow swamped her figure, draping her in darkness as her eyes widened. “Tell me.”

“It—” She took a stumbling step back. “It doesn’t matter now.”

I paused and clenched my jaw, realizing I’d never shown her this side of me. This level of violence and dominance was not something she’d known me to possess. But I was angry, and hurt too. “You have no idea what you would’ve picked.”

“Ford, it’s been fifteen years, we don’t need to argue about this. Let me just—”

“And there you go.” I threw my hands in the air. “Doing what you always fucking do.”

“Which is?” She straightened her posture and glared up at me.

“Deflecting. You always did that whenever you were faced with a tough choice.”

“And you always ran.” She inhaled deeply and closed her eyes. “In the end, when it mattered most, you ran.”

“Because you would’ve never chosen me,” I yelled, confessing one of my deepest secrets I’d never accepted.

The room stilled. The sun's rays sharpened into daggers of ice as her chest rose and fell rapidly with mine.

"Because you would've never chosen me," I stated again.

I'd never admitted those words out loud before, to anyone. Not even to myself. But I'd known, in the end she would've picked her family. I wouldn't have blamed her for it either. That was the easier choice. The more sensible one. Another man would come along. Another man had probably already come along.

"You didn't choose me, either," she replied quietly.

All I'd ever done was choose her. Everything I'd done had been for her, to make sure she had the life she deserved. Leaving her had been the hardest thing I'd ever done. It still was. Every tour overseas, every time I'd squeezed that trigger with a live target on the other end had been easier than walking away from her. Knowing that I may end up six feet under every time I got those orders hadn't terrified me the way I'd been when I had to leave her.

But I simply offered her a tight smile and stumbled back into the chair. There were no words I could say that would change what I'd done and how much I'd hurt her.

And it was clear that fifteen years hadn't extinguished any lasting flames of anger. At least all that time hadn't brought about awkward conversation as if we were strangers—even if that was what we technically were now.

Colette silently knelt down in front of me again, snapped some plastic gloves on her hands, and slid some medical-grade scissors through the cut in my pants. The fabric sheared with each snip of the metal, and a faint coat of red speckled against the blades.

“Don’t look at this, I know how you get.” She placed a piece of gauze over the seeping wound and waited for me to pull my gaze away from her.

Inhaling deeply, I ignored the need to confess every last burning desire for her. “So, you did it. You became a doctor after all,” I said as she finished widening the opening to expose my cut.

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“Sounds like you doubted me,” she replied, a little more lighthearted than a moment ago.

Leaning back once again, I stared at the ceiling as she began tending to the wound. “Never, Cher. Just surprised you’re still here.”

Something cool slid across the edge of the wound. “Somebody had to take care of this community.”

“What happened to Doc? I mean, he was the only one around these parts our entire life,” I asked, ignoring her jab at me. A well-deserved one.

“Same as almost everyone else. This billionaire realtor guy showed up, offered him a chunk of money he couldn’t refuse, so he retired. Not before Doc negotiated to make sure I came with the clinic he sold to the guy so while he can’t fire me, he can attempt to run me out. So now, I hardly have any patients after the fucking asshole hired a new doctor as my ‘partner.’” The sound of plastic ripping filled the empty space as I slid my tongue across my lips. She shook her head. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to ramble on about shit that you don’t care about.”

“I’m sorry you weren’t able to get out of here like you’d wanted,” I quietly replied, ignoring the sting of her words.

She scoffed. “I don’t have anything to numb you up, so I hope your pain tolerance has grown since you left.”

“Mrs. Dupre says that it’s just your family and mine who haven’t sold to this bigwig

rich asshole,” I continued, once again ignoring her sharp comment.

“And you care why? So you can feel like you did something good swooping in at the last minute to save the day?” A needle pierced through my skin as I slowly closed my eyes and faked a wince.

“Cher, I’m not trying to swoop in.”

She worked the needle to the other side of the wound, and metal clicked gently against metal as she carefully tied off the first stitch. “No? Not looking to play hero? So, you’re still the same coward who ran away. You’re still that soft boy who always needed me to throw the punch, to fight, when it mattered. You always had to have someone else get their hands dirty for you. You always needed me to keep you safe.”

“I know,” I quietly muttered.

I still needed her. Every day out on that battlefield, I’d needed her. She’d kept my head from going under, and I wasn’t going to pretend like she wasn’t the reason I’d had the chance to come home.

“What’d you say?” she asked as she tied off another stitch.

“I said you’re right,” I replied through gritted teeth, pretending to be in pain, and looked down at her.

Her hands stilled as her mouth fell open. Slowly, her gaze lifted to mine. “You’ve never conceded so easily before. At least not to me in a verbal conversation, which we had a lot growing up.”

“I never thought I’d see you again.”

Her teeth slid across her bottom lip as she quickly pulled her gaze from me. “Ford, it’s been fifteen years. I have a life that...that hasn’t involved you. I moved on. I just...It’s nice to see you, but just...yeah...” Her voice trailed off as she returned her focus to the stitches.

I should’ve felt something a bit more like heartbreak, but honestly, after fifteen years, after confirming a few years later that she’d ended up safe, I’d prepared myself for this. Instead, my heart seemed blindly numb. Or at least I pretended it felt that way. All of the anguish, all of the anger and sadness, I locked away in a little box and shoved it to the corner of my mind—like I did with everything. It didn’t matter what was going on in the world, or who I had just buried, the pain and grief had to get buried in a small container and pushed to the side. That was where control existed. That was the only way I didn’t lose myself.

“I hope you’ve been happy, Cher. That’s all I wanted for you,” I admitted cordially while lying to her. I’d seen her. Four years after leaving, I’d returned to see her, to make sure she was safe and protected, and she’d looked happy, so I’d left and planned to never return.

She hadn’t seen me during my brief visit. Which had been on purpose. No one had known I’d come back because there was no need to change the course of everyone else’s lives.

She sucked in a sharp breath of air, sliding the needle through my leg again. “It seems you handle pain a bit better. Only a tiny bit. How many superficial cuts did you get while we were out exploring as kids and you’d wail like a banshee every time?”

A pained smile slid across my face. “Maybe I pretended to be more hurt than usual because it got your attention.”

She clicked her tongue as she tied off another stitch. “So, whose attention have you

been vying for these past fifteen years?”

“You say that like you didn’t do the same shit to me,” I replied with a small smirk.

“Fair point. I guess I pretended to be a little clumsy every now and then.” I watched as she tied off the final stitch and sat back against her heels. Her brows creased together, and she lifted her green eyes from my wound. “I do recall you used to be a bit squeamish about blood, though. I was the one that had to gut the gators when we needed them for the restaurants.”

I chuckled. “Ah, the famous excuse to spend time together.”

“Remember when Derek nearly caught us literally rocking the boat?” She giggled.

“What was your excuse again when your cousin said he’d go tattle on us?” I cocked a brow as she rolled her eyes and removed the gloves from her hands.

“We don’t need to bring that up again.”

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“I didn’t, Cher, you did. But I certainly think about it a lot.”

“Oh, shut the fuck up, Ford.” She slapped me gently against my good leg and began cleaning up her supplies. I watched her, still as slender yet strong as when I’d left. Wearing a simple black tank top and a pair of tight-fitting cargo pants was still her style. Still as intelligent and commanding. Still my Cherí. Still the woman who’d had me caving to her every whim.

No, my heart wasn’t numb. No, I was determined more than ever to keep her safe. For her to be mine, even if I knew technically I’d never be able to have her again.

“Where did you go?” she asked, pulling my attention away from her movements.

“Huh?” I knitted my brows together.

“When you left, where’d you go?” She paused and glanced back at me, her medical bag packed.

“Everywhere,” I quietly replied and slid my gaze over her shoulders. The back wall was nothing but a blank space where a face I missed flashed in front of me. I’d been able to keep myself preoccupied and busy enough up until now that Duncan wasn’t much of a thought, yet there he was, staring back at me.

“I don’t know why I expected more of an answer. Oh, wait. Maybe because before you left, you used to never shut up around me. Now, I’m suddenly just like every other person in your life who you hardly speak to,” Colette hissed.

I snapped my gaze back to her eyes but remained quiet.

“Really?” She threw her hands in the air and shook her head. “The least you could do is give me some straight, honest answer, instead of just ‘everywhere.’ After fifteen years, you’ve got to have landed somewhere, planted roots. Or what? Have you just been mooching off of people?”

“I gave you the answer I could,” I quietly replied.

“Everywhere? That’s the answer you could give me? So now, you’ve picked up lying on top of giving me the silent treatment?”

“Like you said, it’s been fifteen fucking years, Cher. I’m not lying, and I’m not giving you the silent treatment. I just don’t know what else to tell you.” I leaned forward and placed my palms against my knees, ready to stand.

Her hand shot forward, and she shoved me against my chest. “I can’t believe I ever loved you. I can’t believe I let myself be hurt over you. Some lazy ass who has spent the last fifteen years slumming from one place to another.”

I swallowed stiffly as her first sentence clawed my heart. She was right. When it came to her, the urge to say anything and everything was still there, but the weight that held all words at bay turned into the knife she’d just stabbed into my soul. Slumping back into the chair, I simply looked at her. I wanted to tell her, to argue with her, but the way she’d spoken that first sentence made me hold held my tongue. There was some truth to it.

And I had to accept that.

Her eyes widened, and she crashed back against her heels. “I’m—I didn’t mean it like that,” she whispered.

Slipping my gaze to the wooden floor in front of her, I inhaled deeply and pinched my brows together. "People say shit they don't mean all the time," I replied and leaned forward against my elbows. "I get it."

I heard her slowly gather her things and rise from the floor. Pulling my gaze up to meet hers, I saw something innocent twinkling behind the tears that boiled at the rim of her eyes. "How long are you staying?" she asked.

"Just passing through."

Lie. I wanted to stay. I wanted nothing more than to finally settle down and have a place of my own. But I lied instead, because I knew that was what she needed. What she wanted.

"Oh," she quietly said, and her chest expanded with a breath of resignation. Slowly, her lips lifted into a hesitant smile as she locked her gaze with mine again. "Well, uh, keep that wound clean and dry. If you're still here in a week, let me check it out again."

Fighting through the pain roaring hot in my heart, I winked. "Looking for an excuse to take my pants off in a week?" I teased and felt the tension slither away like a snake seeking the shade.

Her breath came with a giggle to herself as if lost in a memory that held less pain than this moment did. "You know, the least you could've done is gotten ugly or something. Would've made it easier to continue to be mad at you," she grumbled and pursed her lips.

My heart trilled in my chest. "So, you're saying you forgive me?"

She shook her head as she walked to the entrance. "Absolutely not." And the door

clanged shut behind her.

I grinned to myself and leaned back against the seat.

Determined.

Chapter 3

FORD

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The blanket of night settled upon my shoulders as I continued meandering down the road. The lights were on inside my parents' house, the stars a beacon to a destination that I'd been dragging my feet from returning to since Colette had left the treehouse-turned-cabin. While the excuse of doing research sat at the tip of my tongue, and wasn't technically a lie, I knew deep down that all of that investigating and gathering information about this rich real estate guy had been merely that—an excuse.

Even calling the state police seemed like an excuse and a long shot. It could take them months before they managed to get an investigation started on not just this wealthy outsider but also the local sheriff's department that I knew had gone corrupt and started taking bribes from that same real estate mogul.

My phone vibrated in my pocket as I rounded the end of the driveway and shrugged my rucksack tighter up my shoulder. Another text message, probably from Griffin giving me more intel on this Robert O'Connor. Information I'd relay to Mikey to see what connections he could drum up with his fancy computer skills that landed him with the Rate he had.

I'd check the message later; right now, I needed to focus on keeping my emotions in check as I stared at the front door. Voices whispered from inside, landing softly on my ears. My mama's voice danced through the cracks in the threshold, and I nearly collapsed to the ground. Fifteen years. I hadn't heard her speak in fifteen years, and it sounded the same as I remembered.

Clutching my chest, I blew air into my cheeks and swallowed the tears that threatened to spill. The mirror of my choices lay before me. Every consequence I'd anticipated hadn't prepared me for the chill that slithered down my spine, knowing I'd broken

her heart.

The exact words they spoke were of no consequence to me; I didn't care. What I cared about was simply hearing her speak, so I closed my eyes. Leaning my ear silently against the door, my bottom lip trembled as words left her lips again.

"I don't know how much longer we can hold out," my mama said with a crack in her voice. She still spoke as if she sang the notes in tune with a flute. As smooth as whiskey and gentle as a songbird, though I knew they could slice as sharp as a knife when needed.

"What about the loan we took? Didn't that help?" my father replied. His voice reminded me of my own when my Cajun accent slipped out. Lower, deeper, but not quite as gruff as mine had become with age. He hadn't fallen into the habit of smoking, and while I wasn't nearly as bad as Mikey or Griffin, a cigarette or two often graced my own lips.

"It did, but the business isn't as good as usual. And with the messed-up orders lately, I don't know what else we can do."

"Messed-up orders that were O'Connor's doing," my father grumbled, and I finally focused on what they were saying.

"It doesn't matter, honey, because we can't prove it," my mom said. "At some point, we won't have money left and will have to sell to him."

"The music festival tomorrow will certainly help." The tone in my dad's voice lifted in spirit.

"Not with the LeBlancs, and you know that. We'll see half of the customers just as we do every year because half of them will go there. And I'm not losing to the

LeBlancs!”

“Losing?” my mawmaw inserted, and wood groaned as I imagined her rising from the rocker in the living room to the right of the entrance. “This isn’t the time for that petty rivalry, Fleur.”

“Really, Maman? You’re going to stand there and act like you didn’t spend your entire life doing everything in your power trying to bring the LeBlancs down?”

“And what good did that bring? I won’t see my daughter and son-in-law lose their business to an outsider because they can’t figure out right now that two enemies have a common rival. Y’all should be working together to—”

“Enough with that same argument, Maman,” my mama inserted, cutting Mawmaw off. Footsteps stomped across the carpet in the living room, nearing the door.

Jerking away from the frame, I raised a fist and rapped my knuckles against the wood just once before the door flew open.

And a face I’d lost in the mirror years ago stared back at me. Eyes with the same genetic heterochromia widened in shock as her weathered hand froze around the door handle. My mom’s face turned to that of stone, her wide-set jawline and gentle cheeks held deep lines that weren’t there when I’d seen her last. And hair that had once flowed freely down her middle back now sat in thin, silver wisps, short around her shoulders.

“Hi, Mom,” I quietly said as deep creases formed between her brows.

Her gaze left my face and slowly trailed down to the tips of my boots and then back up again, only briefly pausing on the wound hidden beneath gauze and torn joggers. Once her eyes met mine again, the shock faded, drowned out by a flickering of

emotions indecipherable in the backlit entrance.

Shrugging my shoulders up to my ears, I studied the short, plump woman who remained like a statue before me.

“Fleur, what’s going on?” My father’s voice encroached on the woman whose floral shirt drowned her in a way that had my heart aching. My mom was... older. Worn down. And I knew part of that was my fault.

A shadow fell over her short figure, and a sharp intake of breath pulled my gaze away from my mom. “M-m-my son,” my dad stammered. But he, too, seemed unable to move. Quite the pair they were and always had been. My dad was tall—taller than me still to this day, which was saying something, considering I was six feet four inches in bare feet. But he was thin, with bushy brows—brows I’d also inherited.

“My son,” he stated firmly this time, pushing past my mom. Wiry arms wrapped around my shoulders, and I collapsed into his chest. I’d expected danger. I’d expected frustration and resentment. I’d expected anything except for this.

Despite the age that showed upon his skin, despite the rounding of his shoulders that stole at least half an inch from his height, he was still my dad. He was still the man I’d worked hard to one day make proud. Despite the fact he had hardly any hair left on his head—despite it still being the same brown shade as mine—despite the fact that his blue eyes were clouded behind glasses, he was still my dad.

As my chest wracked in silent sobs, I twisted his plaid, short-sleeved, button-up shirt in my fists as his hand patted my back. “Welcome home,” he muttered against the side of my head.

“No,” my mother’s once-smooth voice sliced sharply through the embrace.

“Honey,” my dad gently admonished as he slowly released me from his hold. I kept my eyes closed for a moment longer as the warmth of his thin body left mine. “It’s our only son.”

“Who. Left.” I opened my eyes as she ripped her hand off the doorknob and clenched both fists by her sides. “Go. I don’t want to see you. I don’t want to know you’re around. Just leave. Like you did once already. And never come back.”

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My mawmaw's voice slid out of the house. "Fleur, this is your son. Think about—"

"I have no son," my mom hissed, and the door slammed shut in front of my face.

I clenched my jaw, swallowing the lump that hung in my throat as peeling paint was all that stared back at me.

That was what I'd expected, thought I'd prepared for. But it didn't hurt any less. The sting bit as raw as the knife that had sliced into my quad a few hours ago.

Chatter rose from inside. Passionate and heated words were exchanged loudly. But the conversation was indecipherable above the ringing that echoed in my ears. It was what I deserved. But the agony ripped through me all the same.

With a stumbling step back off the porch, I shrugged my shoulders up to my ears and turned away from the yellow glow piercing the night air. The hunger that sat heavy in my stomach was numb to the blow I'd received from my mother. Doubt and regret drowned the cold sliding into the humid night air.

Stars were my guide back onto the forgotten pathway as I crept away, as silent as the near-death that consumed my blackened soul.

Nothingness.

I'd left a world full of love and desire, and abandoned it for absolutely nothing. And came home too late for the mourning of someone I no longer recognized.

Good intentions had been met with a painful consequence of my own making.

Maybe it would be best to just disappear again. To call up Bernie or Dom and find my way once again, coasting along in a world where people had no expectations of me other than how quickly I was able to pull a trigger. Maybe there wouldn't be so much sorrow left hanging around if I simply...left. Again.

But Colette was right. Running away had always been my go-to whenever things became rough. But it had been to protect her. All the running as kids had been to ensure we were never caught together, and then one day, I just kept going. My feet hadn't stopped since, and here I was, once again, running.

Running away from parents whom I had destroyed.

My fault.

My choice.

My consequences.

Facing them fifteen years later should've been easier to bear, but what I felt now was nothing short of the first time I'd been shot.

This was my burden to crumble beneath. Alone and exiled. By my own actions.

Chapter 4

COLETTE

An hour until my first patient would arrive at the clinic afforded me an hour of quiet solitude to attempt to understand the thoughts rolling through my head like the storm

that he was. I slowly meandered the path that took me to my little cabin. Fifteen years later, I'd long since given up the idea that Ford would ever return. I'd moved on. I'd found a life, found love, figured out how to do this whole adulthood shit without him. I'd mourned his death in a way, because he had died all those years ago. Maybe not physically, but to me, he had.

How dare he.

How dare he show up and upturn the life I was living. Okay. So this town, my parents especially, were already three feet from drowning, so help would be nice. But not from him. Definitely not from the man who had ripped out my heart and stomped on it. I'd already grieved him. I'd grieved two loves, and it had nearly destroyed me.

How fucking dare he.

But there was apprehension building, stemming from a deeper and darker part of my heart. If he found out... Or maybe I should just tell him. Fifteen years was a long time to hold onto a secret, and he deserved to—

No. He fucking didn't deserve to know. He'd actively chosen to leave. He'd taken my choice away from me and left, so I'd done the same thing to him.

Doubt crept into the corner of my mind in a way I'd never let before, because part of me wasn't ready to admit that he wasn't entirely wrong. I wasn't sure what I would have chosen if and when I'd been faced with that decision. To pick between him and my family...

I wanted to believe I would've picked him. That was the choice I'd convinced myself of because it certainly made me out to be less of a horrible person. It took some of the blame off me. But I'd chosen not to call him. So there was fault on my end.

My reasoning for not calling him was fair. Was valid.

Right...?

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I paused and braced against the frame of the shack-turned-cabin that held every tender memory I'd once cherished above all else. Tears welled within my eyes. He'd absolutely shredded my heart and ripped my soul to pieces. Love was something for fools and young teenagers.

We were past that. I was past that. Especially now, after losing another love. A different kind of love than I'd felt with Ford, but a love all the same. The indent line had long since faded on my ring finger, but I still thought about it every so often. I'd stayed for her, for my parents, and for him, but I'd also finally become a doctor because of him, even if I'd stayed in this town. And now, my parents needed my help if we were ever going to manage to keep the restaurant. Whether it was a good or bad thing that I wasn't exactly...busy at the clinic these days wasn't something I had time to focus on.

Those beautiful, different-colored eyes weren't something I could afford a second thought about right now. But damn, I'd missed them. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed them until he showed back up. The intensity with which he'd always looked at me. No matter how little he'd talked, no matter how...rather muscular and large he'd grown, his eyes hadn't changed. Maybe they were a little sharper, deeper, held a little more wisdom and pain than before, but they were still the perfect imperfection I'd so deeply fallen for before.

Hazel in one eye, a deep brown in the other, had been the picture I'd drifted off to last night.

Shaking my head, I snapped my own eyes open and shoved off the wall. No. I wouldn't let him weasel his way back in so easily. In the end, our families were still

rivals, maybe now more than ever. Plus, he'd left me here alone, forcing me to face the reality that I was never getting out of this damn little town.

A town that had once been a safe haven now held nothing but worries and danger. Danger for everyone in my family, and yes, even for his. Though I bet now they were all celebrating and tonight was going to be his homecoming feast that drew everyone at the music festival, only subjecting my parents' restaurant to even more debt.

Yes. I couldn't give in because I didn't deserve another chance at love. I hated him. I had to hate him, because if I even let myself have a moment to care about him, I might just slip up and give in. I might just share with him everything I'd kept hidden for fifteen years. I might just slip up and land safely in his arms, where I'd dreamt of being for the—

Stop it, Colette.

Glancing at my watch, I rolled my eyes. Forty-five minutes. Damn. I'd been standing here wrapped up in thoughts for fifteen fucking minutes. He had been here for less than twenty-four hours, and I was already sucked back into his ability to trap me in everything that was him.

I was acting like a strung-out, crazy, love-sick puppy. Which I wasn't. It had been fifteen years, and he had destroyed me.

I was a badass doctor who had built my own life, with my own new friends, with a new love. This cabin was my own place, and I spent most of my time here after losing him, just as I had after losing Ford. It just didn't have room for a bed, so technically I still lived with my parents.

Rolling my eyes again, all of that was just a sore excuse to try and convince myself that I was doing fine and not drowning in my own debt from medical school, I pushed

open the door to walk inside.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up at the shadowed shape of some disheveled hulk lying sprawled out on the couch. Adrenaline seeped through my skin as I clawed for the nearest available thing I could use for a weapon.

My fingers wrapped around the hilt of a broom handle, and I gently eased the door closed with my toe. It latched with the faintest tick. Creeping steadily forward, my heart raced in my chest as if an alligator snapped its teeth around my stomach.

A random massive man was sleeping in my cabin. This place was my one sanctuary, somewhere that no one else alive knew about except for Ford and me. Yet, some random dude was sleeping on my couch. O'Connor must've found this place and sent one of his men to attack me the moment I arrived here with my guard down.

The world spun around me as the enormous frame bathed in shadows shifted. The man groaned, and rumpled blankets slid down from his shoulders. He faced the back of the couch, exposing the entire right side of his body to me as his arms shifted beneath the quilt. I crept closer and raised the broom handle above my head.

Squinting through the dark, I continued to sneak forward as silently as I could. My movements were from memory, as hardly any light managed to claw its way through the curtains drawn over the windows. With tall trees surrounding the cabin, even being this close to the person on the couch, I could barely make out any identifying features. Yet, since his earlier movements as I'd crept forward, he hadn't shifted. Maybe it wasn't some guy sent to attack me? Wouldn't he have been waiting and alert, not sleeping on the couch?

I solidified my resolve. Even if it weren't some guy sent here by O'Connor, I wouldn't be caught with my guard down. Not today, bitch.

The moment I was around the coffee table, I swung. Hard. Slamming the broom handle, with a grunt, against the side of this random man. Pulling the weapon back, ready to swing again, my eyes widened at the sound of a click and the swoosh of blankets dropping to the floor.

With the broom lofted above my head, I stared at the muzzle of a handgun with a blurry figure lying on his back now behind it. Frozen in place, a frog lodged in my throat as I squinted through the darkness at the weapon holding me completely still.

A fucking gun.

Sweat beaded on my forehead. Death waited at the finger that rested steadily beside the trigger. There was not an ounce of wavering movement in whoever was holding the weapon. Held so resolutely, it was as if the cold metal was crafted perfectly for him and had spent years there. I swallowed stiffly, choking down the rising fear that pumped through my veins.

“Shit,” the man suddenly said, and I recognized the voice, even though it was slightly deeper and raspier than normal. My gaze focused on the shadowed face of Ford.

Relief flooded my figure, and I lowered the broom as Ford dropped his hand back to his side and sat up on the couch. I took several steps back as another click sounded, and I assumed he flicked the safety back on the gun.

Wait, Ford had a gun? Where the hell did he get a gun? The one kid in the entire town that had avoided violence at all costs, now pointed a weapon at me as a grown ass adult. I tipped my head slightly as my eyes finally adjusted to the dim lighting, and continued to back up as the tension shifted in my muscles to curiosity and confusion.

He scanned the room, wild and crazed like he was searching for something, as he stood up, and then slowly, he tucked the gun into the back of the waistband of his

compression boxers as a calm settled over his stiff frame. His hands slapped across his bare chest—

BARE FUCKING CHEST?

My eyes widened as I realized this man had been shirtless and in only boxers the entire time.

“Shit, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you weren’t dressed,” I muttered.

He collapsed to the ground and grabbed some crumpled clothes from the floor beneath the quilt that had fallen as I spun around to give him some privacy.

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“I’m sorry, Cher,” he quickly stated, his voice still deeper than normal, and I swallowed the rising desire forming in my throat.

“No, it’s fine. I’m the one that should be apologizing for walking in when—” I paused mid-sentence and spun back around as everything in me shifted. “Hold on, fuck no,” I hissed. Marching back to the front door, I plopped the broom back in its spot and flipped the light switch next to me.

Twisting back around, I watched as he quickly slapped a baseball cap backward on his head, and then his fingers finished tying his joggers around his waist. In a momentary lapse of judgement, my eyes slid across a hardened body of muscle. My mouth fell open.

The skinny boy who’d left had returned as something else entirely. Colorful tattoos covered nearly every inch of skin on the right side of his body, starting at the edge of his wrist, rising across his shoulder, and down the mountain of a pec. The designs eventually disappeared beneath the waistband of his joggers, which hung low on his hips.

A trail of hair rose up to his navel, thick and all manly, and ugh... A specimen like him only came along once in a lifetime, and it was taking every ounce of self-control to not drool over the man I wanted to simultaneously stab and straddle.

My eyes slid up an abdomen that wasn’t veiny and ribbed like someone whose muscles were all for show, but each divot and crease, each mountain and valley had me sweating. Scars that certainly had never been there before were in abundance. It would be easier for me to start tracing my eyes along the left side of his body, which

lacked a single tattoo.

I pulled my brows together. Why would he only get tattoos on the right side? They were beautiful and hauntingly familiar as I slid my gaze back across the designs that I couldn't quite yet decipher from this distance.

Of its own accord, my foot took a step forward.

He wasn't the Ford I'd lost.

My gaze slid up his thick neck and danced across a square, wide-set jaw covered in stubble that hadn't been shaved in a day or two. On the left side was a small slice of bare skin where a scar inhibited the growth of a beard. That was also new. Where had he gotten that? Where had he gotten any of his scars? He was the last person in the world to end up with battle wounds. Wrinkles lined the edges of his lips, as if at least once in a while, he had smiled over the past fifteen years.

Finally, my gaze met his eyes.

I nearly stumbled back at the blatant regret and longing he held in his own piercing stare.

He was a stranger and the one person I wanted most at the same time. It had been such a long time since this type of desire coursed through my body. I had long since been resigned to the fact that my chance at love had passed since I'd already had two—but here stood one of those men.

His forehead creased as his thick brows rose. There was a weariness about him. He'd aged into a man I'd once thought he could be, but also something else entirely. There was something hardened and distant about him, something that held secrets buried so deeply I wasn't sure he even remembered they were there anymore.

“I didn’t mean to point the gun at you,” he muttered beneath his breath, breaking the stillness that slithered around us.

He quickly tugged the same long-sleeved shirt from yesterday over his head as I stared. Uncertainty waffled within me. Anger tasted bitter but strong. Longing was a little sweeter but barely palatable behind the roaring frustration building.

“What the hell are you even doing here?” I grumbled as he reached for a duffel and odd-looking backpack. Odd in the sense that I’d seen it before but couldn’t quite place where. He bumped a strap over his shoulder and then reached forward to the coffee table. I watched as he quickly gathered two beer bottles in one hand, then picked up a silver chain, which he quickly tucked into the palm of his other hand.

“I’ll replace these. I didn’t eat anything, though, so don’t worry.” He raised the bottles and then slid unusually quietly around the table.

I studied him for a moment, feeling more questions rising in my throat. But I wasn’t even sure how to ask what I didn’t know, and all of these damned questions were of things that made no sense about the man I thought I knew.

“You... You didn’t answer my question.”

He paused, and like a wave, a mask slid across his face, hiding away every emotion. “Sorry, I didn’t really have anywhere else to go.”

“A motel.”

“Booked because of the music festival.”

“Well, suck up your pride and go live with your parents.”

“Already tried that.” His jaw knotted for a moment.

“Well.” I cleared my throat and crossed my arms. “Find somewhere else for tonight.”

He slowly nodded. “And why aren’t you doing your doctor duties? I thought—”

“Ford, just shut up. I have my first appointment soon, but like I already mentioned, there’s another doctor at the clinic.”

His brows rose, and he opened his mouth, but I continued speaking. “And before you say anything, I’m aware he’s taking my patients, and the renovated hospital a town over doesn’t help. But I have too much to worry about right now, so I’ll deal with that once I figure out how to get rid of this jackass real estate dude hounding my parents about the restaurant.”

He tipped his head. “The same jackass who owns your clinic, hired this new doctor, and is trying to force you out?”

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I dropped my arms from in front of my chest. “How’d you know that?”

He shrugged his shoulders and walked forward again. “Well, for one, you already told me. Plus, I know how to work Google, Cher.”

“Right. But if you call me that again, the next time I stab you, I’m not stitching you up,” I hissed as he stopped beside me. His body heat wrapped me up in a cocoon of warmth and strength. The anger cooled.

Only slightly.

“Are you threatening me?” He glanced down at me, his towering hulk of a frame swamping my own.

I narrowed my eyes and shoved my hands on my hips. “I’m making you a promise.”

He grinned a strange smirk that darkened his eyes. “I look forward to you keeping it.” His voice was low, almost like a growl deep within his throat. My pulse jumped at the sound of it. Set ablaze by a few simple words, I watched as he sidled out of the house and disappeared behind a closed door.

And, for whatever reason, the room felt a few degrees colder than before and a thousand times emptier.

Chapter 5

COLETTE

Distracted.

It was like an echo everywhere I went, everyone telling me I seemed distracted. And I was. All day during my appointments—I was lucky they were mostly routine visits, because nothing seemed to drown out the thoughts that circled Ford.

He was different. New. Exciting. Frustrating.

Here.

And reopening wounds I'd thought I'd healed from.

“Colette?” a gentle voice echoed in the back of my head.

Lost in my thoughts, I was so distracted they pulled me faster toward the horizon where I was aimlessly drifting. I'd started a fire, ignited with matches I'd struck, in order to find out who turned to ash first—me or him.

“Colette? Darling?” the voice said again.

Darling? Since when had I ever called myself darling? Uh, never. No, that was something that my mom—

Shaking my head, my vision snapped into focus. My mom, as short and redheaded as I was, stood in front of me with her brows pulled tightly together. “Colette, darling, where is your head at?”

I scanned the decently busy dining room. Cracked leather booths lined the wall to my right, directly beneath large, long windows that flashed with the colors of the music festival raging outside.

Music pumped loudly through every penetrable orifice, filling the air with trumpets and horns, making our small town feel a little more like New Orleans. Most of the wobbly chairs and uneven tables were occupied, and I was... I was doing... what?

My fingers tightened beneath a serving tray.

“Oh my goodness, Mom. I’m so sorry, I—”

“Got distracted? Look, you’re only hindering business tonight. Azelie is outperforming you, and you know how badly she would rather be out with her friends,” my mom replied with a tilt of her head. The hair net strained against her curls, doing its best to keep the same mane as mine back from her face.

“I’m sorry. It’s been a weird day.”

“Go take a break and screw your head on right. It’s the busiest night of the summer, and I need your full attention.” She nodded toward the door and pulled the serving tray from my grasp.

Blowing out some air, I waded quietly to the front of the restaurant and pushed open the wooden door that could use some new paint or new staining. Everything in the restaurant could use an upgrade, but it didn’t hurt as bad knowing that, just down the street, Ford’s family’s restaurant was in the same shape.

Fresh, humid air assaulted my face as I stepped outside. It was oppressive and didn’t provide the reprieve I was seeking. Nothing anchored my thoughts from drifting back to the man who had so abruptly left and, just as startlingly, waltzed back into this world.

So suddenly, in fact, I didn’t have time to set up walls and safeguards to protect my world and my secrets, even though he was someone I so desperately wanted to share

them with. And one of those secrets could upend his life in a way that I wasn't sure he'd forgive me for.

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I wrapped my arms around the apron that adorned my body and slid my gaze across the crowd. The town square was full of people mobbing a street that vehicles usually drove down, but tonight, it was blocked off by a stage in the middle of the road. Music pumped loudly, synced with the flashing of colored lights, and the beat of the drums matched the swaying of the horde of people.

Two-story buildings suiting business, that had all been monopolized by Robert O'Connor, lined either side of the cracked pavement. Picket fences with iron spikes fronted the few unoccupied residences that would eventually be transitioned into something else. It all looked the same, other than the signs that seemed out of place amongst such a richly historic town.

And then there it was. The Thibodeauxs' restaurant. The lights inside were warm, and shadows of people danced across the windows that were canopied by the same ugly striped fabric awnings I'd convinced my parents to tear down. Metal tables were scattered about in front of their brickbuilding with a neon sign half lit up, sparkling through the blazing stage lights.

Thibodeaux's Cajun Comfortstared back at me, as if mocking me. Taunting the fact that only one was going to survive. That one family would have to give up everything while the other would finally win. A fucking dumb rivalry that both Ford and I had once tried to dismantle, but the hate ran thicker than blood.

Somehow, that disdain had crept into my own skin. I wasn't proud of it, but all I wanted was for my parents to be able to finally relax. That was it. And here I was, staring at the same sign all these years later that represented the one final thing that hadn't changed.

Their door suddenly flew open. I squinted through the crowd as Ford stumbled backward. He looked so small and broken, so unusually tired, as the woman I knew to be his mom wagged a spoon at him. Her free hand flew to her hip as she slapped the back of the spoon against the side of Ford's arm.

He flinched, and for a moment, the image of my cousin Lenny wailing his fist into Ford's side crashed in front of my eyes. Ford was twelve again. I was twelve. And we knew nothing of what lay ahead.

A tear slid down my cheek as Ford's mom turned and stomped back inside, slamming the door behind her with a rattle of the frame. With his size, he would've easily been able to overpower her, but instead, he stood frozen with his head hung and that same stupid baseball cap turned backwards.

Every overstimulating sound was drowned out by the pain that clearly radiated from his frame. Despite everything that screamed happiness and a joyous reunion around him, it seemed fate had other ideas for him. I wasn't sure if he deserved this much hate or not.

But every time I had an inkling of forgiveness well up within me, I was quickly reminded of the earth-shattering devastation he'd left behind.

Slowly, Ford turned. The intricate details of his face, hidden by the distance between us and skewed by the colorful lights flashing from the stage, seemed distorted. He plopped himself down on an empty chair outside the restaurant. I crept forward, weaving quietly through the crowd, uncertain of what drew me toward him, but I was moving anyway.

When there was finally enough light that I could make out the planes of his face, I paused, confused by his expression. It seemed like pain, but... not? It was like he was here but wasn't. His gaze was so distant that a world of war raged within his eyes.

It was strange. Ford had always been so full of life that this look seemed ill-fitting for him. As purples and pinks, greens and oranges, danced across his face, everything about him seemed the opposite of the joyous music surrounding us. He was a ghost with a thousand-yard stare, seeing absolutely nothing.

And I suddenly knew what that look was. I'd never seen a look like that before in real life.

Only in the textbooks I'd studied, which made it seem even more strange that it happened to be on Ford's face. The Thousand-Yard Stare. A look that haunted me because I feared the day someone would show up to my clinic with it, thinking it was a physical ailment that I could cure. I wasn't a psychologist. I was a general family physician.

Yet, there it was.

If the medical community wanted an updated photo to teach new residents what it looked like, I could've snapped one and sent it in. I'd known fifteen years would change someone, but how cruel were those fifteen years to warp someone so gentle so much?

I shook my head, refusing to believe that I was actually looking at Ford with that expression on his face. While I couldn't make out the colors of his eyes, even from this distance I could tell how blank they were. So...lifeless. So unblinking and unfocused. I wanted to rationalize that his pupil dilation was a result of the dim lights of the evening, but I couldn't.

Not as flashes from the stage in the middle of the street flickered across his face. It didn't startle him. It didn't jolt him out of whatever dissociated state he was in, and it tore my heart in two. My fingers begged to reach out and gently caress his cheek. To feel that familiar warmth of his skin beneath my touch once more. To sink into the

steady safety that he had always been. Not for my own personal gain, but for his. I wanted to offer him comfort from whatever battle raged within his head.

But I simply stood still, watching the boy I'd loved morph into a man I knew nothing about.

"I was promised I could go hang with friends at eight. It's eight, and—" Azelie's voice sheared through my thoughts and then cut off before she spoke her final thought.

I glanced to my right at the almost-fifteen-year-old girl who had the same frizzy red hair that all of us LeBlancs were cursed with. She looked like me. Everyone in town always commented about how she was like a mini version of me.

"Who's she?" she added as I stared at her face, which had yet to be hit with the woes of adulthood.

"Hmmm?" I muttered and turned to gaze back at Ford, who still hadn't moved a centimeter.

"He has that look that Cory's brother got last year during the Fourth of July fireworks. Do you remember that?" Azelie muttered.

I nodded, unable to pry my eyes away from such a hollow and haunted expression. It was similar to Mark's look, but this was...deeper, even more intense. "It's called the 'Thousand-Yard Stare.'"

"Wait, I think I heard about that. We talked about that in history class during our World War II section," she replied.

"That's when the term was coined. It doesn't require someone going to war, but it's

usually a result of something as traumatic as that,” I mindlessly explained.

“So, why do you think he’s got that look?” she asked.

I wasn’t sure how to answer. I could lie and simply shrug my shoulders, playing it off like he was some traveler who was in town for the festival. That was easily believable considering she had no idea who he was, and I wasn’t about to tell her. But I also refused to lie to her—mostly. I’d told her one lie. One lie that only three people, including me, knew to be a lie. Otherwise, I was always honest with her.

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So, I simply kept my mouth shut as I stared at someone who I refused to admit still had a part of my soul.

“Anyway, it’s eight. You know, in the evening. Meaning my shift is done, right?” Azelie added.

“Yeah, go on. But—”

“I know. I know. Don’t go anywhere with strangers. Always have a trusted adult around, and be home by ten. Can tonight be eleven, though? It’s the music festival and summer.”

“You know how dangerous it is right now with that real estate dude and his cronies hanging around. They already came after us a couple times before,” I replied without moving my gaze away from Ford.

I silently pleaded for him to turn his head. To do something. To bring his gaze toward me. I wanted to stare at those two different-colored eyes just once.

“They haven’t come after me specifically,” she whined.

“Yet.” I pried my stare away from Ford and faced the girl who was only an inch shorter than me. “Look, they haven’t escalated past anything...mild yet because of tonight’s deadline. And while I’m holding out hope that somehow they’ll be distracted by something the Thibodeauxs do or don’t do, I can’t bank on it. So, once they realize we’re not selling to them, they might come after you next instead of me. I can manage if they come after me again, but not you. Not anyone in our family. Only

me. Okay?”

“Ten-thirty?” she pressed, clasping her hands in front of her.

“Fine. If you have your location on your phone at all times and—”

“Have an adult around. Thank you!” She grinned and skipped away.

I glanced back over my shoulder and furrowed my brows. Ford was gone. But it hit me like a ton of bricks crashing down from a wrecking ball.

The deadline.

Shit.

I’d been so consumed by Ford’s sudden appearance, I’d forgotten that the deadline was tonight. Sell, or O’Connor would make good on his latest threat.

And I still had no idea how he might escalate. He’d already messed with our orders and bought out the local sheriff’s department. Already had his cronies rough up Dad and trashed our restaurant.

Luckily, Mom and Dad had some funds left from their most recent loan to help replace and repair most of our equipment, and the couple of attacks on Dad barely left a bruise or two. So far.

I groaned and spun on my heel, making my way back to the restaurant. I refused to let my parents stay at the restaurant alone after he’d messed with my dad. Hopefully, the guy wasn’t crazy enough to go after them at our house. If he trashed the place again, my parents would be forced to take out another loan. But how many more places would give my parents more money when they could barely pay back what they

already owed?

If the Thibodeauxs weren't doing too bad, maybe we could—

No. No. I refused to give in to that.

I would figure this out. On my own.

Chapter 6

COLETTE

I flipped the final chair on top of the table and sighed. It was after two in the morning, and I was alone. My parents deserved to be home after such a busy day, and Azelie had returned with them. Besides, I wanted a moment to collect my thoughts. We'd made a decent amount today. But the profit would barely make a dent in the debt. No matter how hard we worked, we wouldn't be able to hold out forever. Honestly, I wasn't sure we'd make it another week.

The streets were now as silent and hollow as my own soul. Shadows writhed in front of the restaurant's windows, reminding me of that stupid childhood legend my parents told me growing up. The Rougarou had come to haunt me tonight, it seemed. I knew the fable too well—it was recited to me by heart growing up—which made venturing back home this late a little risky. But I was exhausted and chalked up the strange fluid movements outside the building to my lack of sleep.

Until knuckles rapped against the closed door.

Blood rushed to my ears. There had been no one around for at least an hour. Not just inside, but outside as well.

The door frame rattled, and wood groaned beneath a relentless pounding fist.

I hadn't believed in the Rougarou since I was a child.

But red glowing eyes hummed at the back of my mind.

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If the question was, “Would you choose a man or a bear?”, I would take the Rougarou over O’Connor and his cronies any day. At least that foe had more respect and dignity than this low-life motherfucker.

Slipping my hands into my pockets, I gently removed the knives from their secured location and gripped the hilts, lining the blades up with my wrists. The rapid pounding became solid, purposeful blows of something heavy.

I stared. Watched the door shiver. Any second now.

O’Connor may be here to get me, but I wasn’t about to succumb without a fight. He’d already hurt my dad, so if he came after me, I had no issues swinging first and asking questions later.

A sharp crack and the door splintered, then burst open. A man kicked away debris before others behind him poured through. My eyes widened as dark-uniformed men rushed into the restaurant. O’Connor’s Cronies. Here to collect the debt that my family owed.

“Colette LeBlanc.” O’Connor’s slimy voice followed them, snaking into the air as anger and determination boiled in my veins.

The ten men, who all wore black shirts and pants, formed a semicircle around me, blocking the entrance. I retreated half a step, only to be met by pressure against my back.

Game on.

With a grunt, I swung my right hand behind me. The sharpened blade sliced into whatever flesh it could find. A wail from sharp pain met my ears. I spun and slashed with my other knife. The blade squelched across the chest of the towering frame in front of me.

Warm, sticky, wine-red liquid coated both silver knives as I stabbed the man's stomach for a third time.

"Stop her." O'Connor's voice met my ears.

I ripped the blade from this assailant's flesh as he crumpled forward, and I sprinted around him.

Something solid slammed against the back of my head, and everything turned black.

The world spun as nausea crept up in my stomach. Something bit into my wrists, and my shoulders groaned from an ache, telling me that my hands were tied behind my back. Prying my eyes open, I was met with the restaurant still in perfect order, other than the table to my right no longer had two chairs stacked on top of it.

My ass was numb, and my feet tingled from the zip ties that cuffed my legs to the chair. In front of me sat the man I hated. The back of my skull pulsed with every beat of my heart, and I could imagine the giant welt forming from where I'd been hit.

I closed my eyes, attempting to cull the swaying of the room and swallow the nausea. "O'Connor," I grumbled.

"So, you know who I am. How lovely since we've never officially had the pleasure," he replied, and I cracked my eyes open. He ran slender fingers through his crisp and tidy acorn-brown hair. He looked just like I'd expected before searching for him on the internet. His hair was parted on the side, combed to perfection without a strand

out of place. It was just long enough to prove that he wasn't balding, but short enough to be professional. His pinstriped suit looked as expensive as I imagined, and the baby-blue eyes that looked back at me were hollow and empty of emotion.

I kept my mouth shut as he adjusted the matching navy pocket square and then crossed his legs. "The deadline was tonight. As I am very aware you know. And now you've gone and mucked up the situation even more. Why'd you have to stab Fred? He was just doing his job."

"As was I," I hissed.

He snickered and slid his hands into his pockets. "I know this is so cliché. My...methods." Removing them, he clutched both of my knives and waved one around. "But why change something that works?"

"It clearly hasn't been working, since we're not selling." I gritted my teeth, feeling like a dumbass because if that wasn't a scripted line from some fucking movie, I wasn't sure what was. But what else was I supposed to say?

He clicked his teeth and twisted the tiny blade between his fingers. "Except you will have to sell. See, I bought the loan company that your parents got their most recent loan from. And that loan is due. Tonight. In full. With interest."

My stomach sank to my toes. There it was. The escalation I hadn't thought of. I bit down on my bottom lip. I would never concede to this fool. A bruise or two here or there, I could handle. He could threaten me physically in any way, and I would be fine because he'd already done it. But selling to him would never happen.

"Now, where's that attitude that you gave my men?" he asked and raised a brow.

"You can take your loan company and shove it up your ass," I hissed.

And knuckles from the side crashed into my mouth. The jolt of pain split my face and vibrated across my skin as the taste of hot iron pooled in my mouth. I groaned and slid my tongue across my split lip. Rolling my neck, I faced O'Connor again and grinned wickedly. "Try again."

"You know, these men haven't had a day off in a while. Which means they've..." He rose from his chair and slid his eyes around at his men. "They've lacked the companionship of a woman. Maybe I'll go fetch Azelie, and then—"

"NO!" I lunged forward. My wrists and ankles caught short against their binds. "No.Please."

He spun on his heel to face me again. "But you don't have the money to repay your debt. I know. I counted what's in that register and broke open your very cheaply made safe that was laughably secure at best."

"Use me. Take me. Not her. She's not even fifteen yet." I squirmed against my restraints. Desperation was not a good look, I knew that. But I wasn't some trained spy in some shitty B-grade movie. I was simply trying to protect my family.

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“Exactly,” he cackled and stopped moving. “She has so much more to lose. So much more to give than you.”

“Just give me a week. I just need some time, and I’ll have the money,” I pleaded.

“I don’t want your money, and you don’t have a week. You sign the restaurant over or...” He sat back down in his chair and crossed his legs as if he were in another usual, above-board business deal. “Well, you know you can’t stop me or these men even if you wanted to.”

My breath caught in my throat. “Why this? Why now? Why us?”

“What you’re really asking is...” He leaned forward, bracing his elbows against his knees. “Why not the Thibodeauxs?”

A shaky breath escaped my throat, but I nodded. Guilt swarmed within me, coating the anger and, yes, fear, that surged through my veins. But I wanted to know what they were going to do to escalate against the Thibodeauxs, because his threats always came in pairs.

“How do you know this isn’t about them? Besides, they have a son who just showed up,” he hissed and nodded his chin.

A crack sizzled through the air. To my left, the eleventh man I’d slashed in the stomach collapsed to the floor. My eyes widened as blood seeped from the bullet hole in his head. But the man who had shot him barely batted an eye.

Ten. Back to ten.

O'Connor grabbed the arm of my chair and tugged. Metal grated across the floor as he closed the gap between his seat and mine. "What does—" I gasped, gulping down mouthfuls of air. "What does their son have to do with anything?"

"Well, one, Fred there clearly didn't do the background dive into the Thibodeauxs as well as he should've, or we would've already known about this son. So, isn't it obvious?" He tipped his head and blew air slowly from his lips.

"You're going to focus on what and who you do know," I finished for him.

"Exactly." He leaned away from me and glanced back at my knives. "These are really nice. Too short to really do much damage, but easy enough to carry around undetected."

"Give them back," I snarled. But how fucking intimidating was I when I barely passed five feet tall and certainly had no leverage or advantage being restrained and tied to this FUCKING CHAIR.

I rocked back and forth violently, thrashing against my restraints, when the lights went out.

"What the hell?" O'Connor muttered.

Faint illumination from the streetlamps cast an eerie, dull yellow glow around the room. With the chairs stacked on top of the tables and men staggered about the room, odd shapes shivered in the darkness as if they were swaying beneath water and then extinguished by simply shifting the angle with which I looked at them.

A scream tore my attention behind me, but the bellow was cut short. Suddenly, a

shadow darted across the diner. I whipped my head to the right as several bodies disappeared into the ethereal black with a faint grunt.

Six. Maybe seven? Either way, there were certainly fewer than ten men standing around me now.

“Thefuck?!” a man shrieked, and then one of the shadows thumped to the floor.

A thud followed.

The strangest silhouette raced across the restaurant at nearly inhuman speed.

Rougarou?

All my bravado fled. O’Connor’s cronies looked like they were being torn apart, and my earlier thoughts about childhood fables didn’t seem so innocent now. My heart hammered in my chest, and my ribs felt as if they could barely contain the fervent pounding.

“WHAT THE—” Another man’s scream was cut short as this massive creature barreled into three of the cronies, all standing in a line.

“WILL SOMEONE FUCKING DO SOMETHING!” O’Connor shouted, his darkened form rising in front of me.

“Like what?” a man to my left defiantly asked. He shifted on his feet, darting wildly from side to side. In the dim shadows, I could make out his gun, which he waved around recklessly but with no aim. I mean, was there anything to really aim at?

“I don’t know. Shoot the fucking thing!” O’Connor shrieked, his voice sounding a bit further away from me, high-pitched with panic.

“Where is it?” the man beside me cried out, spinning in a circle.

Everything within me froze as a monster rose behind him. Towering at least a foot or two taller than an average human, and twice as wide, the creature’s massive frame blocked the streams of light from the street. His own shadow bathed me and the man holding me hostage in total darkness.

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All I could make out through the darkness were two beady, blood-red eyes set deep beneath thick brow ridges.

Oxygen seemed as much my enemy as O'Connor, hiding in the dark. I couldn't scream. I couldn't voice a word.

The man hard up beside me trembled. The gun in his desperate hold rattled as he pivoted around as slowly as possible.

I couldn't look away.

I couldn't move.

I refused to let someone else fight my battles for me, but this wasn't a someone.

The muscles in my body were as tight as the bonds holding me captive. My blood stilled, turning to ice within my veins as the creature raised his massive paw, tipped his head, wrapped his claws around the man's head, and jerked.

Like wood splintering, bones crunched, and the man's body crumpled like a sack to the floor in front of me.

The creature's red eyes returned to mine as its broad chest rose and fell, thick shoulders pulsing with each breath. As rhythmical and threatening as the scream lodged in my throat. Footsteps faded with a tinkle of the bell, indicating a few cronies had escaped. And the lack of O'Connor's grating voice told me without looking that I was alone.

Alone with this... thing.

Red eyes. Bigger than a human. Disheveled hair draped around its face. A face that, from its nose down, was hidden beneath a strange mask with detailing I couldn't quite make out in the dark shadows that slithered around it. Razor-sharp teeth had to be waiting behind the mask but restrained by the metal casing of its curse.

"Rougarou," I whispered involuntarily.

The creature raised its massive paw again, and my eyes slammed shut. It was my turn. I hadn't left thirteen objects out to confuse it. And I certainly hadn't practiced Lent in at least ten years. Plus, I just spoke its name. All notions of this strange legend had left when fantasy met the real world, and I was burdened with debt and a life I couldn't escape.

Yet here I was, about to meet my demise by a creature who shouldn't exist. Who didn't exist.

The floor rattled beneath my feet, and something snapped through the air. I dared not open my eyes as I felt the bonds around my ankles fall, and my shoulders finally rotated forward.

I waited even longer for silence to once again become my sole companion.

Something had just saved me.

A creature who didn't exist. Who shouldn't exist.

And I would say nothing about it because, even though I saw it, I still didn't believe it. I would simply go to bed and pretend like nothing happened. I would return early in the morning and clean up the mess that was made and somehow find a way to

dispose of the body or bodies that were left behind.

Because a Rougarou wasn't real.

But men were. Men with terrible intentions. Men who were going to go after Azelie.

And I had to find a way to stop them.

Chapter 7

FORD

Iwaited.

Like a dog drawn to a bone, I waited in the shadows of the forest, watching the place I'd grown up. The sun hadn't yet peeked over the horizon, and my mind drifted to the woman who owned me. Where was Colette's wedding ring? I could rationalize her not wearing it to the clinic to do doctor shit, but she hadn't had it on last night at the restaurant. In fact, I hadn't seen her wear it at all, nor seen anything of her husband.

I closed my eyes, once again haunted by the image of Colette smiling at a man who wasn't me. She'd looked so happy when I returned four years after leaving. I'd gone back, ready to fight for her. To hell with everything that had forced me out of town. The threats. The lies. I wasn't willing to run anymore.

But she'd clearly moved on, and I couldn't blame her. She believed I'd left her for nothing more than a petty ass rivalry. And when I'd seen herhand in his wearing a massive diamond ring, I'd decided to take my secret to the grave. She was safe with him. She was happy. I could live with that.

I'd lost her that day to someone else, and somewhere along the way, I'd accepted that

fact because she was protected. And happy. That was all I ever wanted for her, and I had to respect her decision. So, where was he? Why hadn't I seen this dude? I needed to clear my head and talk to someone who'd always helped me figure out what the right thing to do was.

Waiting for my parents to leave for the day was a waste of precious time, and I decided to utilize this quiet moment and wander back down the road where I'd stashed my Harley.

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The one thing I loved about having no issue waking early was how peaceful and still everything was just before the sun woke every sleeping creature. Throwing a leg over, I kick-started the motorcycle and took off.

The roads were empty as I cruised through town. It had yet to rise from its slumber. Small towns were like that. Something I absolutely adored because, in this moment, as the bike's engine rumbled beneath me, I was free of every burden that consumed even my nightmares.

I'd been surprised that the Harley I'd rebuilt with my dad still worked when I dragged it out of the shed yesterday. But I was grateful for it. and as the wind bit at my cheeks, I twisted the throttle a little more.

My pawpaw would hold the answers I was looking for.

Turning off the road, I slowed as the cemetery entrance came into view. Gravestones littered the clear and beautifully manicured lawn. He'd passed away when I was just a kid, and I'm pretty sure his family was the reason that we had this shitty rivalry with the LeBlancs in the first place. Which meant he'd never had the chance to share with me why. I also doubted my mawmaw ever really understood it either.

Cruising beneath the arch that read Willow Roux Cemetery, I wove through the narrow one-way paved roads and pulled off to the side. The engine died just as the sun broke the horizon.

The last time I'd been to a cemetery was Duncan's funeral. Tears made my nose tingle as I bit back the grief. He never had the chance to go home like I had. A part of

me still argued how that was fair. Was I grateful? Yes. But of everyone who should've made it home, it should've been him and not me. I'd given that idea up when I'd left the first time.

At least most of the gravestones weren't white, but that failed to provide me any reprieve. Closing my eyes, I turned my face toward the warm, rising sun. I wouldn't waste this chance; it had been far too long since I'd visited my pawpaw. Even if I came without flowers or a bottle of whiskey, at least I was here.

Right?

I swung off the motorcycle, leaving my rucksack and duffel with the bike, then wandered between a row of gravestones. Some were older, and I recognized them despite the faded inscriptions. But other ones were newer, sharper.

I moseyed along, taking time to at least read the names of who had become companions with my pawpaw since I'd left. My feet jerked to a halt as my eyes slid across a photograph embedded into a headstone. I would always know Colette when I saw her, whether in person or an image printed on stone.

About facing, I squatted down. There she was, smiling brightly, wearing a beautiful white dress with her hand resting on the chest of the very man I'd seen her walking with that day I visited.

His eyes were bright and sharp, blue as the sky, with plain brown hair. Nothing about him screamed unique, but he wasn't ugly either. He was a simple man, it seemed, and clearly everything to her. But as I scanned the date, my stomach dropped to my toes, and I fell to my knees.

Six months? Liam Hamilton. The man who had won Colette's heart and hand had died only six months after I last visited. She hadn't been protected all these years. She

hadn't been safe like I'd imagined.

I'd failed her, and she'd been alone all this time.

If only I'd kept better tabs on her.

I closed my eyes and tipped my head back. "Of course," I muttered. Just like I'd expected, my pawpaw had held some answers. Not everything, but he at least provided me with clarity.

I wouldn't repeat that mistake. She wasn't going to have to be alone anymore. Whatever it took, I would win her heart again and give her the life that she deserved. No longer about closure, it was my turn to protect her.

Not just for her sake, but to honor Liam. I was grateful for him taking care of her, for however little time it may have been. At least for a moment in these past fifteen years, she'd found happiness.

Rising from the ground, I nodded once at Liam's headstone. It was time to go get my girl. Time to let go of the past. Time to rebuild trust with her, no matter what it took.

Back in my hiding spot within the shadows of the forest, I waited as my amazing parents, who deserved nothing of the woes and heartbreak I'd given them, hobbled out the front door. With a wave, they bid my mawmaw goodbye for the day.

I tipped my head, a little confused. She always went with them to the restaurant. It was more her baby than theirs, and in all the years I'd grown up in the same house with all of them, she'd never missed a day of work.

Maybe she felt comfortable taking a day because O'Connor had backed off for the time being. But something in my gut said that was a load of bullshit. It was a

temporary state of affairs, because once he found out who I was, and what I was capable of, I knew violence would rain like hell upon my family and their damn restaurant.

Once my parents were in the van, my dad reversed slowly down the driveway. As my mind raced a thousand miles a second, two of the people I cared for most dearly steadily drove in the opposite direction. As they did like clockwork, as they had every single day of my existence, they headed off to a place that tomorrow might not exist.

I always wondered why they fought so hard for it. What was it about the restaurant that fueled them to literally risk their lives to keep it going? Same with Colette and her family. I mean, I understood protecting your family and community, but why a restaurant? And why at the risk of life and limb? My father had already suffered a couple of broken bones, as had Colette's father.

These guys were ruthless and willing to stop at nothing. And the more I learned about this O'Connor fucker, the less there was to like about him.

"All right, Ford, sweetie. Get your ass over here, I bet you smell like shit," my mawmaw called out.

Remaining tucked against the massive tree trunk, I watched Mawmaw tighten the shawl around her shoulders and purse her lips.

"Honey, I know you're lurking out in the forest, and I know you're waiting to sneak into the house to shower since you weren't able to yesterday. So, either you get your behind over here and give me a hug, or I guess I'll tell your—"

I quickly ducked into the street and wrapped my free hand around the strap of my rucksack. "Hey, Mawmaw," I gently said. Damn, I was a softie, because all it took was a fucking offer for a hug... and I really wanted a hug from her. As tears misted

my vision, I clutched my duffel tighter and jogged down the road as she took an unsteady step off the porch.

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Sprinting across the lawn riddled with weeds I was supposed to have pulled fifteen years ago during the summer I left, I dropped the duffel, threw off my rucksack, and launched myself at my mawmaw.

“Oh, sweetie,” she whispered as her frail arms encircled me. Warmth filled the hole in my chest, long since turned black, as she squeezed harder. I feared I’d snap her in half as I tightened my grasp around her shoulders, but she didn’t wince within my embrace. Instead, she tucked her face against my chest.

Slender fingers slid down my back as her thinning gray hair tickled my neck. She was skinnier than when I left, and her hair no longer brushed her shoulders while curling out and up at the ends, but she smelled like home. Like every spice that graced my tongue growing up. Every crawfish and alligator she cooked up wafted from her skin as if she soaked in the only comfort I’d found over the years.

“Mawmaw,” I choked out through tears.

“Hi, my boy,” she gently said as her hand patted my back. And then the gentleness shifted as her pat turned into a slap. “How dare you take so damn long to come home.”

“Ow,” I muttered, shying away from her smack.

“Suck it up, buddy. And also, you really do stink.”

My chuckle vibrated in my chest as she stopped hitting me, and I slowly released her. “Had a busy day yesterday.”

“Getting whacked by your mother. Do you really think that bombarding her at the restaurant was the right play to get her to forgive you?” She slid away from me and threw her hands on her hips.

“I know. It was dumb, but...” My voice trailed off as I closed my eyes.

“But she’s your mama.”

I nodded and inhaled deeply. My gaze slid across the house, which could certainly use some upgrades. But it was home, and I wanted nothing more than that forgiveness and the ability to finally come home.

“My have you grown,” Mawmaw continued, and I glanced back down at her.

“Or you’ve just shrunk,” I teased.

She smiled at me and reached up, patting my cheek with a hand that held even more wrinkles. “Come on inside. And you can tell me your new plan for winning your mother over.”

Chapter 8

FORD

My mawmaw gestured to the front door as I quickly scurried back to where I’d dropped my duffel and rucksack. “So, I figured this time I’d show up with my resumé and—”

“And what qualifications does being a Navy SEAL get you when it comes to restaurant work?” she quickly inserted and grabbed the door handle.

“Well, not much, really, I guess. But I wasn’t—”

“Then you need a new plan because that won’t work.”

“Mawmaw, if you let me finish, I wasn’t going to ask to be hired, but to simply volunteer.” Shrugging the rucksack on my shoulders again, I hoisted my duffel from the ground and faced my mawmaw, who stood in the entranceway, holding the door open.

“I’m not stupid. I know y’all are drowning in debt and can’t afford to pay someone else to help at the restaurant. I also know all about this Robert O’Connor shithead.” I bounded up the porch steps two at a time and slipped by her into the house. A smile crept onto my face. I’d been right.

Everything was exactly how it had been when I’d left it. The same worn-down burgundy carpet to my left was adorned with floral-patterned couches, where the same cushions that were hollow and sunken from often being sat on waited.

At the far side of the room, beside a massive grandfather clock, rested my mawmaw’s wooden rocker. The stain was weathered, and the vibrant blue color the seat had once been was worn to a dull gray, and several crocheted blankets still draped across the back of it.

The wall splitting the living room and kitchen area on the other side had yellowed with a few pictures sitting askew above the couch that rested against it. The curtains hanging in front of the massive front window were dusty and used to be a beautiful green color, but now they were so bleached I wasn’t even sure if they had the same floral pattern I could’ve sworn they once had.

Mawmaw shut the door and then quietly walked into the living room, settling into the rocker with a heavy groan. “Your parents kept your room just as you left it. They

only went in to keep it clean, though I made sure they didn't look under your bed, so there may be a few cobwebs left."

I shook my head with a smile and kicked off my boots. "Believe it or not, Mawmaw, I didn't keep any naked magazines under there."

"Oh, I know. Just a certain box full of pictures of one single girl."

My eyes widened, and I froze. She couldn't know. There was no way she knew. Nobody had known. Colette and I had been way too sneaky and careful after nearly being caught by one of her cousins.

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“What are you talking about?” I questioned, feigning innocence, and slowly rose from my squatted position after removing my shoes.

I lifted my gaze to her, and she rhythmically rocked back and forth as her eyes closed and a smile drifted upon her lips. “Don’t worry. I never told anyone.”

“But...how?” I raised a brow.

“I’m your mawmaw. I know way more than you’ll ever realize about everything.”

“So, do you also know why I left? Like why I really left?” I cautiously asked, hoisting my rucksack up my shoulder again.

She nodded as the wood creaked with her steady movements. The clock ticked behind her in tune with each shift of the rocker.

“Why didn’t you say anything? Or call? Or convince me to stay and fight?” I asked, unsure how I was supposed to take this news. Fifteen years. I’d gone fifteen years without seeing my family, and yet, Mawmaw had known this entire time.

“Because, my boy, I fear if I’d let on I knew, things might have turned out for the worst. Besides, you know I never really cared about the feud your pawpaw and his family had with the LeBlancs. I fear you got your desire to avoid conflict from me,” she quietly explained and planted her feet firmly on the ground.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

Her eyes opened, and it was as if I were looking in a mirror. Regret as clear as what filled my own heart haunted her gaze. “I’d hoped you’d choose differently. Every piece of me clung to that as I watched you and Colette go from innocent friends to everything more. I hoped you’d somehow become the fighter and protector you are now. But you didn’t, and that’s on me. I failed to help two teenagers be wild and in love. I failed to keep the damn burden of this petty rivalry from destroying something beautiful and innocent.” A tear streaked down her cheek as I swallowed whatever bubble of confusion and pain that was swelling within me.

“I don’t understand. How is any of this on you? You’re not the one who gave the threat,” I replied as her jaw began to tremble.

“No, but I knew about it and didn’t step in.”

“Mawmaw, what the hell are you saying?” I blurted out.

“I’m saying you’re not the only one who ran away from their problems when they shouldn’t have. And somehow, instead of teaching you differently, I shoved that onto you. You only became the man I’d hoped by leaving, by learning it from someone else, somewhere else.” She gave me a tight-lipped smile. “I am truly sorry.”

I stared at her as shock coursed thick through my veins. “You knew about Colette and I this entire time, you knew why I really left, and you still let—” My voice broke as it hit me. I’d never needed to leave. She’d already known. Someone else had already known. If I’d just stayed and fought like a real fucking man, none of this shit would be happening. Someone else would’ve been able to help me protect Colette.

All of the pain and heartbreak I’d caused was—

“All of this was for nothing?” I cried out. “You knew this entire fucking time? So I could’ve stayed. Colette and I could’ve had— could’ve had a damn life together.”

My chest rose and fell sporadically as rage and confusion ticked like a time bomb set to go off in my heart. “But because I thought us being together would’ve gotten me or you or mom and dadfucking killed, I—” I slammed a fist against my chest. “I fucking left. When I could’ve—”

And suddenly I couldn’t finish speaking.

She wasn’t to blame. I’d made my own choice as an adult, but giving her the blame took some of the regret and burden off my shoulders.

“I could’ve stayed and been with her,” I finished as my vision blurred. “Fifteen years, Mawmaw. I destroyed everyone and everything I loved because I thought...” I paused as she remained silent.

“You were the one person I thought...” I couldn’t even bring myself to speak.

Wait. Was I being irrational? Was I overthinking this? I mean, technically speaking, only she knew. Which meant my parents still had no idea, and how much protection could I have actually offered?

I slowly shook my head. “It wouldn’t have changed anything, because of who I was then,” I finally muttered.

“Which is why I didn’t say anything, my boy,” she whispered. “Be angry at me, it’s okay. I would be, too.”

I closed my eyes. “It wouldn’t have changed anything. And we would’ve never worked because of me.” A soft snort escaped my nose. “I was a fool. And a coward.”

A gentle chuckle pierced the dense air, and I cracked my eyes open again. “You were no coward, Ford. You were young and naive, and barely eighteen. Those were and

still are her parents. Even as a grown man, you still have to face them. I am sorry, Ford. But no matter how much I hoped you'd stay, I knew you couldn't."

I exhaled slowly, letting my shoulders fall. She was right. Too much had been at stake back then. Colette herself had been at stake, and yes, even my own life. "Mawmaw?"

She raised her brows. "Yes, sweetie?"

"What if I had stayed?" I asked.

Her chest rose, and she resumed rocking. The chair shifted back and forth slowly, once again in tune with the clock that ticked beside her. The sun blazed brightly through the window to my right, dancing sparkles across the wall where yellowing pictures hung. My gaze caught sight of the only one not hanging off kilter. The only one without a speck of dust on it. The picture in the very middle of the wall, directly centered above the couch, was mine. My military portrait.

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Part of me wished I'd stayed. Maybe everything wouldn't be so damn awful now. Maybe I wouldn't be filled with so much regret. Maybe Colette wouldn't absolutely hate me. And maybe, just maybe, we would've found a way to be together. Or maybe neither of us would even be here to have a second chance.

I'd become someone entirely new since leaving. Someone I no longer recognized in the photos that scattered the rest of the wall. I wasn't that same, timid boy. I wasn't the same kid who finished every fight Colette started when she wasn't watching. I wasn't the same boy who had run away at eighteen.

Maybe running then had been easier. I'd left a world where everything I'd wanted, I couldn't have had. Of all the things that had changed, that hadn't. I still wanted those same things. Or rather, that same person. I wanted her. I wanted my family back, and I wanted Colette. Even though she'd changed too.

Coming back clearly wasn't the easier choice. Avoiding facing the consequences of choices I'd made was always easier. But facing them, owning them, and getting what the fuck I wanted was worth it because I had fucked up. And most importantly, I wasn't scared of her fucking parents anymore.

I couldn't dwell on the what-ifs any longer. That wouldn't change them.

"Why didn't you ever tell anyone about Colette and I?" I finally asked, and she stopped rocking.

"And tear you two apart sooner?" She raised a brow.

“Are you going to say anything now?”

She slowly shook her head. “I don’t think there’s anything to say, seeing as Colette stabbed you.”

I pinched my brows together. “How the hell do you know that?”

She grinned wickedly. “I know everything, Ford. Now, go shower. You really do smell.”

I stared at her for a moment longer and then turned away.

She didn’t know everything. Not really. Not anymore. Because Colette stabbing me hadn’t meant that she wanted nothing to do with me, but that she was still pissed. She wouldn’t still be pissed if she didn’t still feel something for me. I loved my mawmaw, but this time, things would be different. Fuck the rivalry that was still there, fuck the threat that had forced me out of town fifteen years ago, and fuck O’Connor. I wanted her. Period.

I would get what I came back for.

Because I wasn’t that kid anymore. I was someone else entirely. I was a monster who danced with the devil daily. And I’d have what I wanted because I had nothing left to lose.

Chapter 9

FORD

I braced my palms against the cold tiles of the shower, enjoying the warm water sliding down my back as it washed away the final bubbles of soap. Being typically

too tall for a decent shower, it was really nice being home, seeing as my father had made sure that both the master shower and this one would fit him—and now me.

That look in Mawmaw's eyes had told me everything. I understood my own mistakes; they'd haunted me long enough. But it was only during that conversation that I recognized that same pain in her own eyes. She'd made a mistake. One she couldn't take back, just as I had. We'd both spent enough time holding on to the regret. Now seemed as good a time as ever to let it go.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, despite the steam from the warm shower. Something in me set adrenaline coursing through my veins. My skin prickled like a thousand needles as I turned my focus past the crinkled, white plastic shower curtain and strained my ears for any unusual sound.

A brief cool sensation washed across my wet body, and I cautiously pushed off the wall, straightening to my full height. Someone was here. Someone who moved as stealthily as I, though not because they were trained, or they'd have known to avoid standing where a shadow would cast itself across the curtain.

I smiled as I stared at the warped shape of a barely five-foot-tall woman, braced against the back wall, directly near the edge of the tub. If she wanted in, she'd have to climb, which also led me to reason that she had no idea this was probably one of the worst places for an ambush.

I watched as one hand slowly raised a shadow shaped to a point. Watched as she quickly pushed some curls away from her face and then shuffled closer to the shower curtain.

My stomach churned. Heat cascaded down my back as I still faced the shower, but the warmth that pooled low in my core had little to do with the water. There were two options in front of me. Speak, and alert Colette that I knew she was there, giving her

time to escape the same way she snuck in—through my bedroom as we'd done more than once growing up.

Or...

Continuing to watch through my peripherals, I grinned even wider. I liked the latter option much better. It was much more like the current Ford, and less like the shy kid who had always let her take the reins. It would be much better to ease Colette into this new idea of me, instead of doing a one-eighty some random time in the future and be like "Surprise, Cher. I'm aggressive and demanding now, and both of those things play into how I plan to fuck."

Shit. Maybe the latter reason wasn't better...

Remaining still, I watched slender fingers slither around the edge of the shower curtain behind me. Well, the latter reason was the only option now because she was about to try and rip open that route anyway.

In a flash, I spun around, grabbed her wrist in one hand, and yanked her off the ground. Pulling her into the tub, I stepped between her legs and pinned her back against the wall with my hips.

Her eyes widened as a stifled gasp fled her lips. "Wh—Wh—" she attempted to say as I grinned and tipped my head.

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Water traveled down my face as I quickly snatched her other wrist and slid it beneath my hand, trapping both of them above her head. A tiny knife that wasn't the one I made her trembled in her bound fingers. "What happened to the daggers I made you?" I asked and yanked this one out of her grasp.

"Let me go," she grumbled, squirming against me. I simply stared at her hand, tossed the weapon that would do very little damage to me out of the shower through the crack left by the curtains, and brought my hand back to her wrists. Slowly, I slid my fingers down the side of her arm. Heat danced beneath my touch, as soft as a flower petal, yet I knew the stubbornness that slithered through her veins.

Goosebumps pricked upon her skin at my touch, a visceral reaction that ignited a fire within me. She thrashed harder, but all I did was lean tighter into her body, feeling every muscle of hers coil beneath the thin tank top she wore. Cargo pants just like she'd always worn swished with her movements, quickly dampening beneath the water they soaked in from my body as her legs tightened around my waist.

"Cher, no matter how hard you try, it won't work," I admonished as she grunted again and attempted to twist her wrists from my one hand.

I dropped my finger from her arm and finally looked into her eyes. Green and moody and just as sharp as ever. "Now, what the fuck are you doing sneaking into my bathroom with a knife that literally cannot do anything other than annoy me?"

Her eyes narrowed, and she pursed her lips. "You're going to fix this shit you caused."

“What shit?”

She turned her head away and stared at the white tile against the other wall. “Well, apparently this Robert O’Connor fuckface didn’t know about you. So, he showed up last night to collect on the debt my family owes and told me he’s put a temporary pause on coming after your family until he figures out who you are.”

Due to the nature of my job that she was unaware of, and the circumstances I’d knowingly flown back into, both Griffin and Mikey had helped conceal my records and almost everything they possibly could online before I’d even set foot here. I was a literal ghost right now.

“I’m sorry, Cher, but tell me how you’d like me to do that when it clearly wasn’t my fault they didn’t do proper background checks?” I asked, and she whipped her gaze back to me.

“When the hell did you get so sassy? You never talked back to me like that before,” she hissed. “I mean, not unless you were teasing. And you know what, can we also talk about this whole...pinning my wrists above my head?”

“After we talk about you attempting to sneak into my shower to kill me. Ineffectively, I might add, but all the same.”

Her lip curled. “Did I even sort of scare you?”

I raised my brows as this woman who had once, yes, sort of terrified me, now simply seemed...cute. The fuck, Ford? Colette was anything but cute when she got angry. I still remember nearly losing my fucking belly button the last time she was upset at me. Now, she’s cute?

I think I needed to see a therapist.

“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath.

“Fuck? All you have to say is... fuck?” she asked and thrashed against my restraint, again.

“Will you stop, Cher?” I rolled my eyes.

She shook her head. “No. Not until you tell me why you said fuck? And why you’re not really all that surprised about O’Connor’s tactic? Or the fact that you didn’t seem startled to find me in the bathroom holding a knife?”

I tipped my head as she finally stopped squirming and her body relaxed against mine. “Because you asked if I was even a little scared, and my first thought was how you’re being really cute. Which—”

“CUTE? I AM NOT CUTE! I AM ANYTHING BUT CUTE!” she shouted, but didn’t fight against my hold this time. Instead, she crossed her ankles and hooked her heels behind my back.

I grinned, a chuckle dancing within my chest. “Cute.”

“Oh, fuck you, Ford. When I get out of this, I will stab you. Again, and again. With my tiny knives that apparently only annoy you. Except I saw how you kept grimacing when I was simply stitching you up.” Her gaze darted down my body and paused at the wound she’d sewn up a couple days ago, and then her eyes widened.

“Oh my hell. You didn’t keep it dry.” Her voice caught in her throat as she ripped her gaze back up to my face. She gasped for air through the tension that slithered around us. Her eyes darted back down to my hips that held her pinned to the wall and then back up again. “You’re— You’re naked.”

“What’d you expect? Me to bathe with fucking clothes on? I’m older than you by four days, not stupid.”

“Except you didn’t keep your stitches dry.”

“I’ll dab it dry with a towel when I get out. I don’t need perfection, Cher.”

“You’re still naked.” She pursed her lips and then tipped her head. Her chest rose faster, and pink bloomed in her cheeks. “And you uh...” She swallowed stiffly, her gaze darting around the shower at everything but me. “You were never quite this... this big when you left.”

I pinched my brows together. “Cher, baby, we’ve already established that I’m taller—”

“I wasn’t talking about your height, you asswipe,” she hissed, and I sucked my lips in between my teeth.

Was she talking about...?

“Well, you’re the one that decided to interrupt my shower. So, this is your fault.” I tipped my head as a slow smirk lifted on my lips. The color on her cheeks deepened to a fiery red. My body roared with desire. I knew she could feel what was happening as her eyes widened even more. Each of her breaths quickened into gulps for air as her gaze remained locked on mine.

“You—You—We’re not talking about that right now.” She clamped her teeth together and glared at me.

“You brought it up, Cher, not me.” I grinned even wider.

“Just—Just shut up.”

“What? Can’t come up with something else insulting to call me?” I taunted.

“Give me a couple of minutes and you’ll say something worthy of an insult again.” She narrowed her eyes even more, clearly in an attempt to intimidate me, but it was definitely not having that effect. My smile widened as her eyelid twitched.

A craving unlike anything else I’d experienced fired within me. A yearning to know just once more what it would be like to simply kiss her. Obviously, I lusted for more, and there was little I could do to stop it from hardening between my legs, but I wanted something much more deep and real with her than a good final fuck.

She finally huffed and lowered her shoulders from near her ears. Her eyes slowly slid

down my face and paused at the scar on my jaw. Her racing heart slowed with each passing moment, and the sporadic breaths that bumped against my chest became more even. Softer, the air shifted from sizzling tension to something more tender and vulnerable.

“When’d that happen?” she asked, nodding her chin toward the scar on my jaw, her voice a little gentler.

“Around when I left.” I studied her hair. Every coil that seemed to still never quite end up where she wanted it. My fingers craved the feel of her strands wrapped around them again. I wanted— No, I needed that coarse feeling sliding across my skin again. I needed to bury my nose against her neck and inhale that rich cinnamon smell she always carried.

Her green eyes followed along my neck, and then slowly, I watched as she began tracing the ink that covered the entire right half of my body from toe to neck. Hesitantly, her brows pulled together, and she tipped her head. Her wrists relaxed even more in my hold as her eyes suddenly widened. “Ford, I recognize them. All of them.”

Her gaze became frantic, sliding down my body without a care for decency or anything else. I’d wanted to wait a little longer. Be further on the path to forgiveness before she figured it out, but being butt-ass naked in the shower broke that barrier.

Her fingers twitched as if she desperately wanted to touch them, and I faltered in my conviction. I closed my eyes and released her wrists, then cautiously tucked my hands beneath her thighs, still clinging to my hips. The inevitable slap against the cheek, or punch, or stab was coming, and I braced for impact.

But instead, the smoothest skin brushed against my right arm. Intimately, tenderly, her touch worked its way along the lines of every doodled piece of art that I’d

permanently etched onto my body.

Her art.

It was the only way I'd known to bring her with me.

She was my Sunday on a porch with a crab boil in the back, listening to the dogs bark, and every neighbor laughing about stupid shit. I knew that a simple lazy Sunday was not in the cards for me; I'd accepted that the moment I'd signed my name along that dotted line years ago. But every once in a while, every blue moon, when there was a lull in the war in my head, I'd close my eyes, and we'd be on that rickety porch swing in the back with her legs draped over my lap.

We'd be sipping on a beer, listening to the gators bellow and the sizzle of the most delicious Cajun food. There was no tomorrow. There was no yesterday. There was only that moment. With the sun sinking low, the sky painted as red as her hair.

My spider lily.

My Cher.

Her fingers wound across my pec and then walked down my abdomen. Bumps and ridges that she'd never explored before danced beneath her touch, and instead of pulling away with each imperfection, she lingered.

"You didn't have hair like this on your chest or below your belly button when you left," she whispered.

I chuckled, reveling in how close she was to me. "Fifteen years, Cher."

"You're not that kid that ran away." Warm breath washed over my mouth with every

word she spoke. Whether she was intentionally near my lips or not, I had no idea. But I could feel her there, lost in a world of art she'd created for me before I'd ever shattered her heart and disappeared.

"You might not like the man I came back as," I replied.

"We all have secrets, Ford." Her voice was as gentle as honey, as crisp as that cinnamon scent that floated over me. I wanted this, needed it. But I was not owed her forgiveness, let alone her. But here she was, practically taunting me to take what wasn't mine. To steal one final kiss as if to say that I'd never actually left. Like I never tore her heart apart.

I inched forward, cracking my eyes open as her lips hovered dangerously close to mine, yet her gaze was focused elsewhere, drawing across splotches of reds and blues that had been of her creation upon my skin.

My heart raced in my chest, as erratic as electricity, swirling with anticipation. Plump satin waited for me to simply take. It was my turn to be in control, to have exactly what I wanted. To hell with these secrets. She was right, we all had them—me more than most.

And I slammed my lips against hers.

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She squeaked beneath the pressure and swatted at my sides. I quickly pulled away and glanced at her wide eyes. Her gaze studied mine. There was nowhere for either of us to hide. There was nowhere for either of us to run to. Mist glistened in her eyes, and then she slammed her lips back onto mine and squeezed her palms tightly against my sides. I deepened the pressure against her mouth and gripped her cheeks. With a gentle caress of my fingers, I slid them through the tangled mess of hair that I'd been itching to touch, and twisted the strands within my grip.

As I worked my lips against her mouth, everything in me filled with the regret I'd held for fifteen years. I'd been fully aware of what would happen if I left, and it had all come to a head upon returning. I'd sat in that barrel of guilt, drowning from the moment that I took that first step to disappear.

Yet, as I pressed my hips tighter into her, a spark of familiarity and relief fluttered within my heart. If there was one thing I could convey with this kiss, I prayed she heard the plea for forgiveness, and the sorry I couldn't quite yet speak aloud.

My desire to share everything with her. The fact that she was my everything, and had always been, was the one thing that hadn't changed the moment I'd left. No matter what had transpired since then, and even if this was the last time that I tasted the honey of her kiss. Even if the warm cinnamon of her scent would never again caress my skin, I needed this.

One final expression of words I could never say.

Quickly, I broke apart from her mouth, tipped her head the other way, and dove back against her swollen lips. Just one more second was all I would take, and then I would

return to the shadows that I found solace in. I would become that creature of the night again.

Her fingers slowly dug into my sides, sliding down to rest low on my hips, and she tugged me toward her. My body radiated with warmth from the passion of my lips against hers. As her kiss softened, her breathing slowed, and her lips slowly parted. I met her acceptance with a brief dance of my tongue between her teeth, but afforded myself no more than a second on this web of time we were weaving because I was owed nothing.

Not even this.

And then I pulled away and guided her feet to the floor of the tub. Her eyes remained closed, and her lips puckered as if she wasn't aware I'd stopped kissing her.

Oh, how I wanted to keep kissing her.

But I couldn't.

Just as her brows twitched and her parted mouth closed in recognition, I shoved the shower curtain to the side and stepped out. Ripping a clean towel from the rack above the toilet to my left, I wrapped it around my waist and left the bathroom without a backward glance.

Chapter 10

COLETTE

Air was absent. Oxygen had left with Ford as he'd disappeared from the bathroom yesterday. His mawmaw had come and knocked on the door, offering me a pair of ill-fitting clothes that I'd quickly traded out for my wet ones, then I disappeared outside

without noticing a single thing about his house.

His bedroom door, just down the hall from the bathroom, had been shut, and I was running on shock and guilt from his aggressive and desperate kiss, leaving me unable to find the strength to knock before I'd left.

Plus, the revelation that his mawmaw clearly knew about us fueled my exit out of that home as quickly and quietly as possible.

And I'd avoided any place where we could've accidentally run into each other for the rest of that day. I hadn't gone into town. Hadn't visited the restaurant. And made sure Azelie was always with my parents as I buried myself in non-existent work at the clinic.

The inevitable ghost lingering over my shoulder followed me all around work yesterday, and now today, as I sat in my car, parked behind the restaurant, it was still there. When would O'Connor strike next, and why had he put a pause on going after the Thibodeauxs simply because he hadn't known about Ford before?

Something else also told me Ford knew more about this entire situation than he let on. There was a voice gnawing at the back of my head saying he questioned O'Connor just like I did, and he didn't believe that snake was "taking a break." There was something deeper at play. Ford wasn't dumb, far from it. In fact, he let people underestimate his intelligence all the time, or at least he had while growing up.

But he clearly wasn't the boy I'd known growing up. Part of me felt like that was my fault. I was still angry at him. But more so, I was angry at myself. Mostly angry for not being more angry at him. Or at least angry for longer. He'd been back for less than a week, and I was already feeling my rock-solid walls crumble around him.

And whatever this was, it felt new, almost refreshing. Obviously, the tension and

desire between us that I'd always felt were still there, evident from the rough kiss we shared. But I still hadn't told him about Liam, and if he knew... Would that change things? Would he think I wasn't worth pursuing anymore? He'd clearly never let me go—it was obvious that I was his one and only love—so if he found out about Liam, would he feel betrayed, even though Liam had been killed by a drunk driver eleven years ago?

Besides, Ford had left me. I thought he'd never come back. So, I'd moved on. And while I knew there was nothing wrong with that, I'd already had an incredible love with Liam. Leaving me to wonder if I was even deserving of another chance with Ford.

I leaned my head back against the rest, wishing I could use the excuse of a busy day at the clinic again today, but I couldn't. The doctor O'Connor hired really hurt me on a professional front.

Despite the fact that I knew the patients wanted to see me, O'Connor and Dr. Brandt had done everything possible to keep me from having any appointments. All of the changes about home life had left me so occupied and overwhelmed that Ford's arrival had even held less of a shock in this little town.

I missed it.

That sense of home and community that I grew up with.

No matter how much my family and the Thibodeauxs were at each other's throats, in the end, when it really mattered, the entire town had always been there for each other. Nobody went hungry, nobody lacked for water or warmth, or a nice crisp, air-conditioned roof over their heads.

We looked out for each other.

And then this nasty motherfucker, Robert O'Connor, showed up, and within four months had turned everything upside down. Most of the people who remained were either too old to leave, stayed to take care of the elderly, or were too poor to go anywhere else.

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I did what I could for free, but even then, things just weren't the same.

Azelie hadn't been able to grow up with that same sense of community. My parents were more extreme with her around Ford's parents and his mawmaw than they'd been with me. I shook my head and attempted to count how many times we'd been on a walk with Azelie when she was little and Ford's family would come into our vicinity. Then suddenly I couldn't find Azelie, and at least one of my parents.

Wait... Confusion rippled through me as it hit me. Ford's family had never been anywhere near Azelie at all until a bit more recently. As in, they'd not once seen her up close to notice anything more than what I could imagine was her red hair before she'd become a teenager.

And it was all by my parents' doing.

How odd...

But that didn't matter right now. What did matter was the current situation with O'Connor. Everything just seemed...fishy. Too coincidental to have happened without it being purposeful, even when something was "an accident."

I knew that my parents were going to give me lip once I walked inside that restaurant, because no matter how much I'd managed to clean things up after being attacked, my excuse of tripping and bumping my head would be unraveled in an instant.

Except for the fact that when I'd returned to clean things up, all the bodies that I could've sworn had been left for dead were gone without a trace—including my

knives.

I knew I wasn't as sane as I pretended to be, because losing those knives pissed me off more than the fact that I was taken hostage.

Shaking my head, I turned off the ignition and stepped into the blistering heat. No matter how much I dreaded heading into the restaurant and facing the ass chewing my parents were about to give me, there was nothing else keeping me in my vehicle.

I rolled my shoulders, clicked the key fob to lock my car, and hustled through the alleyway that also held no evidence of dead bodies. Inching my brows together, I took my time walking around the restaurant's garbage bins, inspecting every brick and cobblestone that could hide blood. Yet, just as there had been when I'd come to clean up, there was nothing.

It baffled me that bodies could just...disappear like that. But it also made me even more concerned. I'd heard the rumors as we all had, when O'Connor had made threats when he'd first come to town.

Except I hadn't believed them. Until now.

Unless... No... The Rougarou wouldn't have come back to eat them... That wasn't part of the legend, at least not the stories that my parents had told me.

With one final sweep across the alley, I wandered out to the street and watched as everything seemed back to its usual slow hustle. Cars drove on by without a second glance at this pass-through town. Although the restaurant wasn't set to open for another hour, it was still disheartening to see people not so much as turn their heads as they moved from one store to another. Despite the urge that begged me to look down the road and see if Ford was at his parents' restaurant, I turned away and opened the front door of LeBlanc's Cajun Haven.

The sizzle of food on the grill in the back hit my ears the moment I walked in. Chairs were still stacked on the tables, and the pile of menus to my right on the hostess stand was in need of organizing. Without calling out that I was here, I got to work pulling seats down and wiping off the tables.

I needed time to gather my thoughts. Thoughts that consistently went back to the man I had foolishly tried to sneak up on. Honestly, I wasn't even sure why I'd reacted like that. It wasn't like he was at fault for O'Connor's decision or his actions.

But what had caught me off guard was just how aggressive yet calm Ford seemed.

Straightforward. To the point. And very much not concerned about being butt-ass naked. I pulled my lips between my teeth and bit back a smile as I braced with my hands against a table.

Damn, he was fucking hot.

I knew how lustful that thought was, and it certainly put a chink in the independence I was clinging to, but there was no denying he'd grown into something I wanted to wrap my legs around and—

“Colette?!” my mom shouted, her voice piercing like a knife through the very dirty thoughts I shouldn't be having.

Thoughts I hadn't had in years. Thoughts I hadn't allowed myself to have until now. Thoughts that made me feel like a giddy teenager itching for the next second I could sneak off to do some very naughty things with a hunk of a—

“Colette!” my mom shouted again.

I blinked and whipped around, tucking my hands behind my back. “Mom,” I gasped.

I prayed she wouldn't notice the heat blooming in my cheeks.

"Your father and I know why you avoided the restaurant all day yesterday. How could you not tell us, though? I had to hear it from someone else!" She threw her hands on her hips, the same apron wrapped around her waist with a new hair net holding back the coily strands of hair that refused to cooperate.

My heart dropped to my toes, and my eyes widened. There was no way she knew about Ford and my encounter yesterday... She couldn't.

"Uh..." I mumbled. With a racing pulse, I swallowed stiffly.

"What if Azelie had been here?" she continued.

I furrowed my brows. Azelie? What did Azelie have to do with Ford and me, other than the massive lie that we all told everyone?

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“I know you’re capable of taking care of yourself, but O’Connor’s men are big and ruthless. They hurt your father, and now you!” She closed her eyes as her bottom jaw trembled.

Relief flooded my figure, and my shoulders fell away from my ears.

This wasn’t about Ford.

“Mama, I’m all right. Just a bump to the back of the head. It was a scare tactic, that’s all.”

“A scare tactic? Then why was there blood on the floor?!” Her eyes shot open, and she closed the distance between us. “It’s those damn Thibodeauxs’ fault! If that—” She clicked her tongue as her mouth pulled into a thin line. Her jaw clenched as she curled her fingers into a ball. “If that horrible son of theirs hadn’t returned, you wouldn’t have been hurt.”

“I’m fine, really. Other than a bonk on the—”

“Absolutely not. You will go over there and tell Ford to turn himself over to O’Connor. It’s the least he could do after causing all of this.” She pursed her lips and cocked her hip.

“Mom, seriously. He didn’t cause all this. Besides, what good would that do?”

“Either you go over there, or I will. But either way, thatboywill face the consequences,” she spat.

Anger boiled my blood, and I swallowed stiffly.

Ford was not a boy.

Besides, I'd already threatened him and asked him to fix this shit, even though he wasn't really at fault. Part of me wasn't ready to admit I'd sought him out for comfort and safety after everything had happened. Part of me wasn't ready to admit that I'd merely found an acceptable excuse to seek him out.

She raised a brow. "It's you or me, Colette. And if I go over there, there will be blood because I am not losing to them."

"I'll go, jeez," I muttered and plopped my rag down on the table. I didn't want to lose to them either, but after accusing Ford—after being attacked—something had shifted inside me. The feud between us and the Thibodeauxs seemed less important now. Especially since I never understood why we were fighting them to begin with.

"Don't take it easy on him just because he's been gone for a while, either; he's still a Thibodeaux, and if he finds out about you-know-what, everything changes," my mom called out after me as I walked out of the restaurant.

Normally, that would've fueled a fire in my belly to give Ford absolute hell. Or at least I thought it would, considering I'd already tried to sneak up on him and stab him again. But maybe it was because I'd already tried to push the blame onto him. Or maybe it was because of the kiss, but either way, all it did was frustrate me.

In reality, it was probably because I'd finally admitted to myself that the true anger festering within me wasn't directed at Ford, but at myself.

Chapter 11

COLETTE

Just as I neared the front of the Thibodeauxs' restaurant, the front door swung open, and out came the very man I was looking for. But he wasn't alone. I glanced back at the street as confusion and shock boiled within my stomach. There was a cop with him, and a cruiser sat parked on the side of the road, directly in front of the restaurant.

Why was a police officer here? Was Ford in trouble? Why hadn't he called me for—

Wait.

I shook my head as their quiet conversation floated into the air. Ford hadn't called me for fifteen years. He hadn't needed me for fifteen years; why would he need me now? There it was. My irrational self trying to come up with a reason to be mad at him. I'd spent so much time being angry at him for leaving that it had practically become part of my identity. A part of me that I didn't like at all.

The cop nodded once at Ford, shook his hand, and with his belt jingling, he walked across the sidewalk to his car. I turned back to look at Ford, who was already staring at me. His two different-colored eyes, deeply set beneath pronounced brow ridges, studied me with an intensity that sent a shiver down my spine.

I remained still. Frozen in place by a look that held an entire world of desire and regret. Pain encompassed his massive frame in a way that seemed as haunting as if he were a ghost himself in a life that he'd never truly owned.

He'd left as an unsteady, unsure boy and come back a man who was confident in himself, yet burdened by what seemed like death itself. I had been clinging to this idea that he was still the kid he left as, because that made hating him so much easier, but as his gaze lingered on me, unmoving and unwavering, I knew that to be entirely false.

Letting go of what he'd done wasn't going to be easy, I knew that. But I believed he knew that, too, and yet, he seemed unafraid to do whatever it took.

His gaze flickered away from my eyes, darting down to my lips and then back up. My heart skipped a beat, landing directly in sync with his again. For the first time in years, I felt...human again. I felt some semblance of being a wild woman again. This time, it seemed, if, and I mean a big if, I toyed with the idea that something could happen between us, I wouldn't be the one in charge.

He would lead me.

Which seemed rather conflicting with the image I tried to convey to everyone else.

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No, I couldn't even toy with that idea. I had others who counted on me. Who needed me to continue doing as I'd always done. Especially Azelie.

Ford slowly tipped his head sideways as a crease formed between his brows. Subconsciously, I mirrored his movement. Maybe letting things go just a smidge for just a moment wouldn't be... a terrible thing. Right? Maybe because we were both different people now, it would work this time.

I sucked in a tiny bit of my bottom lip as his rough kiss from two days ago danced through my mind. Passionate and strong, he'd tasted sweeter than I remembered. It was as if that was the first kiss we'd ever shared with each other, and every kiss that came after would be in comparison to that one. His rough hands, palms that were covered in calluses acquired from a life I wasn't privy to, had danced against my hips, my arms, my wrists, and my cheeks, and for a moment, I'd felt feminine and strong all at the same time.

Ford's chest expanded slowly, raising shoulders that were broad and thick. Damn, was he a specimen to behold. Not the tall, skinny kid whom I'd once loved. I tipped my head the other way, and this time he followed suit. Something about the spark that had once glowed in his piercing gaze seemed dampened. It didn't shine quite as brightly, and there was a part of my soul that wished to wrap around his and take away whatever anguish twisted inside of him.

And I somehow knew it wasn't just from the remorse he felt about leaving me.

"Your mom seems rather pissed," Ford finally spoke, and my eyes widened.

Shit.Right. My mom.

The whole reason I was over here.

“You fucker,” I snarled, threw my hands on my hips with a shake of my head, and stalked forward.

The crease between his brows deepened as he tucked his chin down against his chest, lowering his gaze to me while I closed the distance between us.

“It’s your fault I was attacked!” I continued with a shout.

“What the hell?” he muttered.

I curled my fingers up and then grimaced. “Sorry about this,” I whispered and then slapped him. A sharp sting shot up my arm as my palm connected with his cheek.

But he didn’t even wince. “The fuck did I do this time?” He placed his palm against the red forming on his skin.

With an over exaggerated cock of my hip, I raised my voice even louder. “It’s your fault I was attacked, and you need to fix it!”

He dropped his hand back down to his side. “Again with this?”

I narrowed my gaze, attempting to get some sort of rise out of him. “You should turn yourself in! It’s the least you could do since everything that happened to me is because of you!”

“Will you quit shouting?” he calmly asked, casually watching me.

“NO! You’re the reason I was hurt! It’s always your fault. You hurt me. Again.” I jabbed a finger against his chest and lowered my voice, sending every ounce of lingering rage that seethed within me. “That’s all you’re good for, is to hurt others.”

And his jaw twitched. His eyes flashed with sorrow, turning briefly hollow.

I slammed my lips together. No. What had I just done? That was too deep of a dig. This was supposed to just be for a show for my mom until she went back into the restaurant and I could actually talk to Ford about what happened and ask him why a cop was here.

Ford’s shoulders fell, and he pulled his eyes away from me in defeat.

Silence stretched thin between us. I should say something, but I wasn’t sure what. There was nothing that could take back what I’d said, nothing that could change the knife I’d just twisted in his stomach.

He leaned away from me slightly, his gaze darted above my head, and then for a moment, he drifted off somewhere in his mind that wasn’t here. I closed my eyes. This time, I’d gone too far. He’d hurt me, yes. But that was fifteen years ago, and he wasn’t that same person. Nor was I.

“Was all that for show because of your mom?” he finally muttered beneath his breath.

My eyes shot open as a sliver of hope bled through the cracks in the despair I’d just created.

“Yes,” I stated. “Yes.”

Please, forgive me, I silently pleaded.

Slowly, he bobbed his head up and down and then brought his gaze back to mine. He didn't move, nor did I. I simply widened my eyes, raised my brows, and tried everything in my power to convey that I was so sorry. That I hadn't actually, totally meant what I'd said.

Suddenly, he shot forward and wrapped an arm around my waist. The world flipped upside down as he tossed me over his shoulder, and I was staring at his ass.

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“What the hell, Ford?” I shrieked.

Though, his ass was not a bad view...

Shaking my head, I closed my eyes and slammed a fist against his back. “What are you doing?” I cried out again.

He marched down the sidewalk, tightening his hold around me. “Your mom went inside so we’re gonna fucking talk in private,” he replied.

With large, bounding footsteps that seemed way too quiet for his size, he weaved through the clueless, sparse crowd and shot down the alleyway I could’ve sworn I’d just walked up a few minutes ago.

His massive palm smacked against my butt.

“Stop, Ford. What are you doing?” I asked with a crack in my voice. I wasn’t sure whether it was supposed to be a giggle or some sort of involuntary jolt of shock expressed through some fucking noise in my throat, but some strange sound came out as he proceeded to pat my other ass cheek.

Then fingers dug into the pocket where I’d stuffed my car keys, and he pulled them out. Still not a word left his lips as I heard a click, and then lights flashed on my vehicle.

Now, his chest rumbled with a chuckle. “A Honda CR-V?”

“Don’t judge, asshole. It’s a very practical vehicle, okay?” I pursed my lips and attempted to cross my arms, even though I knew he couldn’t see it.

“Fair. Just not what I pictured for you as a grown adult is all.”

“And what vehicle did you picture for me?”

He shrugged, which shifted me tighter against his neck. “Not really sure, just something more... forceful. No.” He shook his head and finally stopped walking. I peered around his back and found he’d paused in front of my gray car. “More assertive. Wait.” He paused speaking again and reached forward with a hand.

“More hostile. Yeah, that’s the right word,” he said, and a click sounded. The world blurred around me once more as I was flung from his shoulder. My back slammed against a seat, and the gray interior roof of my car came into focus just in time to watch him climb in after me and shove me the rest of the way across the back, forcing me up against the far door.

Chapter 12

COLETTE

“Hostile? What the hell do you mean with that?” I snapped, choking back a slight giggle as Ford somehow folded himself into the cramped space. Damn, his size alone was intimidating enough to deter violence.

My stomach fluttered at the thought that I wouldn’t be solely responsible for Azelie’s well-being anymore.

Hold on, absolutelynot.

With his head tipped to the side and his knees facing the front seat so he was able to fit, he slunk down onto the seat and looked to the side, directly at me. “Hostile,” he simply said with a raised brow.

I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms and legs, tucking them up against my body.

A smirk cracked his hardened exterior, which had barely shown any emotion until now. “Like how you slapped the fuck out of me for no damn reason,” he finally added.

I sighed and relaxed my body back against the window. “That was just for show ’cause my mom was watching, and she’s the one that sent me over. She blames you for my attack, and since I kind of avoided coming into town all day yesterday, that was really the first time my parents have had a chance to turn that blame onto you. I am kinda dreading all of the questions that they’re going to ask once I return because the couple minutes we spoke last night hadn’t left a lot of time to relay...everything.” I glanced away from his intense, inquisitive stare. How the hell was I supposed to explain how I’d been saved without sounding like I was insane to them? Including explaining it to Ford.

I snapped my eyes back to his gaze. Time to change the subject. “Anyway, why were you with a cop?”

He raised his brows and looked away from me, staring at the back of the headrest in front of him. “My pops said that he thought he’d forgotten to turn the light off in the kitchen at the restaurant last night. So, I went back late. A whole bunch of O’Connor’s cronies were there. They’d broken in and had begun trashing the place. They clearly weren’t taking a break from us like he’d told you. That was just a decoy.”

“So, you reported it to the police, who are in bed with O’Connor? Like, you do know

that they take bribes and hush money from him, so what good does that do?" I asked, as his jaw tightened and knotted. My heart jumped to my throat as something warm and hot wormed low in my belly. My gaze lingered on his jawline with a hint of stubble neatly trimmed across skin that seemed hardened by whatever he'd experienced in the past fifteen years.

"It's on record. Even though they'll push it to the bottom of the stack and ignore it, whenever shit comes to a head, at least there's some record of it. Besides," he turned his head back my way, and his different-colored eyes met mine. "Gotta play like I don't know as much as I do."

"Oh, you dumb ass," I muttered with a grin. And then his words really sunk in. "Wait, you said a whole bunch? How many men was a whole bunch?"

"How many men attacked you?" he countered, and I glanced at his hands that sat almost too still in his lap. I wasn't sure if I was upset that he didn't seem even more worried about me, or if I was upset that I cared about how concerned he was for my well-being.

"Ten plus O'Connor. Though he threatened Azelie more than me, other than taking my knives. And having one of his men shoot another one of his guys," I grumbled.

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“What about Azelie, and why specifically her?” he asked with a furrowed brow.

“Better question, how do you know who Azelie is? She was born after you’d left.”

“One, it’s a small town, and everyone talks. Two, I’ve seen her at the restaurant, and while I’ve not been able to get a close look, it’s rather obvious who she is. I mean, your parents literally said copy and paste with those genetics. She looks pretty much exactly like you did at that age. There’s a few things different, but yeah.” Ford leaned his head back. “Anyway, rumors about your attack have been quiet and few, which I assume is O’Connor’s doing. So, tell me everything that happened.”

“Why? What the hell difference would it make?” I sliced a glare at him.

“Colette, don’t.” His voice was razor sharp and harsh, so sudden and a stark contrast to how he’d spoken to me a moment ago. It was as if a knife had slashed right through my stomach.

My eyes widened at his words. He’d never spoken to me that way before. Ever. I’d never heard him speak like that to anyone, not even the assholes that bullied him a bit in middle school before he’d grown.

“Just, tell me what the fuck happened, and don’t leave anything out. The only way we’re going to get rid of this guy is by figuring out his end game before he gets to it. And I need to know—”

“So, this isn’t you being concerned for me? This is all about finishing what you came here for so you can just up and—”

“This is about you!” He threw his hands in the air. “Everything has always fucking been about you, but you’ve acted like an asshole toward me since the moment I stepped foot back here. I left for you. I stayed away for you.” His gaze swung toward me with more rage and excruciating anguish than I’d ever seen in my life. He slapped a hand against his chest.

“I left my family for you. I gave up everything so you didn’t have to. So, stop pretending like we’re still eighteen. I get that I gave up any chance of coming back to you because of how I left, and that’s my fault. I get you moved on. I get I shouldn’t have left like I had, but I did. And nothing can change that.”

Ford inhaled deeply and shook his head, lowering his voice. “But everything I’ve done and still do is for you. So, please.” He gently laid his hands in his lap as they began to shake, and his words became almost a whimper. “Please, stop hating me. At least for the time being, so you and your family can become safe again. And then I’ll leave. Just like I know—” His voice cracked, and he cleared his throat. “Just like I know you want, because all I want to do is protect you.”

I stared at him. Disbelief coursed through me, not because he was wrong, but because he was mostly right. He’d never been this raw and vulnerable with me before. Mostly. I didn’t want him to leave. Not again. Not ever. But with the way I’d been treating him, acting so immature and selfish, I could understand why he believed that.

But my secret wouldn’t remain one if I let this anger go. I’d confess to what would potentially make him hate me as much as he thought I hated him. All of this rage, all of this front I put on was to keep that secret. To keep the one person safe that I’d been left to fight for on my own.

My shoulders sagged as I realized that my own choice had partially created that burden. A choice that I’d thought was right at the time. Just like Ford thought, leaving was the right choice at that time.

I wasn't as innocent in all of this as I pretended to be.

"I don't hate you," I whispered.

Ford pulled a thin smile on his lips. "It's okay. I would hate me too if I was in your shoes."

"But I don't. I'm just..."

"Angry?" He glanced at me. "Hurt?"

"I felt betrayed. And like I'd had my choice ripped away from me. So, yes. I'm angry. And hurt. But mostly angry at myself because I'm not angry at you like I was literally five seconds before you showed up."

I faced the gray headrest in front of me, ignoring the sun bouncing off the shiny silver metal accents. There it was. Admittance to thoughts I'd barely accepted before walking into the restaurant this morning.

I whipped my gaze back toward him and wagged a finger. "This doesn't mean I forgive you. Just that I won't be so..."

"Hostile toward me?" He shot me a crooked grin.

"Again with that word," I grumbled.

He chuckled and returned to his lazy gaze out the window. "Please, Cher. Tell me what happened."

"It won't change anything."

“No. But I just... There were fifteen guys, and I feel like I’m going crazy with—”

“You saw something!” I interjected and sat up straight.

His jaw twitched as if he was chewing on what to say next but remained quiet.

“Something that if you were to say it out loud, someone would tell you that you needed to be in a psych ward.”

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“It was just a story growing up,” he finally muttered.

“The Rougarou showed up for you, too,” I stated, staring at him with hopefulness filling my heart.

“You know we’re not supposed to say its name out loud, or we’ll end up with the curse, right?” he replied a little more lighthearted.

“Yeah, well, I said its name while looking directly at it, and it...freed me. Maybe it’s protecting our home. Its home.”

Ford slowly nodded. “Cher, are you okay?”

“Am I—” I paused as his eyelids fluttered closed, taking with it any indication of whatever he was feeling. I couldn’t believe how good he’d become at masking his body language. It was as if I stared at some unfinished statue, something stone and cold that lacked any emotion. But I knew better. Because, yes, he wasn’t that kid anymore, but he was still Ford. “I’m okay. Though he did steal the knives you made me,” I muttered.

“Actually, that reminds me. I have something for you, but it’s in my duffel at home,” he answered and shimmied awkwardly to try and face me better.

A giggle burst from my throat, and I slapped a hand over my lips. “I’m sorry,” I said, muffled behind my palm.

“What’s so funny? This isn’t exactly a silly situation.”

“I know, but you look crammed in this back seat, and watching you try to shift is a bit funny.” I giggled again and dropped my hand from my mouth. “Guess car sex is out of the question.”

And my palm slapped over my lips again. Heat rose to my cheeks as I stared forward, refusing to look at Ford. I could only imagine that look on his face, and I was terrified to find out if it was desire or disgust.

“Cher, you realize that just because I can’t lie down on the back seat, doesn’t make car sex out of the question. Pretty sure some of the best sex we had was in my old truck,” he said, almost too casually for my liking.

I chanced a glance his way to find a smirk on his face and his head tipped back. He wasn’t looking at me or facing me; he was simply smiling to himself.

“Explain to me how it would work now? Have you not recently looked in the mirror? Or maybe stepped on a scale? You aren’t as skinny as you were,” I countered.

“Hmmmm. There’s the front passenger seat that I can lay down, and you’re small. So, you can climb right on. Even back here, Cher. There’s plenty of room on this lap of mine.”

My cheeks burned warmer with the sparkle in his eyes. Yet, he continued to stare forward.

“You know what, I don’t even know why we’re talking about this when we should be discussing how O’Connor might escalate and why he singled out Azelie,” I quickly replied.

Ford flopped his head to the side and brought his eyes to meet mine. “I’ve got security cameras ordered and coming for, yes, both your restaurant and my family’s.

So, the next time he tries something, there will be irrefutable evidence.”

His gaze remained locked with mine, and his words seemed a far distance from my thoughts. My veins burned with heat, and a magnetic pull tugged me toward him. He wasn’t wrong; I could easily straddle his lap. I could give in to the desire that inched me a smidge closer to him.

A momentary distraction from the doom that lingered around us couldn’t hurt. Azelie was safe with her cross-country coaches at their meeting right now, my parents were in the restaurant getting ready for the day, so there was no way O’Connor would do anything right now.

It was just Ford and me.

I could ask him how he could afford security cameras later.

I could get after him for everything else later.

Right now, I wanted him. I’d wanted him since the moment he’d arrived back in town. It was time to grow the fuck up and be an adult. An adult who did adult things.

Even if in secret with the one person where the history between us was something we hadn’t quite hashed out.

Even if it was probably going to start something wrong.

I needed him.

Just one more time.

As his eyes remained fixed on mine, self-control fled the vehicle.

I launched myself across the car, threw my legs around his waist, and slammed my lips against his.

Chapter 13

FORD

My heart hammered in my chest as her kiss crashed against me. I didn't hesitate in inviting it. She'd been selfish and mean to me, but she'd also had every right. Maybe we were making a little progress in repairing the damage that I'd created, and if I was honest with myself, her escalated behavior toward me probably wasn't having the effect she wanted. She'd always been more aggressive and assertive. Which I'd loved. But now? Like damn. Stab me again, baby, 'cause it did the exact opposite of what it should.

I really should see a therapist about that... Getting bricked up when— Nope. I would keep that thought to myself.

She tore the ball cap off my head and tossed it to the floor as I dug my fingers into her hips. For the first time in fifteen years, I let go.

All the control that I clung to for dear life left through the window.

Any fear about someone seeing us together fled with it. As surely as if I'd trained my gun sights on it.

I wanted this.

The fiery taste of her tongue in my mouth and her body pressed against mine shot static up my back.

Panting, she tore away, tossing her messy hair to one side with a flick of her head, and I didn't wait for her to lean forward again. My lips were against her mouth again, and my tongue down her throat without hesitation. My hands slipped around to her back, reveling in the feel of her body beneath my touch. She leaned into my chest, deepening the aggression that twisted around us.

Whatever this was, battled between being a hate fuck and too much time passing since we'd been intimate, but I wasn't going to stop and argue about it. I didn't care. Colette LeBlanc was kissing me in the back seat of her car. I wasn't about to do anything to mess this shit up.

The constant war in my mind had gone silent.

The grief and regret that consumed my soul quieted when I traced my fingertips across the bottom hem of her T-shirt. It disappeared as she weaved her hands through my hair, rolling her hips against the growing bulge in my pants.

I moaned into her mouth as a quiet gasp released from her lips. My world was turning black. Everything except for my Cher faded into the background as she pulled away from my lips and raised her hands above her head.

With a quick tug, I slipped her shirt off. Pressing my palms against her bare waist, I took in every ounce of her exposed body to me. She had more freckles than the last time I'd seen her like this, and I wanted to trace my tongue across each one of them. I wanted to rip her bra from her body and tear away any shred of clothing separating us.

But she cut my lingering and lustful gaze short with her tongue between my teeth again. Velvet and swollen, her lips worked against my mouth, and my eyes closed as I let myself disappear into the moment.

Ego was left behind, and self-control was on a different continent as her hands slid beneath my shirt and traced up my abdomen. I gripped her hips tighter, begging for more as she rocked back and forth against my hard-on.

Fuckwas I—

A shrill, blaring ring shot through the fuzzy state of arousal.

Colette stopped grinding against me, and her eyes snapped open at the same time as mine. Her heart beat erratically against my chest as a cellphone rang again.

“That’s not me,” I said, panting.

She sat back, breathing heavily as she reached behind her. Snatching the source of the noise off the center console, her brows tightened at the sight of the screen and whoever was calling.

Without removing herself from my lap, she tapped the screen. “Azellie?” she said and clicked the speaker button.

“I need you to come get me,” Azellie replied.

“Why? I thought you guys were going to go for a run with everyone after the meeting? Is something wrong?” Colette glanced at me, her brows raised in concern.

“Are you... Are you okay?” Azellie asked in response. “You sound out of breath. I thought you were helping at the restaurant today?”

I pulled my lips between my teeth as Colette narrowed her gaze into a warning glare.

“Yes, just busy at the restaurant like you said. Tell me what’s going on,” she replied,

keeping her eyes locked on mine.

I silently leaned back, letting my hands linger on her waist and not entirely looking solely at her face. The only woman I'd ever loved, slept with, or kissed was shirtless on my lap, I was going to at least take a peek.

“Kevin and Carla apparently had some family emergency, so they took off. They wouldn't say what, and so—” Azelie began.

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“So, there’s no adult with you guys anymore,” Colette finished.

“Yes. But that’s no big deal. I just need a ride back into town.”

“Yes, it is a big deal with O’Connor roaming around after our family.” Colette sounded just like my mother had when scolding me during high school, and I couldn’t help but smile. Being an older sister suited her, which only made me—

Hold up, Ford. No. I didn’t need to jump to that. Not yet. I needed to fix things with her before I told her that she would make a great mom. That would fucking scare her off even if it was an innocent thing to have crossed my mind.

I focused on the conversation as Colette finished scolding Azelie for not being concerned about the fact that there were only three other kids around her at the moment.

“Okay, yes. It’s a big deal. Anyway, can you come get me?” Azelie grumbled in annoyance once Colette finished speaking.

“Just you? What about the others?” Colette answered.

“Well, Macy’s mom won’t be here for another half hour, and I don’t want to wait that long. Cory and Thomas are also waiting on Cory’s brother, but he’s only got that bench seat in his truck, so I won’t fit.” Azelie’s voice reminded me of Colette’s the longer she spoke.

Colette closed her eyes and tightened her hold on the phone. “Yeah, I’ll be there in

just a bit. Stay safe, love you.”

“Love you, too,” Azelie replied, and the line went dead.

“I’ll go,” I stated immediately as Colette dropped the phone on the seat beside her and snatched up her shirt.

“What?” She froze and stared at me wide-eyed.

“You said your parents haven’t even had much of a chance to talk to you about being attacked. If you have to leave to go pick up Azelie, who’s also been specifically threatened, what are they going to think?”

She fervently shook her head. “No. It’s my job to protect her. To protect my parents.”

“I know. But you can’t do both right now. Look, my mom only lets me sleep in my room because of my dad and Mawmaw, and because I know she secretly still loves me, but she doesn’t want me around the restaurant yet. I can’t blame her, but that means I don’t have to explain where I’m going and why. You go take care of your parents, and I’ll go pick up Azelie.”

Colette slowly inhaled and slid her shirt back over her head.

“I hate how logical that sounds,” she grumbled. “Except you hate any sort of confrontation. So, if this is O’Connor and his doing, or if he gets wind of this, and just happens to take advantage of it—”

“Cher. Just because I hate it, and try to avoid it, doesn’t mean I can’t handle my shit. Besides, I tend to intimidate people by simply showing up. I’ll take care of her, okay? You’ve gotta start trusting that I’m not as complacent as you think I am.” I slid my hands off her waist reluctantly, giving her room to climb off my lap.

She chewed on her bottom lip as if the concept that someone else could take care of her was foreign to her. I opened the car door, grabbed my hat, and wiggled awkwardly out, bumping my head on the frame as I exited.

“Okay. She’s at the high school up on the track,” Colette said, crawling out after me.

“Send Azelie a picture of me, with my name. Tell her to speak to no one, and go with no one else. And if anyone approaches her, to go and hide until I get there. Send her my number as well, so if she needs to call me, she can. And send me her number,” I instructed as Colette shut the door behind her.

She nodded once, quickly snapped a photo on her phone, and then tapped away on the screen. “Same number?”

I nodded once and gave her a tight smile, tucking the baseball cap back on my head. “Just in case you ever needed me after I left.”

Her fingers froze mid-text, and her chest stopped slowly expanding as the breath caught in her lungs.

“Also, here’s your car keys back.” I dug my hand in my pocket and pulled them out, quickly diverting the attention.

She shook her head, and without lifting her gaze toward me, she resumed typing. “No, you’ll need that to go pick her up.”

“I’ll take my motorcycle. We don’t need your parents wondering why your car is gone.”

“Oh,” she muttered and finally locked her phone. My own phone buzzed in the front of my black cargo pants pockets as she slipped hers into the back of her jeans.

And I jogged off without another word to her. I knew we were on some very rocky ground. Knew that everything was confusing and we hadn't even addressed the fact that we were about to very much fuck in the back of her car, but right now wasn't the time to discuss any of that.

Someone she cared about was possibly in danger. A teenage girl whom O'Connor had called out specifically. I took a mental note to find out if there was some connection between Azelie and one of O'Connor's contacts; otherwise, the mention of her was just an empty threat and something to rattle Colette's tough exterior. I prayed it was just that. Just something to try and intimidate her into selling, because I couldn't fathom how a teenager and O'Connor might be connected.

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But I also couldn't let go of shit I'd seen overseas. Children weren't off limits in war, and while I rationally knew this wasn't war, this was a fight, a battle, and no matter how much I wished I didn't know the reality of the nasty shit of the world, I did.

And I wouldn't risk pretending like monsters didn't exist at the expense of someone innocent to the harsh realities of how cruel this life could be.

Chapter 14

FORD

After noting four different vehicles parked in the high school lot, I wandered away from the tall, red brick building and up a small hill toward the football stadium. Inside those metal bleachers that encircled the field, Azelie and her friends should be waiting.

By themselves. If I got up there and found O'Connor, there was a part of me that I worried I wouldn't be able to keep locked away. Protecting people I'd never met came rather instinctively to me, but this time it wasn't someone I didn't know. This was Azelie, someone Colette cared about and loved. Someone I knew.

This was my home. This asshole was on my turf. Coming for the very people that I'd left to protect all those years ago. As silent as the air around me, I crept up the hillside. Déjà Vu was my friend at this moment, because the last time I'd snuck beneath these bleachers was to meet another LeBlanc.

I figured I'd breach through the side, instead of just walking straight in through the

main entrance beside the picket fence and the rundown ticket booth. Just in case. As I wandered around the edge, sweat pooled on my neck in anticipation of whatever fight may occur. The only strange thing about this moment was being alone. I half expected some dark whispered comment from Bernie over the comms or some instruction from Dom siphoning into my ear.

But not even a potato bug crawled upon the cement that I crept across.

The metal of the bleachers was cold beneath my hand as I ducked underneath the crisscross of silver. A stuffiness surrounded me as the air stilled, as if trying to hide my presence. All of this was familiar. Every hair standing on end upon my body, the adrenaline pouring through my veins was a sensation I knew and craved.

Further evidence that avoiding conflict wasn't something I desired as much as I used to. Was it preferable? Always. But I'd take a fight over running away any day if that meant taking care of the people that I cared about.

What a fucking foolish decision it had been to leave. I was bigger than her parents, even then I'd been taller. Maybe I could've handled it and won. Maybe I could've taken them on, but at what cost? The control in fights I had now, I hadn't possessed then, even if I'd been willing to stay and possibly fight instead of being killed.

Slowly, I weaved my way through the shadowed surroundings as teenage chatter met my ears. I paused, scanning for any sound of a threat or an adult, and immediate relief flooded my body. I braced a hand against a beam and allowed the brief worry to slither from my veins. They were fine.

"How long did you say it would take?" a young man said, his voice cracking from puberty, and I chuckled. I was not a stranger to that myself, though the last time I'd had any sort of moment like that was years ago.

“My mom said maybe fifteen minutes or less? So, about five more minutes and he should be here,” a girl replied. A girl I knew from listening to her speak to Colette, and my heart stopped in my chest.

Did she say mom?

“Let me see his picture one more time,” another girl replied. I had to assume that was Macy, since Azelie had said Macy’s mom would take over a half hour, and she was the only other girl mentioned.

Creeping forward so I could see out from beneath the bleachers, I focused on the group. Two boys and two girls. Azelie sat between the other girl who had sleek blonde hair pulled back in a tight, low ponytail. She stared over Azelie’s shoulder, with the same nosiness as the curly, dark-haired boy on her other side, who inched closer to see the screen.

The sun beat down upon the red track encircling the green turf field in the center. The blue paint upon the field goal posts was peeling, and I doubted they’d retouched it in the past ten years at least. The white lines on the track asphalt were a bit faded, but not terribly worn. At least that had had some renovation because I could’ve sworn it was black the last time I saw it.

All four kids sat on the turf inside the ring, wearing matching running uniforms that I knew for sure hadn’t changed. Colette had convinced me to join cross country our freshman and sophomore years, which I turned out to be really good at, and it was like looking in a mirror at these lanky kids who had yet to develop any muscles.

“I know him. My mom was talking about how the Thibodeauxs’ son returned the other day, and she pointed at a guy who looked exactly like that when we went into town,” Macy stated and leaned back against her palms, turning her face toward the sky.

“Isn’t your family, like, not cool with the Thibodeauxs?” the dark-haired boy asked.

Azelie placed her phone against the turf and curled her legs up to her chest. “Yeah. I mean, all my grandparents have been able to talk about lately is ‘the Thibodeauxs this, and the Thibodeauxs that.’ Honestly, it’s getting annoying,” she replied and plunked her chin against her knees.

Grandparents.

“And yet, your mom sent their son. The dude who left fifteen years ago for no reason?” the other boy said. He pushed some light brown hair away from his face, the shaggy strands coated in a thin layer of sweat.

Frozen in place, my hand cemented to the beam I braced against as nausea curled up in my throat. Colette wasn’t Azelie’s older sister. Colette was her mom. I briefly closed my eyes and then returned my gaze to the group of kids.

“I heard he left because he accidentally killed someone,” the dark-haired boy replied.

Azelie clicked her tongue. “You’re an idiot, Cory. If he’d killed someone, he’d be in jail.”

“Well, I heard he left because he—” Macystarted.

“Y’all look like you’re lonely,” an older male voice sheared the casual conversation occurring.

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I scanned the entire stadium to find it empty other than those four kids until a shadow caught my eye. A figure emerged from around the bleachers through the main entrance. He walked with quiet, slow footsteps, and I kicked myself for not picking up he was there sooner. Though, I guess I was unusually preoccupied by the fact that Colette was Azelie's fuckingmom.

He swayed almost unsteadily onto the track with two more boys following behind like birds in a flock. All of them had a similar look about them. Three boys who were old enough to have some facial hair, old enough to not need adult supervision, and a chill swept down my spine as all three narrowed their gaze onto Azelie and Macy.

Shit. I prayed they simply had hit puberty earlier than normal and were nothing more than high school rivals or some such shit to these kids. Like the cool kids versus the nerds. These three guys had to be in some rival clique, right? Not sent by O'Connor.

"We're fine, so bug off," Cory replied, standing up.

I had to give credit to the kid, despite still being a skinny teenager, and definitely younger than the approaching assholes, he wasn't afraid to assert himself.

"I wasn't talking to you," the stranger hissed and pushed greasy hair behind his ear.

"We're fine," Azelie stated again, and all three kids rose. "Let's go." She tucked her hand into Macy's elbow and shifted to walk around the three strangers.

"Ah, where ya going? Don't you remember us?" the man said again.

I inched forward to the edge of the bleachers, ready to sprint the couple of hundred meters needed and lay this guy out flat. But I hesitated. Was Azelie as fiery as her mom and would get pissed if I stepped in? Would she be embarrassed that she needed saving by someone who wasn't one of those two boys with her?

"No, we don't remember you. So fuck off!" Azelie snarled, and I sucked my bottom lip between my teeth.

Yep, just like her mom.

"Oh, come on, we only graduated last year, you have to know us," the stranger replied.

Nope. Fuck, no. They were fifteen, and this motherfucker was a grown ass adult. To hell with how embarrassed Azelie might end up.

"We just finished our freshman year. Of course we don't know you. So, leave, creep," Thomas said, standing up beside Cory as Macy and Azelie quickly attempted to skirt around the side of the three new adults.

The ringleader threw out his arm and blocked their path with a wry smile. I shot out of my hiding place.

"Fuck off. I won't ask again," I snarled and stalked their way.

The eyes on every single kid widened, even the three "men."

"Get lost, loser. Can't you see we're just chatting?" he called out at me, but took a stumbling step backward.

"Why would we chat with you?" Azelie hissed and hocked a huge wad of snot at the

stranger.

Rage seethed behind his eyes as he wiped the loogie from his cheek.

Shit. As much as I couldn't stop the smile from cracking upon my lips, I knew that look.

His focus ripped from me, and he glared at Azelie. "You little bitch."

"Don't you fucking dare," I snarled, stopping the stranger from grabbing her arm.

He whipped his gaze back to me. "What are you going to do, old man? Hit me? Call the cops?"

With three more steps, I got right in his face and stared down at him. "You should fucking hope I call them. You should fucking pray that I call them because they're the only ones saving you from me if you so much as touch a hair on her head."

His pointy Adam's apple bobbed in his throat as he took another stumbling step backward. Alcohol seeped from his skin, and that musty scent of weed. "I'll—I'll—" he stammered.

"You'll be begging for them. Being in prison as a fucking pedophile would be paradise compared to what I'll do if I see you so much as breathe in her direction again," I sneered at him.

Red. Everything around me was red. Like a bull to a fighter, I was the bull. Maddened by a type of devil I'd become familiar with overseas, yet here they were, in my hometown. The beast that had been trained to obliterate men like this one clawed at the cage within me. The steel bars keeping it at bay weren't going to hold out for long.

“You—You’re—” he stuttered as he and his two companions took another couple stumbling steps back. This time, I stayed still, a barrier between the teenagers and the type of men I knew all too well. Creeps like them had hung around high school when I was a teenager myself.

“Call my bluff. Please,” I teased and tipped my head, keeping my gaze steady on the three of them, my hands curled into fists as they trembled with rage. “Apparently, the town already thinks I’ve murdered someone. Death would be a relief for what I’d do to you.”

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With a squeak, he turned and ran. Not even bothering to glance back over his shoulder to make sure his two buddies were following him. They were. But his ass blurred behind dust from how quickly he shot toward his car that had its bumper duct taped to it. A gold, run-down Civic. A car that hadn't been there when I'd parked my Harley.

The moment his buddies flew into the backseat of the car, the three of them disappeared back to whatever hole they'd crawled out of in a cloud of exhaust smoke.

Once again, leaving me filled with relief. And a smidgeon of disappointment. I was really itching to hit him.

At least it confirmed that the coach's family emergency was real, not something orchestrated by O'Connor. Time to get Azelie back to her mom.

Her mom. Colette.

Chapter 15

FORD

I remained staring long after they'd left the parking lot. Long after the dust settled, I simply watched. I wasn't sure what was rolling through my head, if I was being honest with myself. The control I'd exhibited was fading with every thumping heartbeat. I'd never been so blindly enraged before, despite all the fights I'd been in. No, there was something else that had seeped from my skin.

My hands had begged to rip him apart. I wanted to snap every bone in his body, one by one. I wanted to hear him wail in agony caused by me. I thirsted for it. It wouldn't have been a fun or fair fight. Three barely legal guys drunk and high off their asses, I could handle that in my sleep.

It was who and what they were threatening that had me barely able to see straight.

To even toy with the idea of talking with a minor in that way...

I closed my eyes and dove into the boiling red rage within me. It kept at bay the casualties that I hated to admit had ended up on the opposite end of my gun muzzle a time or two. It allowed me to live in denial of what we'd sometimes been asked to do. That killing someone who wasn't even eighteen had never happened.

Maybe this rage was redemption for things I'd been ordered to do that still haunted me.

Maybe I was no better...

Maybe...

Just... Maybe...

Rage felt better than the hollowness that I bathed in most nights. Sleep was neither comforting nor provided me as much reprieve as I wished it would.

"Ford?" a gentle voice slithered through my dissociative thoughts. A voice that sounded all too much like Colette. All too much like the woman who had no choice but to be stubborn, and anything but gentle. I'd caused all those walls at first, and then instead of manning up and keeping an eye on her, I'd what? Stayed away because she'd found someone new, which, yes, had been the respectful thing to do.

Except he'd fucking died six months after I'd returned for her. It was all my fucking fault. And now, here I was, expecting her to still have some tenderness to her when love had done nothing but destroy her and leave her alone. She'd spent eleven years raising a daughter—

My eyes snapped open, and I spun around. It wasn't Colette. It was her daughter. It was Azelie. Azelie had spoken.

"Sorry. I—" I began, but couldn't find words to continue.

Her brows knitted together as I finally took a moment to look at her. "You really look like her," I whispered. The same cherry-red hair with untamable curls wrapped in coils around a face that wasn't quite as slender and oval as her mom's, though. No. Freckles littered a wider face with cheeks that hadn't matured yet. Her eyes weren't quite as bright green as Colette's, but the lashes were just as thick.

"And you're nearly as tall as she is. Aren't you fifteen?" I continued, a little louder this time. She was skinny as a stick and tall, much different than Colette yet all the same...

Azelie smiled. "Almost. I'll be fifteen in a couple weeks."

I scanned her companions who had yet to move. Whose mouths all still hung open. "Cory and Thomas?" I nodded at the two boys who stood off to my left.

"Y-y-yes?" Cory slowly said, finally clamping his lips together.

"You did good," I said.

"Did good? They would've eaten us alive," Thomas replied, and his shoulders fell.

“You still stood up to them. That’s what matters. Anyway, I’m gonna get Azelie back to her mom. Are y’all good or do you want me to wait until the rest of your folks show up?”

Macy shook her head. “I don’t think they’re coming back.”

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“Yeah, we’re good,” Cory said and finally rolled his neck. “Besides, my brother should be here in like one minute. We’ll have him wait with us until Macy’s mom gets here.”

“All right.” I scanned the group one last time and then glanced back down at Azelie. She gave me another wide smile. Without a word, she skipped toward the exit, and I tagged along, giving myself one more second to scan the surroundings again. I hated leaving three kids alone, but my conscience was eased as an old 90s single-cab truck pulled into the parking lot.

Returning my focus to the teenager I was tasked with bringing back, I took a couple of large steps and closed the distance between us. Without saying anything, I guided her to the left and down the hill where I’d parked off to the edge so it wasn’t out in the open, just in case.

“So, how do you and my mom know each other? Everyone says that you’re the Thibodeaux son that left, and I thought us LeBlancs were in some sort of rivalry with you guys,” Azelie suddenly said.

I smiled to myself as a small chuckle danced in my throat. “We technically are. I mean, my parents and your grandparents are definitely feuding.”

“But not you and my mom?”

Raising a brow, I stared at the blue, cloudless sky. “Nah, though I’m pretty sure she’s not too pleased with me either.”

Azelie stitched her brows together. “But she sent you to get me. That means she trusts you to protect me.”

“Or she had no other options that wouldn’t send up red flags with your grandparents.” I glanced at her, and she shook her head.

“You’re not going to tell me?” Azelie asked and narrowed her eyes.

With a grin, I shook my head. “Nope. I’ve already been stabbed by your mom, so she gets to tell you what she wants.”

“You’re being metaphorical about that, right?” Azelie continued.

I simply chuckled. This was strange, murky water I was wading through. Colette had no idea I knew Azelie was her daughter, not sister, which seemed to be something Colette had been avoiding telling me. I’d flat-out said “sister” to Colette, and she hadn’t corrected me. Part of me also swam in a river of shock.

“Can I ask you something else?” Azelie said, pulling me out of my thoughts again as we wandered off the grass and onto the sidewalk.

I nodded and glanced at her. She kept her gaze forward, but as her brows scrunched tighter together, it was as if the wheels spinning in her head were visible to the naked eye.

“Did you ever get bullied for it growing up?” she asked.

“Bullied for...what?” I replied.

“Your heterochromia. You know, your two different-colored eyes.”

I stopped walking and studied her. She took a couple more steps and then turned back to face me. Innocent eyes lifted to my face and locked onto my gaze.

Slowly, I shook my head, racking my memories for any moment I could remember some kid being an ass about it. “No, not really. I got bullied in middle school ’cause I hadn’t hit puberty like the other kids, but never for my eyes.” Tipping my head, I studied her gaze intensely. Something strange swirled behind her gaze, something that pleaded with me that I couldn’t quite decipher. “In fact, especially in high school, I got some...what’s the word y’all use these days? Clout? Is that what it is? They gave me clout.”

Her shoulders drooped forward, and she finally pulled her gaze away from mine. But she remained quiet. I wasn’t sure if that was normal for her or not, considering this was our first real interaction that wasn’t just me seeing her down the street at her family’s restaurant.

“We don’t say clout, but I get what you’re saying,” she mumbled with a soft giggle.

“Why do you ask?” I pressed.

She looked back at me and then reached up toward her face. Closing her eyes, she pinched her right eyelid and then opened again. “Because I’ve never met someone with eyes like mine.”

One hazel eye and one green eye stared back at me.

I couldn’t stop my jaw from falling open as she released her eyelid, blinked a couple times, and then upon reopening, her green colored contact had slid back into place.

Complete heterochromia just like me. She had two different colored eyes. A hazel one just like I did. All words left my mind as I simply stared at her. She watched me

quietly, but said nothing and made no move to shift her stance. This wasn't possible, was it? Heterochromia was either genetic or caused by some traumatic experience.

Did Liam have heterochromia? I mean, I hadn't gotten a good look at his eyes the one time I'd seen him. It had been way too painful watching Colette smile at him the way she had. So, it was very possible it came from him. Or was it from something traumatic?

"How long have you had it?" I asked.

She furrowed her brows. "What do you mean? My whole life."

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“Heterochromia can happen from a traumatic experience, so I was just...” My voice trailed off as I stared at her eyes.

“Oh. Well, no. It’s always been this way. The moment I was old enough to wear contacts, my grandparents bought me ones that matched my green eye and forced me to wear them, saying that they don’t want me to get bullied for it.” She shrugged her shoulders like it was no big deal.

But it was. It was a big deal. Not the whole thought she might get bullied for it, but the fact that she had heterochromia in the first place.

“Did Liam have heterochromia?” I asked.

“Liam? No, why?” she replied. Her brows raised as innocence dripped from her words.

She was nearly fifteen. She was Colette’s daughter. She had heterochromia.

I ran a hand over my mouth and jaw, unable to speak. There was no way. My heart raced in my chest. It couldn’t be real. Colette would’ve said something to me.

“Have you—” My voice cracked, and I cleared my throat. “Have you ever met my parents?”

She shook her head. “No. Grammy and Pop Pop never let me anywhere near them as a kid, and now as a teenager, they obviously can’t keep me as far away as before, but they still intervene anytime I’ve ‘almost’ crossed paths with them. Why?”

I swallowed stiffly and finally filled my lungs with the oxygen they'd been deprived of. "Nothing. Let's get you back to your mom before she chews my ass out for taking too long."

"She's gonna chew your butt out for saying 'ass,'" Azelie replied with a grin.

"Well, then don't tell her I said that." I nodded at the Harley parked alongside the road.

Her eyes lit up, and her grin widened. "Probably shouldn't mention the whole three dudes showing up thing, either? I mean, they're not some guys with O'Connor or whatever, right?"

"That I know of. Maybe mention it, but only when she's in a really good mood and make sure to put in a plug for how fucking awesome I was." I paused beside the motorcycle and grabbed the helmet off the seat.

"Now you said—"

"Don't you repeat it. Just put this on. Otherwise, your mom will have my behind for not keeping you safe on the bike." I pushed the helmet against her stomach lightly.

She laughed and pulled it from my hands. "Better."

With an eye roll, I smiled. She was a pretty good kid.

A kid with heterochromia. A kid whose mom was Colette. A kid who was almost fifteen. And a pregnancy takes nine months.

There was a feeling in my gut I couldn't shake.

Chapter 16

FORD

Smoke curled around my head as I puffed on a cigarette. The heat of the day still clung to my sticky skin despite the sun beginning to sink upon the horizon. I'd dropped Azelie off a week ago without a word to Colette, merely watched Azelie walk into the restaurant and hug her mom through the window, before riding back home.

Little else had consumed my thoughts since discovering that Azelie was Colette's daughter and had heterochromia. With the lack of capacity to process much else, I'd also avoided town other than to set up security cameras at night when no one was around outside both the restaurants. Luckily, so far neither O'Connor nor his cronies had shown up anywhere. I doubted the LeBlancs even knew the cameras existed, and it was on my list of things to tell Colette.

Later.

I couldn't face her. Not yet, even though I knew I had miles of groveling and not just for the fact that I'd been a deadbeat dad for fifteen years to still cover. So instead, I simply left a fresh bouquet of spider lilies in the cabin every day and snuck some into her bedroom a few times as a peace offering.

Bracing against the wooden railing surrounding the porch, I watched an alligator slither slowly beneath the surface of the bayou. It was coming for me, or more for the marshmallows I kept randomly dropping into the water. But at some point, I would need to confront Colette for either confirmation or denial, and I wasn't quite sure which one I was ready for. Disappointment if my suspicions were wrong, or the reality that I'd missed fifteen years of a life I helped create.

Fifteen years not spent with the woman I still craved to this day.

Part of me also wasn't ready to accept that I was actually excited about the possibility that I might have a child, something I never thought would be an option for me in this life. Especially considering every fucked up thing I'd done whether by my choice or by orders. I wasn't even sure if I was worthy of such an important role in this world. I'd already missed nearly fifteen fucking years of it.

With a deep drag on the cigarette, I let the burn from the smoke coat my throat as I dipped a hand into the half-empty marshmallow bag. What a fucking strange turn of events. The issues with O'Connor seemed so small now compared to learning what I had yesterday. I dropped a marshmallow into the bayou and heard the gator's jaws snap.

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A massive swamp puppy was all this guy was, as he slunk beneath the surface of the water again. I knew if I gave it a few minutes, he'd be back up, ready for another snack that was as sweet to him as it was to me. But I wasn't craving anything sweet. I was indulging in something to dull my senses.

The gentle breeze lifted my crudely made black cutoff, tickling my sides as if taunting me to actually admit out loud what thoughts had kept me silent for over a day and a half. The sliding glass door scraped as it was pushed open, but I didn't turn. Bare feet slapped against the wooden planks that served as our porch. Slabs in need of a good refreshing stain, and I took a mental note to fix them.

"Dinner will be ready soon," my mawmaw said.

And everything in me crumbled.

I was eight years old again, with wide eyes of wonder for the world. Everything that had broken Colette and me hadn't happened yet. Every bridge I'd set fire to was immediately doused with a bucket of water.

"Mawmaw," I cried out and pushed off the railing. Before I'd even had a chance to face her, her arms wrapped around my waist, pulling me against her.

I squeezed my eyes shut and collapsed into her hold. Even though it was her head resting against my chest instead of mine against hers, there was something about my mawmaw holding me. I was thirty-three fucking years old and felt like a child in his grandma's arms.

“Want to talk about it?” she tenderly asked.

I squeezed tighter, not ready to release her. My mind and body begged for just one more minute before speaking the words I was suspicious of.

“Is Mom still mad at me?” I whispered instead of voicing what truly bothered me.

My mawmaw’s chest expanded, and she slowly pushed out of my embrace. “Oh, honey, I don’t think she’s ever been mad. She’s in shock. Could you imagine how it would feel to lose your child for years and then have him just waltz back in? Fifteen years of not knowing. Fifteen years waiting for someone to show up at her doorstep, more likely chaplains from the military than her son.”

I swallowed stiffly and faced the bayou with my head hung as it hit me. “Life’s got a cruel sense of humor,” I muttered. I could understand—sort of. I’d also missed out on fifteen years. Grief and regret were a heavy burden to carry, and I’d forced them upon my mother the way they were now thrust upon me.

By a choice I’d been forced to make as a kid myself. For the person I was at eighteen was certainly not a man. Not like I was trying to be today. I rocked the cigarette to the other side of my mouth as the sun sank low, painting the pink sky a deep, burnt orange. The greens of the swamp around me shifted to black, and the gator swimming below the porch became a ripple in still water.

“Worry for your mom is not what’s got you out here, now, is it?” Mawmaw continued as she turned and rested her forearms against the railing and clasped her fingers together.

No, that was certainly not it. I loved my mom, and of course I worried, and of course I owed her years of apologies, just as I did Colette. But no, my mom was not the reason I was out here. I dug into the marshmallow bag and pulled out another treat.

Leaning forward, I stared at the water below and waited for the alligator's nostrils to breach the surface.

"What life mystery are you attempting to solve this time?" my mawmaw asked as the swamp puppy pierced the water, and I dropped his reward in front of his jaws. "Something that turned this big dreamer boy rather quiet, it seems," she gently added.

"I just..." I inhaled deeply as my mawmaw dug into the marshmallow bag herself. I was grateful she was the one out here. She would be the easiest to confess to, but that didn't make the situation easy. "I just don't know," I muttered as she placed a marshmallow into her mouth and dropped a second one into the bayou below.

Mawmaw pushed away from the railing and faced me. Her eyes danced up my arm, over my shoulder, and down the portion of my torso exposed by my homemade cutoff. "Those are pretty," she said, and pointed at the tattoos.

I furrowed my brows, glancing over at her, but remained quiet.

"Colette still hasn't forgiven you?" she asked, and I closed my eyes.

"Yeah, well, I've got fifteen years of groveling to make up for," I replied with a tight smile.

"But why not just tell her the truth?" She placed a hand on my arm, and I turned to face her directly.

"I can handle her being mad at me, but this is her parents we're talking about."

"She's upset at you for not giving her a chance to choose, right?"

I nodded.

“Then, Ford, honey, is this not doing the exact same thing?”

I rolled the cigarette between my teeth and took a long drag. “Yeah, well, it seems we’re both fucking good at taking the other’s choice away,” I grumbled and blew some smoke through my nose. The burning sensation in my nostrils had long since gone numb, but the action helped dull the anger that bubbled in my veins.

Anger. That was a new emotion. I hadn’t been angry about losing out on these years until now. Sad, yes. Tired, yes. Hurt, yes. But angry?

Anger felt good. Anger, I could control. Rage was something I’d fed for years.

“What are you talking about?” Mawmaw asked as she took a cautious step away from me.

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I narrowed my eyes and stood upright. “Have you ever met Azelie?”

She slowly shook her head as she frowned. “No, but what does that—”

“She’s got my eyes, Mawmaw. One green eye and one hazel,” I interjected, and she froze in place. Every muscle on her body tensed.

“What are you saying?” she whispered, unmoving.

“I’m saying I met Azelie, and she asked me if I was ever bullied for my heterochromia. I said no, and she showed me that she wears a colored contact that’s an exact match to her green eye. Her grandparents told her she has to, so she doesn’t get bullied. I’m saying that Liam didn’t have heterochromia, and heterochromia is either genetic or a result of some super traumatic experience, but Azelie’s had it since birth. I’m saying that she’ll be fifteen in just a bit, so that means Colette was pregnant before I left, Mawmaw,” I blurted out, letting every thought in my mind loose upon my tongue.

And the anger left with every word, shifting back once again to the grief that I now understood had ripped my own mother’s heart apart. My shoulders sagged, and my bottom jaw trembled. “I’m saying I’m pretty sure that’s my...daughter, and I didn’t get to—” My voice caught in my throat as I stared at my mawmaw, begging for her to understand what I no longer could say.

“Oh, Ford,” she whispered and immediately wrapped her arms around me.

I closed my eyes, soaking in the warmth of her embrace and the gentleness of her

caress. “Oh, my sweet grandbaby,” she quietly muttered again. “Everyone thought Azelie was Liam’s. You left, and then a bit later, her parents suddenly took her out of town. They came back, but she didn’t. Her parents told everyone she was away at college, which wasn’t entirely false, and then when Colette did return, she came back three years later with a man and a toddler.”

“I get it, you know,” I said, tucking my face into her shoulder. “At least a little bit, I get what I did to Mama.”

She inhaled deeply and then placed her hands against the outside of my arms, pushing me gently away from her. “But she’s not who you need to go talk to right now. She’ll be here when you get back.”

I swallowed and stepped back with a deep gulp. “This is going to change everything, you know that—right? I mean, I still have years of making up to do, and now I’m gonna go tell Colette that I know.”

Mawmaw reached up and tenderly patted my cheek. “Everything had already changed, Ford. You’re just now finding out about it.”

With a nod, I turned and walked toward the sliding glass door. “I would’ve stayed, you know. If I’d known that Colette was pregnant, I would’ve stayed, despite what her parents did. I thought that it—” I paused with my hand on the doorknob and glanced back. “I’d always planned to come back, too. I did come back.”

Her brows stitched together as tears welled up in her eyes, and she tightened the shawl around her shoulders. “Wh-what?” she whispered.

“I figured if I pretended to be afraid of their threat, it would keep her safe. And you guys. And then I would come back for her. I just...” I gave her a tight smile. “I was just too late.”

Her fingers flew over her mouth as a tear slid down her cheek, and I slipped inside the house.

If only I'd returned a year or two earlier. Before Colette met Liam.

Chapter 17

COLETTE

"Did you brush your teeth?" I yelled down the hall.

"What am I, five?" Azelie sassed back and poked her head out of the bathroom with a toothbrush hanging between her teeth.

I shook my head with a smile and leaned back against the headboard as she disappeared back inside the bathroom. My mind was reeling, and had been for over a week. Where was Ford? I hadn't seen him since he willingly offered to go pick up Azelie. The silence was slowly killing me.

Glancing to my right, I smiled at the vase of flowers. At least there was some evidence that he'd been thinking about me. Though it was slightly stalkerish because I kept finding them everywhere. Which made me a little suspicious that they weren't from Ford. He wasn't possessive like that...Was he?

Closing my eyes, I laid the book I'd been attempting to read for the past hour in my lap. I'd been wrong about Ford before, and everything that was happening now scared me. Part of me felt guilty. I'd been in love with Ford before Liam, and then he suddenly showed back up, and I was gushing like a teenager all over again? Was that fair to Liam? To the love I shared with him? And what right did I have for a second chance with Ford? He'd hurt me when he left, yes, but I'd kept a massive secret from him, one that I feared he'd never forgive me for.

The best thing that could happen would be for him to leave without finding out.

But deep down, I'd always wanted him to find out. I'd always begged for some excuse to reach out to him, and there it had been. Or rather, there she had been. I was tired. I was so tired of being alone. Not just because Ford was back, but because for the first time since Liam had passed, part of me felt... safe again. Part of me finally let go of the shield that I clung to.

"Mom?" Azelie's voice pierced my thoughts as a light flicked on.

Opening my eyes, I glanced at my door frame, and there she stood, dressed in pajamas with her hip cocked and an innocent but worried look forming a crease between her brows.

"What's up, baby?" I asked and patted the sage green quilt beside me.

She wandered into the room, pushing the door shut behind her as she padded quietly across the cream carpet. My curtains hanging over the open window to my right billowed in the gentle breeze as she climbed onto the bed and crossed her legs. I glanced out at the night sky as the full moon rose high. A silver blanket settled over the yard as if offering a small comfort amidst the secrets that I held.

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“I’ve been wanting to ask you something for a week now, but I’m worried you’ll get upset,” Azelie muttered. I glanced back at her as she twisted a loose thread between her fingers.

“I promise I won’t get mad. Does this have to do with a boy?” I tipped my head, and her cheeks turned a smidge pink, but she shook her head.

“Not this time. Well.” She furrowed her brows and met my gaze. “Yes, but not one for me.”

“What boy, then, are we going to be talking about?”

“A man, technically. Like a man, man. Macy won’t stop gushing about him.” She quickly tore her eyes away from mine and stared at the quilt once more.

Closing the book in my lap, I laid it down on the bleached oak nightstand beside me. My gaze lingered for half a second on the spider lilies blooming so brightly. He’s always said my hair was the same color as them... Like cherry wine on a hot summer night, even though we’d only snuck alcohol from my parents that one time. It was also the first time he’d kissed me—truly and passionately kissed me. Ford kissed me as if I would be the one and only girl he’d ever kiss in his life.

“Mom?” Azelie questioned, and I ripped my gaze away from the flowers.

“Sorry, baby. All right, what man has Macy been unable to stop gushing about?” I asked.

She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. “Uh, Ford,” she stated, grabbing at one of her curls.

My heart twisted. But not out of dread, and my brows rose as I slapped a hand against my chest. No, hearing his name, just the mere mention of him, had me immediately terrified of the absolute and undeniable desire coursing through my veins.

“What—” I clacked my teeth together once. “What about Ford?”

“Why’d you send him? Aren’t we supposed to hate the Thibodeauxs? But I know you wouldn’t have sent somebody you didn’t trust to get me, especially considering this bad dude that’s in town.” She raised her brows, and I studied her two different-colored eyes.

A hazel one, just like him. A green one, just like me. So much of him was in her. Her dreamer spirit was him. I honestly wasn’t really that upset that I was still here; the biggest reason I’d talked so much about leaving town was because he wanted to. And going with him had been more important to me than getting out of this place.

Reaching forward, I placed a palm against her cheek. “Is that what you think? That we hate the Thibodeauxs?”

She nodded. “Grammy and Pop Pop have always kept me away from them. I’m fifteen and didn’t actually meet face to face with one of the Thibodeauxs until a week ago. Isn’t that exactly what is going on?”

Shame rolled my shoulders forward, and I dropped my hand back into my lap. “Oh, baby. I’ve failed you. No. We don’t hate the Thibodeauxs.”

But she had a point. My parents had never once spoken kindly about them, even when they brought over some ingredients when a restaurant order had been delayed.

Even when our air conditioner broke down and Ford's father came and helped fix it when my dad was out of town, they hadn't even voiced a thank you.

In fact, they'd said some pretty awful things to Azelie before, some lies about how they were unkind, and had stolen things from us before. I'd brushed it off as petty excuses for the rivalry, but...

I lifted my gaze back to hers. "I don't hate them, Azelie. They are good people who run a business that is in competition with ours. Plain and simple."

Slowly, she nodded. "But—"

Glass shattered all over my bedroom floor. A brick crashed against the side of my mattress, and I dove on top of Azelie. She dug her fingers into my sides as I sheltered her beneath me. Screams from the living room muffled her shriek, and I ripped my head up from Azelie's shoulder.

What was going on? Were we being attacked? I glanced at the shattered window. Whoever had thrown this glass brick aimed for the half that wasn't open. They had purposefully targeted the panes of glass to add to the shock.

More shrieks and screams echoed into the room, along with wood splintering. Ceramic crashed against a solid surface, and a few grunts rose.

Mom. Dad. Were they okay?

"Stay by me," I instructed, knowing we needed to get out of here, and dove for the drawer on my nightstand.

Azelie slid off the bed as I ripped it open. "Shit," I cursed, remembering that my knives were stolen.

My daughter's eyes widened. "Shit? Why shit?" she gasped.

Shoving the drawer closed, I snatched my cell phone off the nightstand, stuffed it in my pajama shorts pockets, and grabbed her hand.

"Don't say that word." We quickly ran to the door of my bedroom. The lights went out just as I pulled it open and peered out into the dark hallway.

"Stop, please!" my mom shouted. A grunt followed her plea as the brittle explosion of glass shattering echoed again. Wood splintered. Fabric shredded as Azelie and I crept along the hallway.

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“Boo,” a man snarled, his face whipping around the corner of the hallway. I could barely make out his features as my foot caught on the rug and I stumbled forward, involuntarily letting go of Azelie’s hand.

“Mom!” she screamed, and I glanced behind me as another man ripped open a bedroom door and lunged at her. She swung a fist, connecting with his arm. I dove toward her as a hand clamped around my ankle, and my chin slammed into the carpet.

Stars spun in my vision, blurring my surroundings as whoever held me dragged me away from her. The skin on my stomach turned raw with heat as I clawed at everything around me. Broken wood, picture frames, and torn books flew around me. Glass shards pierced my skin, but I ignored the agonizing sting. With a glance behind me, I aimed the heel of my foot at the hand holding my ankle. I kicked. Hard. With a thud, it landed against my attempted captor’s wrist.

“Mom!” Azelie shouted again as my captor released my ankle.

“Azelie!” I shoved myself upright. An arm was wrapped around her midsection, carrying her back to my bedroom that we’d just vacated. Tears of fury clouded my eyes.

And fear.

As I sprinted down the corridor after her, the weaselly man carrying her spun around and shot me a malicious grin just as he passed through the door frame. And he slammed the bedroom door shut in my face. My forehead rammed the wood.

“MAMA!” she cried out.

“FIGHT, BABY!” I screamed and ripped at the door handle. It wouldn’t turn. He’d locked it.

Fear coursed through me as hot and sharp as the glass embedded in my arms. Pounding on the frame, the wood rattled, but it did nothing to get me any closer to Azelie.

Suddenly, a hand clamped down on my shoulder and shoved me aside. Off balance, I crashed against the wall as a hooded figure spun around and kicked backward against the door. It flew open with a cascade of shattered wood. Red eyes briefly connected with mine.

And the Rougarou raced past me into the bedroom.

“Azelie!” I screamed again and darted in after the creature. In a flurry of shadows, the creature dove at the monster holding Azelie pinned to the bed. They both crashed to the far side of the mattress and out of view.

“Come on!” I waved at my daughter as she scrambled off the bed, and we raced into the hallway.

Rounding a corner, we both dug in our heels at the same time and screeched to a stop. Six men groaned on the ground, while a couple of others weren’t moving at all. Azelie’s eyes widened, and her chest rose with panting breaths. She raised a shaking finger and pointed at a body lying still on the floor.

With his neck at an odd angle. An angle that I knew indicated that he was dead.

“Let’s go,” I whispered and grabbed her hand, intertwining my fingers with hers.

Guiding her through the rubble and broken chaos of wood and metal that used to be furniture, I shoved our front door open.

And froze. Five more men waited for us. My mom and dad were each held by one of them with a knife at their throats. My knives. And while you couldn't kill someone by stabbing them, if you sliced their jugular...

"You fucked this up," one man called out, any distinguishing features hidden behind a hood and black balaclava.

"How so?" I replied, swallowing the nerves that had nearly made me stutter. I gently pushed Azelie behind me. She tucked her face against my back.

"Who'd you call? That... That thing has shown up every time," he asked.

I slowly shook my head. "I didn't call anyone."

"ALL WE WERE SUPPOSED TO DO WAS TRASH YOUR PLACE!" he shouted, and then a crack pierced the air.

My eyes widened, and the assailant crumpled to the ground.

Dead. With a bullet hole in the back of his head.

Chapter 18

COLETTE

Shiny metal flickered beneath the moonlight as the remaining two men who didn't hold either of my parents raised their own knives and spun in a slow circle. My dad thrashed against the chokehold, but his captor wasn't as distracted as he'd thought.

“Don’t,” his captor warned, and a sliver of blood seeped from the fresh cut upon my father’s throat.

But my mind was focused on something else. Did the Rougarou even know how to use a gun? The man was just shot. A creature of the night, one cursed by the moon, wouldn’t use a gun, would it?

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Behind the line of attackers loomed a shadow. I squinted at the darkness as this thing moved with a fluidity that seemed otherworldly. Smooth and haunting, powerful and in control, the creature stalked forward with death by its side.

Not a leaf crunched beneath its footsteps as it emerged from the tree line.

It raised its chin, and that same mask flashed in the silver light of the full moon. A shiver stole down my spine, replacing the fear with something else entirely. A trace of adrenaline? Maybe. Excitement? Possibly. Whatever it was pushed a smirk upon my face.

Two men lunged at the creature, brandishing their knives. It didn't even flinch as the first one dove in with a wild slice. The blade hissed through the air. The creature leaned out of the way and countered with a punch against the assailant's ribcage.

With a grunt, he doubled over. The second man latched a hand around the Rougarou's right wrist, stopping the second jab. Fabric twisted in the man's grip, and the creature's arm slipped through the sleeve.

"Colette!" my mom shouted, and I briefly glanced away from the fight. The two men dropped their knives from my parents' throats and darted toward the single creature. Mom and Dad raced toward me, freed by a thing of legends.

"Let's go!" my dad instructed as my eyes latched back on the fight. Azelie raced out from behind me. My mom threw an arm around her shoulders as they ran to the left. But I lingered. For just a moment. The Rougarou twisted the sleeve of its jacket around the throat of the man who had ripped it off in the first place.

My heart stopped. Shock jolted through me like a bolt of lightning, stilling every sound of the fight. Nothing moved. Nobody moved. Everything froze as if I'd hit the pause button on the remote in the middle of a movie.

This was no creature. This was no Rougarou.

I knew those tattoos. I knew that arm.

I knewhim.

“Ford?” I whispered.

Time resumed, and he tightened the noose around his attacker's neck.

Another man drove my knife into his trap. He grunted and stumbled forward. Tightening the sleeve even more, I heard a small pop, and the man he'd choked crumpled.

“Colette!” my mom shouted.

Ford's eyes flew my way as another man landed a blow to his side. As if concrete had hardened around my feet, I was unable to move. In a rather beautiful movement, he unwrapped the noose from around the one guy's neck and caught the wrist of the man diving in for a second punch.

He twisted, throwing the assailant into another brute. With his free hand, he ripped the knife from his trap and stabbed the blade into the eyeball of the man he'd caught in his jacket.

The squelch roared my body back to life. But instead of sprinting toward my family, I raced toward the fight where the final two men remained.

Nobody stabbed Ford but me.

Especially with my own knife.

Ford unwound the jacket from the screaming man's wrist and shoved his arm back into the sleeve. He ripped the blade out of the eye and plunged it into the side of the neck of his incoming attacker.

I tore across the gravel road just as Ford's eyes met mine.

Red? From this distance, I wasn't sure what color they were, but I swore they were red when he passed me in the hall and broke down the door to save Azelie.

Ford shook his head, removing the bloodied blade and jabbing it again in quick succession. Blood pulsed across his jacket with every beat of the man's heart. Ford had hit his target. That man would bleed out in a couple of seconds.

He dropped the body and pointed at my family as the final man raced at him.

I slowed. I should listen.

As if peeling Velcro apart, I turned to face my family. That is where I should be going. I should be racing over to them and disappearing into the woods. That was where the Rougarou wanted me. I mean Ford. I mean...

I shook my head.

My family. My daughter.

Right.

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Spinning on my heel, I sprinted toward the people who were waiting for me. My mother had her hands clamped over Azelie's eyes, the sheer fright plastered on her face visible from here. They would all need therapy. Even Azelie.

My lungs burned, and the taste of iron tingled on my tongue as I finally caught up with them.

I would need therapy.

If that was really Ford...

The world blurred as we ran in a group toward the cabin hidden in the forest. The one place that O'Connor didn't know about. One place he couldn't send his cronies to. How many would he even have left to send after Ford had finished with them?

My brows loosened upon my face as it hit me. Ford was back. I was safe. He was protecting me. I could finally relax. I was no longer alone. Everything I once felt for him came rushing back in. The guilt left. The frustration and rage over him leaving me left. What I should have felt all along came trickling in like a gentle bubbling brook.

An ill-timed smile crept upon my lips. He'd known I'd be pissed if he tried to take care of me. At least at first, when he returned. That was why he was pretending to be the Rougarou. That witty, intelligent man still found a way to take care of me even when I was too hard-headed to see I needed it.

And it all suddenly made sense. The fights that just...somehow disappeared and

ended overnight while growing up. That was him. It had to have been.

All this time... He'd never stopped.

What an asshole I'd been.

I paused and braced against a tree trunk as my family continued to jog ahead of me. The world was quiet. My head was quiet. For the first time in years, since Liam passed, I felt a surge of overwhelming...gentleness. I could be tender again. I could be the woman Ford had always made me feel like.

I could—No, we could start over. Starting something new, having these feelings of desire for Ford was okay. Liam would want me to be happy. I deserved to be happy.

My family slowed their pace to a walk, and Azelie glanced over her shoulder. I gave her a reassuring smile. My secret was still a hurdle to jump. Admitting to Ford that I was wrong, that I was sorry, was something I would need to do. All I could do right now was hope that he'd forgive me and give us a chance.

There was always the possibility that he wouldn't want me once he found out I'd kept Azelie from him. There was always a possibility that he would lose all feelings for me. And there was, of course, still the issue of my parents. And O'Connor.

I groaned to myself and pursed my lips. Why? Had he and I not been through enough already?

He was worth it. Plus, there was something about him wearing that mask... Fighting those bad dudes... My stomach swirled warm as images of him bathed in shadows and moonlight danced through my mind.

Wait. No. He'd killed somebody. Several somebodies. Somebodies who came after

me and my family. Somebodies who came after Azelie. A somebody who tried to... All right, yes. I was allowed to find his controlled, protective rage fucking attractive. Because while I knew I could fight, nothavingto was a nice change.

Because I finally wasn't the one who had to carry all of that burden. I pulled my bottom lip into my mouth and grinned as I realized I was going to keep another secret to myself. The fact that I knew he was pretending to be the Rougarou.

Time to entice him into something that had me weak at my knees. Giddy. Excited. And yes, aroused. Those were the top three things I was feeling right now.

Oh, fuck. I needed to see someone about this.

And then it hit me. Hold on. Since when did Ford know how to fight like that? That wasn't just backyard, teenage fights where you grabbed hair and looked like fucking idiots. No, that was...controlled. Calculated. Purposeful and deliberate.

"Damn it," I muttered to myself and exhaled.

"What was that?" my mom shouted.

I shot off the tree. Shit, I'd totally forgotten about them. "Uh, nothing!" I replied and jogged the distance between us.

"Well," my dad said once I'd joined them. The silhouette of the cabin sat in the distance behind my parents as Azelie pushed off my mom and wrapped her arms around my waist. "Where are we going to stay?"

My mom closed her eyes. "We can't go back home. They—They—" Her voice broke as a tear slid down her cheek, and my dad pulled her into his body.

We couldn't stay at the cabin. There was no place to sleep. Nothing but a kitchen and living room. I chewed on the inside of my cheek as a fleeting thought danced through my mind that I just knew they would hate.

Azelie tapped my arm, and I glanced down at her. Her eyes darted to my parents, who were consoling each other. She looked back at me and raised her brows. "What about Ford?" she whispered.

"What?" I hissed through my teeth.

She pulled her shoulders up to her ears. "I'm just saying. You trusted him to come pick me up, and you have to admit, he's pretty intimidating looking. His family is going through the same thing we are, and if they haven't been hit yet, they're next. Unless..."

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“Unless we’re all there. That’s a lot of numbers,” I finished for her.

She nodded.

“You’re way too smart for your age,” I added and studied her a bit longer.

She’d had the same thought I had, and it was the most logical conclusion. Even if she had no idea that it was Ford who had already protected us as the Rougarou. Even if my parents hated the idea that this would also provide protection to the Thibodeauxs, it was the best idea.

“Mom, Dad, I know where we should go,” I bluntly stated and dug my phone out of my pocket.

“Where?” they asked simultaneously.

I simply glanced up at them as I tapped the contact icon for Ford’s number. They were not going to like this at all.

Chapter 19

FORD

I waited at the end of Colette’s driveway with my parents’ van, which I definitely didn’t tell them I was taking. Destruction and mayhem were evident beyond the front door that swung loose on a single hinge. I’d only had enough time to dispose of the four bodies outside of their house before they’d returned. Azelie stood quietly beside

me since she'd not been allowed to go back inside to pack a to-go bag.

Silence. The air was thick and musty, completely still. Too still for my liking, and my nerves were still on edge. This wasn't the usual rough-up type attack. Something felt too personal about it, and I was hating the sinking feeling settling in my stomach. I crossed my arms and slid my teeth back and forth across my lips.

Hopefully, I'd hidden the blood-stained jacket, colored contacts, and mask well enough that once they climbed inside, nobody would see it, but that had been one of the last things on my mind. What a fool I'd been to not also install security cameras at our houses. I'd failed. And now, I also had a stab wound in my back that I knew the bandage from my mom's first aid kit in her van wasn't going to hide for long. Somehow, I was going to have to come up with some lie as to why I needed Colette to stitch that up, too.

But not only that, I was in fight mode.

Rage mode.

To hell with keeping Colette out of the violence that was my job. A phone call to my brothers waited for me. I wished Dom was here to take charge, because I preferred being the fucking battering ram, not the leader. Give me orders, let me snap some necks, shoot some fucking awesome guns, and bust down doors. That was where I shined.

Besides, wasn't this the police's job? Oh wait, the fucking department here in town was bought by the same fucking man who'd sent those guys after Colette in the first place.

"Are you...okay?" Azelie asked, snapping me from my thoughts.

“Yeah,” I grumbled and stared at the front door, waiting for any sign they were coming out soon. Which reminded me, I probably should give my family a heads up. Digging into my pocket, I pulled out my phone and started a group text with my parents and Mawmaw.

“You look... kind of... I don’t know,” Azelie continued and took a cautious step away.

“I’m fucking angry,” I snarled as I finished typing out my no-contest message that the LeBlancs were coming to stay with us.

“It’s not your fault, you know,” Azelie quietly said.

I stared at the locked screen of my phone for a moment. It felt like it was. That was the problem. If I’d put security cameras here, or at least decided to check on the LeBlancs instead of being wrapped up in personal shit, maybe I’d been here before they got here and could’ve run them off.

As I stuffed the phone back in my pocket, I glanced down at Azelie. “No contact lens this time?”

Her brows raised. “Oh, well, I was getting ready for bed. I don’t sleep in them, so...”

“True,” I replied and sucked my bottom lip between my teeth.

“Will I still be able to go to cross-country practices? I don’t want to lose my spot going into sophomore year since I was freshman captain this past school year,” she asked.

“As long as your mom is comfortable with it, we’ll make it work. The restaurant’s gotta still run, and I’m planning on adding security cameras to the house. Plus, I’ll

have you share your phone's location with me, and get one of those watches that connect with it."

"I already have one of those." She raised her wrist with a smile.

"Good. Don't take that off. Don't lose it." I pulled my gaze back to the front door as a shadow passed in front of it.

"My grandparents don't like tattoos, but yours look really cool," Azelie continued.

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I chuckled to myself. I'd known that they hated them, which was another reason I'd gotten Colette's drawings tattooed on me. A subtle "fuck you" to them.

"What's so funny?" she asked as Colette's mom stepped over the threshold of her broken front door.

"Nothing," I replied and muttered the truth under my breath in Cajun-French.

Azelie's brows furrowed as Colette's dad followed her mom out, carrying two duffel bags. "You said 'fuck,' but that was all I understood."

I whipped my head toward her. "Why, of all the words in French, is 'fuck' the one you know? Also, don't say that word."

"But you did."

"Like we already discussed, I have a bad habit that you don't need to pick up."

"Fine." She pursed her lips, but the twinkle in her eye had me smiling to myself.

"You're a lot like your mom, you know that?"

She grinned as Colette finally made her appearance in the doorway. Without letting Azelie answer, I pointed at the van and walked forward. "Get in while I go help them with their bags."

"You like her," Azelie blurted out, and I nearly fell over my toe as I took a step

forward.

“What?” I stumbled, catching my balance with an outstretched hand on the hood of the van.

“My mom. You like my mom. Like, like-like her,” Azelie repeated and wiggled her brows. “It’s so obvious now.”

“Uh, I do not.”

“You do.” She grinned and then darted inside the van.

Shit. If Azelie could pick that up, then I wasn’t doing a good job hiding my emotions. With a shake of my head, I shoved everything back into that bottle. Every emotion, including rage. It was time to become the monster of death I’d been trained to be.

My parents and Mawmaw stood outside the front door with their arms crossed as I pulled the van into the driveway. The short drive had not been silent, but I’d also not been included in the whispered argument occurring in the back seat between Colette and her parents. Azelie had simply pushed herself up against the window and stared out as I drove us to my house.

With his arms crossed, my dad stepped off the porch and glared at me.

“See?” Colette’s mom whispered. “They don’t want us here, just like we don’t want to be here.”

Fuck this.

I spun around in my seat and shot a steely glare at two people who had done nothing but turn my life into a living hell from the moment they threatened me. “Here’s how

this is going to go,” I snarled and pointed at Colette’s parents. “You two are going to get your asses out of this van, and walk into that house. There’s a guest bedroom that you’ll be staying in, and I won’t hear another lick of a fucking argument. Colette and Azelie will stay in my room, while I stand guard. You don’t have to talk to my parents or Mawmaw. You don’t have to interact with them in any way, shape, or form. I will be your liaison if you’re going to continue with this fucking petty bullshit, because despite all of the shit you give, I’d rather not see you fucking dead.”

Colette’s and Azelie’s wide eyes and open jaws were mirror images of Colette’s parents. But I was fed up with this.

“You were attacked in your home, by someone who is after my family, too. So, until this asshole is gone, can you act like fucking normal human beings, and put this rivalry on pause?” I shook my head, the frustration boiling within me along with a smidge of praise for myself. Fifteen years later and I’d finally grown a pair of fucking balls where her parents held not an ounce of control over me.

Colette’s dad slid forward and wagged a finger at me. “How dare you talk—”

“Don’t,” I snapped. His eyes widened. “Or I’ll come clean to her.”

He slunk back in his seat and shared a quick glance with his wife. Silence strangled the van, but the tension shifted as I briefly caught Colette’s gaze. Something wicked burned in her green eyes. Something that surprised me since I’d never shown her this side of me. I’d always tried to be soft with her, allowing her to take the reins because I’d thought that was what she wanted.

But then again, we’d been kids, and I knew my understanding of love was practically non-existent then.

“I’ll tell my parents the same thing,” I added, unable to pull my gaze from Colette’s.

The wicked female rage that I'd been on the receiving end of the moment I'd returned, sifted away like flour in a recipe. And for the first time since I'd known her, she seemed gentle. It was beautiful. She'd always been beautiful, but this willing submission filled a hole that had expanded between us.

With a groan, the van doors slid open, and I exited along with the LeBlancs. I shot a warning glare at my dad, and he took a step back on the porch. I'd explain things later to them, but right now, I needed to sort out another security system from Griffin if he'd let me borrow a third one. There was also the matter of a talk with Colette.

That conversation still needed to happen, but not while I smelled of blood and death and sweat that itched upon my skin. After the shower. After Azelie was settled in and asleep. After the world finally stopped spinning out of control.

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Walking up to the porch in front of the LeBlancs, I paused beside my parents and reached forward to my mom. She crossed her arms and shook her head as tears threatened in her eyes, and I retracted my outstretched hand.

“Mama, they broke into their house. They took...” I cleared my throat as the LeBlancs paused at the base of the porch stairs. “One of them took Azelie to the bedroom to—to—” I couldn’t finish the sentence. There’d been too many times I’d seen exactly what the aftermath would’ve been had I not shown up when I had. Too many times we’d been too late.

A ringing started in my ears as I stared at my mom, begging her to offer a smidge of grace. I knew we hadn’t even begun to prepare the burnt bridge between us, but I really needed my mama at this moment.

She dropped her arms, and a tear slid down her cheek. “Is she okay?” my mom asked.

I nodded fervently. At least with my daughter, I’d made it in time. At least now she was in my house, under my roof.

“Well, then, I guess I should grab a few more towels from the linen closet,” she said and wiped the stain from her cheek. Relief, at least a tiny drop of it, slithered in through the apprehension.

My mom walked around me with a gentle pat on my arm. She gave a tight smile to the LeBlancs and then gestured at the door. “Well, let’s get you settled, shall we?”

This wasn’t going to be easy, but at least it was a start, and they would be safe.

Safe. What a foreign concept. I hadn't felt entirely safe since Duncan was killed. Even with Bernie and his family, something had itched beneath the surface of my skin as if warning me about the carnage waiting at home.

But if I could at least provide some semblance of peace to Colette and Azelie, then maybe I was worth something.

No matter the cost, I'd keep them safe.

No matter the cost.

Chapter 20

FORD

Itightened the grip on my phone and slid to the edge of the couch, bracing my elbows against my knees. Part of me still felt like a failure and an idiot for assuming that O'Connor wouldn't attack at home. I'd seen worse, so why hadn't I thought that this man could be just as horrible?

And why hadn't he attacked here at the same time? A coordinated attack would've been the smartest thing, except for the fact that I knew he was trying to send a message. So, maybe having everyone in one place would keep him from attacking. I doubt he would kill all of us at once. Then there would be no way he would fucking get what he wanted: the restaurants.

Right?

Griffin and Dom had both told me not to second-guess my instincts, but after showing up to men breaking into Colette's home, I'd lost all trust in my gut.

“FUCK!” I shouted, jumped to my feet, and spun around, ready to throw a fist at the wall. And stopped just before my knuckles slammed into plaster.

Right where my military portrait stared back at me.

Dropping my cellphone on my temporary bed, I studied the picture as the freshly bandaged wound on my trap sent a pulse of ache through my muscles.

The photo mocked me. What kind of man would let everything happen that had? What kind of man ran away all because his girl’s parents threatened to kill him? Would they really have? I mean, they weren’t that crazy. A normal, rational person wouldn’t just up and murder someone for being in love with their daughter, right?

I grabbed the picture frame and ripped it off the wall. Nobody needed to see this, and luckily, in the hustle and bustle of ushering everyone to their respective rooms, nobody had noticed it. Squatting, I slid it underneath the couch. Out of sight. Out of mind. All that was left on that wall were old photos of the boy I’d been, because it seemed I still hadn’t become a different man.

“You okay?” a quiet voice asked.

Adrenaline shot through me, and I whipped my gaze to the left.

Colette.

“Yeah, sorry if I woke you,” I mumbled.

She tipped her head, her unruly curls frizzy and unkempt. I couldn’t help but smile, just a little, at the sight. Light danced off her blue silk pajamas as she pushed off the wall and quietly walked toward me. Her eyes briefly slid down my body, and it was at that moment I realized I had no shirt on.

“Oh, shit,” I muttered and spun around, looking for the T-shirt I had grabbed to go with my plaid pajama pants when I’d changed for bed.

“It’s fine, Ford. Nothing I haven’t seen before,” she teased. I looked back at her as she plopped down on the couch. “Have you slept at all? It’s nearly six in the morning.” She patted the cushion beside her.

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“I’ve gone much longer than twenty-four hours without sleep, Cher. I had the security system overnighted, so it should be good to go by tomorrow. Then I can sleep,” I replied and cautiously sat down next to her.

She rocked toward me as the cushion sank and bumped against my shoulder. “I have so many questions.” She giggled and pressed her palm against my arm, clearly ready to push herself upright, but paused.

I stared at her slender fingers that lingered against my skin. Softer than mine still, but not baby smooth as they once had been. So much life had passed between us. Time that I wished I could get back, but knew I never would. Maybe this wasn’t about trying to make up for all the shit I missed, all the damage I’d caused, but this was time for something new. A new beginning.

Except there were broken secrets still ripping at the thin cord stretched between us.

“Ask,” I said as goosebumps rose upon my skin.

Her brows stitched together while her green eyes remained trained on her hand against my arm. Slowly, I raised my own and placed a palm against her touch. “Ask me. Anything.”

She sucked in a massive breath and flexed her fingers beneath mine. “I don’t even know where to begin. How about what did you mean by ‘I’ll come clean to her,’ or why you’ve stayed up for longer than twenty-four hours before, unless it was for some stupid shit, like a frat party? Or how about where you’re getting the money for security systems? Or if you’re gonna call the cops to help me file a report?” Her eyes

snapped to mine as mist filmed her sparkling gaze. Every line in her face deepened as her bottom lip trembled. “Or...where you’ve been for this past week?”

“Well, two of those questions have a very easy answer: my job,” I gently replied, sliding my fingers between hers. “So, no frat party, just work. As for calling the cops, yeah, I already did, and they said they’ll send a deputy to talk to you in the morning. But I know nothing other than a file will come from it, because they’re paid hush money by O’Connor. At least there’s a paper trail for whenever the state police get here with their investigation, or we can finally nail this fucker. As for this past week, I’ve been home or—”

“Or breaking into my room to give me flowers? Like some stalker,” she inserted.

I cautiously dropped her hand from mine and shifted away half an inch, breaking our contact. “You have no proof of that.” I narrowed my eyes.

“Except you’re the only one who knows that spider lilies are my favorite. And why they’re my favorite,” she quipped.

I kept my face void of any expression. “Still doesn’t prove anything. As for this past week, I figured your parents wouldn’t be too happy if I installed security cameras for them at their restaurant, so I snuck in during the night and then stayed home monitoring them during the day.”

A half-truth. Or a partial lie, but either way, I didn’t think now was the time to dump a shitload of baggage on her or drop the bomb that I knew Azelie was mine. Plus, I knew at some point, Colette would ask why I didn’t call a different police station or go to some higher-up authority. The thing was, I already had. But I knew how the government worked, and the diplomatic response of “thanks for the tip, we’ll look into it” meant “they’ll get around to an investigation when they can.” That meant we were on our own out here until they had the time.

Especially since there was not much more than my phone call as evidence. I couldn't exactly report that O'Connor sent men to assault Azelie since I technically wasn't there. And what could Colette or Azelie say, or the rest of the LeBlancs, since they'd sound crazy reporting the Rougarou was their savior.

Which is also why the break-in at my parents' restaurant had been reported as just that. It's not like I could say anything about my involvement in stopping them when bodies were a result, as I wasn't exactly walking on the right side of the law either. How much could I claim was self-defense in the end?

But all of that was a worry for another day, another time. I needed to focus on Colette.

"I should've also added a security system to your house and mine, but I didn't think that fucker would..." I curled my fingers into the palm of my hands and dug in tightly. "I didn't think he'd stoop as low as he did to come after either of us in our own home. I mean, this is over some fucking business, not—"

I stopped talking and widened my eyes. Maybe this was more personal than just some restaurant feud. Though I'd seen men do worse for less, so no, it couldn't be that. I shook that thought away.

"Azelie's sleeping in my parents' room. She said it was weird to be in the dude's room, who had the hots for me," Colette said.

And I nearly choked on my spit.

Spluttering and coughing, I leaned forward as she pounded my back. "She said what?" I gasped.

Colette giggled as she let her hand linger against my skin. Slowly, her fingers trickled

along the tattoos of her drawings upon my back, and for whatever reason, she didn't touch or mention the bandage. "Why does that shock you so much? It's not like you've been discreet about your feelings for me."

"Cause that means someone other than you knows," I replied. Goosebumps prickled upon my skin as her fingers sank lower on my back.

"Is that such a problem?" she whispered.

A chill shivered up my spine. Such a sharp contrast to the heat rising from beneath her touch as she scooted a little closer to me.

"Well, your parents and my parents are just two of the issues I can immediately think of." I closed my eyes and focused on her fingers. So gentle and warm. So inviting.

"We're both adults now, and you're still afraid of your parents?" she asked.

"Aren't you?" I wasn't actually afraid of mine, or hers anymore. I owed mine respect, yes, but no, I wasn't afraid of them. In fact, every hesitation was derived from the fact that they deserved my respect, as well as a chance for me to earn their forgiveness.

She inhaled deeply and sat up straight, removing her hand from my back. Cold swept in, replacing the intoxicating touch of her skin against mine. "Should I be?"

I leaned back against the couch and slid my gaze to her. Such trusting innocence stared back at me, so blatant and so unusual that I nearly lost my composure as the shock darted through me. The thing was, I couldn't answer that honestly because I wasn't sure how serious her parents had been with the threat that originally forced me out of town. Would they follow through with murder in order to keep us apart all these years later?

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“You know, with everything that happened last night and so late, I doubt anyone will be awake any time soon,” she added quietly, her gaze unwavering from mine. “So, you know, it’s just us two for a while.”

I studied her as my stomach swirled with warmth and a fuzzy static. Was she suggesting what I think she was? But with all these secrets that still remained between the two of us, maybe she wasn’t. Besides, why would someone like her ever want someone like the man I’d grown up to be. A failure.

“You’re welcome to get some more rest if you want,” I cordially replied.

Her eyes narrowed, and she snapped to her feet. “Oh, fuck you, Ford,” she hissed.

I raised a brow and smirked, receiving my answer to my doubts. “Please do.”

Every mountain we still had to climb to somehow find some sort of equilibrium wasn’t a second thought at the back of my mind as her mouth fell open. For just a moment, all that mattered was her and me.

Then she quickly slammed her teeth together and sucked her lips into her mouth. “I—That was extremely forward.”

“That’s what you were implying, was it not?” I slowly rose from the couch and stepped into her body. Her heart hammered in her chest, palpable against my bare torso.

“I mean—It—Well—” She gingerly placed a hand against my abdomen and then tore

it away. Electricity slithered between her touch and my skin.

“Say yes,” I whispered.

Her breathing quickened. Her fingers trembled as she danced them across my pec, tracing the ink of my tattoos.

I wrapped my hands around her waist. “Let me lose myself in you, please. Let me see you come undone. Say yes, please,” I begged.

“Fuck it,” she said and looped her fingers in the waistband of my pajama pants, jerking me toward her.

That was all the permission I needed as I grabbed her face and claimed her lips with mine.

I couldn’t fucking wait. To feel her against my body again. For a moment, my mind would be empty of everything that weighed down upon me. There was nothing but her and me. There was nothing but this moment where we’d get to share something that involved absolutely no one else.

The only thing in my head was her. This kiss. That was it.

She twisted the fabric in her hands, tugging me into her tighter. I deepened my lips against her mouth. She rocked onto her tiptoes, and I slid my hands down around her waist, pulling her as close to me as possible. There was still too much space between us, despite the fact that every inch of her body was flush with mine.

After all this time apart, after the broken hearts and shattered egos, we were here as nothing more than two souls that craved each other. With an easy scoop beneath her ass, I hoisted her legs off of the ground and quickly laid her down on the couch.

A gentle giggle escaped her lips as I crawled on top of her. “This couch felt bigger the last time,” she whispered against my lips.

I grinned and shook my head as I let myself trace the swells of her hips. “Be quiet or someone will hear,” I replied.

She nipped at my lips and then dove back in for a kiss with her arms snaked around my neck. It was innocent and intimate, as light as a feather but as deep as a pit left by a grenade to mortar. Nothing could stop this moment as her lips deepened against mine. The tenderness shifted into a neediness that had everything feeling as if it was the first time I was welcome to explore her.

My fingers danced across the top button of her pajama top, and she gave me a quick nod for permission. While working the clasps loose, I shoved my tongue between her teeth, reveling in the velvet and slightly minty taste left from her toothpaste. Fuck was she perfect. No matter how the world spun things, no matter where we ended up in time, I would crawl back to this woman.

Once the final button on her top was freed from the fabric, it fell free from her body, and she leaned forward, allowing it to billow to the cushion beneath her. My heart quickened in my chest as my lips hovered against hers. Every wave of her exhales brushed hot and warm against my skin. There she was. Inviting me, open to me. I’d never seen anything more beautiful than her with her hair in an unruly, frizzy mess, completely submitting to this moment. Snow-white skin with freckles as abundant as grains of sand hovered an inch away from me.

She gently laid back against the couch with a lazy hand draped around my neck. For a moment, the hell I was destined for slunk away to the darkest corners of my mind as I stared at the one good thing left that was mine. No matter how brief or temporary my sanctuary was, she was my oasis.

With a trembling hand, I placed my palm against her stomach where faint stretch marks disappeared beneath the waistband of her pajama shorts. What a fucking woman she was, and my desire to explore every inch of this goddess body of hers deepened. Roaring with a flame deep within my lower back, what little blood was left in my head rushed between my legs. I trailed my fingertips up her side and traced the creases beneath her bare breasts.

A quiet gasp escaped her throat, and I lifted my gaze away from her naked torso. Green eyes connected with mine, latching on and claspng hold with an unbreakable fortress. With every passing second, I knew we danced down a road there was no coming back from.

I slid my knee against her thigh as she tipped her chin backwards and whimpered. With a gentle push, I widened the spread of her legs and sank deeper against her, awaiting the moment I could remove the final pieces of fabric still separating our bodies. Her desperation shifted to that of a moan.

She dug her fingers into the back of my neck, and I slammed my lips back against hers. As we panted, falling into each other's touch, it was as if no time had passed between this moment and the last. Her touch was aggressive but softened to mine, giving into what I was asking. This wasn't lust, this wasn't just one last fuck, this was something else entirely. It was a tightening of the bond formed all those years ago, and I forgot every obstacle still in our way.

She was my Cherí. My treasure. She was the only woman I'd ever loved, and the only woman for me. She was my wicked storm on this desolate road that I'd been wandering. I'd never thought I'd make it this far in life. I'd been wild and had done everything in my power to find a way off this Earth for years. But here I was wrapped in the arms of a woman who'd been the only light in the painful mourning of a twisted path I still walked.

Desire and arousal rolled like hot coal through my body. A gentle smile lifted upon her lips as I studied her, ready to dive into her and cause her to writhe beneath my touch as she begged for her release. Such beautiful serenity.

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With a tender sweep of my fingers, I pushed some of her cherry wine curls away from her cheek, positioning myself to finally remove the last bit of clothing separating us—to have what she was offering.

Her eyes suddenly widened, and her brows inched together as her hands stiffened against my skin.

I immediately stopped moving and snapped my hand away from the waistband of her pajama shorts, noting the abrupt change in her welcoming consent to every fiber in her being screaming to stop.

A single tear slid down her cheek. The trembling in her body shifted from pleasure to shattered. As if someone had written the word “no” above her head, the burden of everything that had just happened settled against her shoulders.

“Ford?” she whispered as her voice cracked, and a silent stream of shattered tears rushed down her cheeks. My name, spoken from some shredded place in her head, was all she needed to voice for me to understand.

I knew the trauma that she was finally processing. Her home—destroyed. Her life—changed forever by the choice of a man who simply wanted more power, more money. Tucking my arms beneath her body, I scooped her into my lap. And held her.

“I’m—I’m s-s-sorry,” she stammered.

I shook my head and tucked her into my chest. That didn’t matter. Not at this moment. This hadn’t been about an orgasm or some throw-away fuck anyway. This

had been about sharing something vulnerable and intimate with the woman I loved. Something that only she and I were involved in. It was about expressing love through physical means. She crumbled in my embrace, but I knew it wasn't a result of something I'd done to destroy her, but rather because she felt safe with me.

Maybe those years apart were a good thing for both of us. It gave us room to grow that maybe we would've never achieved together. As she broke down, sobbing quietly, I placed my chin against the top of her hair and draped a blanket around us. Within the cocoon of my body, there wasn't just a weight from the recent attacks that wracked her shoulders, but I also felt some tension leave her.

I slipped a hand around the back of her head and twisted some curls between my fingers. She was safe. No matter what it took, no matter the cost, I would never let her go again. I couldn't believe just how lucky I was that I had a second chance with a family I'd thought I'd lost forever.

Colette's sobs eventually faded, and as nothing other than the grandfather clock ticking in the corner sounded around me, her body finally relaxed completely. Glancing between my arms, I let myself smile. She was asleep. It was clear that she felt safe with me again.

This was the gentle and vulnerable Colette that I'd never seen her give the privilege of meeting to anyone other than me.

So, I simply held her tight.

Chapter 21

FORD

I shrugged my jacket tighter up my shoulders and stalked toward the front door of the

sheriff's station. Without disturbing her from her sleep, I'd tucked Colette safely back in my bed, dressed in a black T-shirt and cargo pants, threw on my jacket, and cruised on my motorcycle down to the police just before sunrise. I wasn't waiting for a deputy to show up.

Sometime, while in the middle of just holding Colette, things within me had shifted to anger. This was either going to be foolish or worth it, but I was going to fucking confront Deputy Harrelson head on about the shit that was going on. Someone both Colette and I'd gone to high school with. The sheriff was some old ass who had been sheriff while we were kids, and I wasn't exactly... in favor with him. But maybe I held some sway with Deputy Harrelson.

I wasn't confronting him out of that anger, but because I wanted to see how far the department was in bed with O'Connor for myself. I wanted to see how many excuses they'd come up with. I wanted them to think I was desperate. Not doing some recon.

Shoving open the front door, the bell tinkled, and several deputies glanced up from their desks on either side of me. Margorie stood up behind her counter, directly in front of me, and raised her drawn-on brows.

"It's barely seven in the morning, and here you come marching in here with some attitude. What can we do you for?" she asked and threw a hand on her plump hip.

I studied her for a moment, and then shifted my gaze, but not my stance, to the man, slowly rising from his seat on my left.

"You look like you've got something on your mind," Deputy Harrelson cautiously said.

"Yeah, I fucking do. Wanna tell me why the hell you haven't done shit about the break in at my parents' restaurant, Carl?" I snarled and faced him directly.

He adjusted the belt around his waist and slid his hand over his bald head. “Ford, this isn’t—”

“Nah, this is exactly the time and place, since I got a phone call at ten-thirty last night that the LeBlanc residence was broken into and trashed. They had nowhere else to go. So now I’ve got an entire family living in my parents’ house all saying that fucking Robert O’Connor sent those men.” I glared at him but refused to raise my voice.

He swallowed, and he rolled his lips between his teeth. “Be careful who you accuse, because the report that Colette and her family gave provided no evidence that ties him into that break-in.”

“It wasn’t just a break-in. They absolutely demolished their home. The LeBlancs literally cannot live there right now, and it’s going to cost them every penny they have to fix it up,” I countered.

“I get your concern, but you’re insinuating that the man who has poured more money into our little town than anyone else in over two decades is capable—”

“Thank you, Deputy, but I can handle this,” a slimy voice weaseled into the conversation.

Bingo.

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I held my smile and looked over Carl's shoulder as Robert O'Connor strutted out of the Sheriff's office. "It's nice to finally come face to face with Ford Thibodeaux himself," O'Connor continued and walked around the deputy's desk. Just as every small-town sheriff's department was, things could use an upgrade, and the tile on the floor squeaked beneath the rubber shoes of the sheriff himself, who followed O'Connor.

"Now, I know small-town communities have this strange thing with outsiders, and anything that goes wrong, their immediate reaction is to blame the newcomer. But I can give you my word, that I wouldn't send men to break into a home, and assault people over a restaurant or two." He straightened the lapels of his gray suit and then clasped his hands in front of him.

Alarm bells went off in my mind as I noted the expensive cufflinks and gold watch that flashed on his wrist. Not a strand of hair was out of place, nor was there a thread coming loose on his white suit shirt.

"No, you wouldn't. You'd just slowly drain the people you want the business from of all their assets and money, until they're desperate enough to give you what you want for pennies on the dollar," I replied, studying every twitch of muscle in his face and shift in his body language.

His lips forced into a smile as he glanced over his shoulder. "Now you can see why I asked for a little extra protection on my businesses while I'm out of town for a couple weeks. It seems small-town brain rot has really hit this one," O'Connor said, addressing the sheriff.

“Of course,” Sheriff Landry replied with a nod. His belly hung over the waistband of his pants, and his greasy fingers were as plump as the sausage links I was fixing to cook up for breakfast once I returned. He looked exactly like he had when I was growing up, with sweat already turning his face shiny from the short walk out of his office. He no longer had hair beneath his hat, and he had a mountain more rolls and wrinkles, but it was still the same man who once put me in cuffs as a kid.

O’Connor turned to face me again. “It was a pleasure to finally meet you face to face,” he said to me.

Brushing his hand down his tie, he smoothed out a few wrinkles and raised his chin to the sheriff. “He certainly is a big one. You might want to double the protection, Sheriff Landry. Who knows the sort of damage a man like that could do. Hell, he might even kill somebody.” He paused as he walked past Margorie and tipped his head in a polite nod. “Morning, sweetheart. Don’t let this swamp puppy intimidate you.” And then he pushed on by me with the sheriff in tow.

I remained standing sideways and used my peripherals to note the handshake and at least three new men that I should’ve done more than knock out last night walk up behind O’Connor.

I should’ve just killed all of those fuckers, though I hated the amount of blood that had already been spilled by men who were just doing what one person had ordered them too.

“Thibodeaux,” Harrelson whispered beside me.

“Hmm?” I mumbled, still watching as O’Connor got in a black Escalade with his men.

“I’m planning to try and push your reports to the state police anonymously, but there

really isn't much else I can do without getting...caught. O'Connor has provided a lot, financially, if you know what I mean." He kept his voice really low, so quiet, I barely was able to hear what he said.

"Thanks, Carl." I gave him a curt nod as the Escalade slowly turned around in the dirt parking lot.

"You know how slow things can be, so just... stay safe and do what you need to do," Carl finished.

"The push from you might help speed things up, though, since I've already given the state police a call." I balled my hands into a fist as the sheriff watched O'Connor leave. "How long is O'Connor gone for?"

"Didn't say specifics, but at least a week or two is what I picked up." Carl pulled his lips into a thin line. "Don't count on the state police hurrying up. We're such small fish in the sea, they reduced our funding so much, which is why the sheriff didn't even bat an eye when O'Connor showed up."

I glanced at him. "How far does this go?"

"Just hush money and to turn a blind eye, for now," he replied and then slunk away as the sheriff turned around and walked back toward the building.

I didn't nod, didn't acknowledge that Harrelson had spoken to me or anything as I marched out of the building. Without a glance to the sheriff, I stalked back to my bike and swung a leg over.

"Hey, Thibodeaux," the sheriff called out, and I paused. Glancing at him, he curled his lips up in a wicked grin. "Might want to check that taillight, son. Wouldn't want to write you a ticket."

Spinning around, I tipped over the edge and clenched my teeth. Of course that jackass would do shit like this. Making a mental note to fix the smashed taillights, I turned the bike's engine over and glanced back as the doors closed behind the sheriff. At this point in time, the information gained was useful, but I still wasn't sure if I could call this excursion a complete success. Because the threat was still there, as well as confirmation that we were on our fucking own.

Azelie shoved her plate out as I turned the pan on its side to dump some more scrambled eggs onto the serving tray. "Thank you!" She grinned widely as I chuckled to myself and guided the food with my spatula out of the pan.

"Where's your mom? She's the only one not out here," I asked, glancing around the oddly relaxed kitchen and dining room. It seemed that somehow, my parents, Mawmaw, and Colette's parents were able to co-mingle relatively nicely when their lives were in danger. They sat around our way-too-small dining table chatting amicably, as if they were old friends.

"Still in the bedroom, I think. No one's seen her come out this morning," Azelie answered and pulled her phone out of her pocket. "The food's gonna get cold if she doesn't get out here soon." And she walked away with another full plate of food and her nose buried in her cellphone.

I sighed and spun around, placing the pan on the stove as I turned the burner off. With a final scan of the room to see if anyone else was paying attention to me, and they weren't, I crept out of the kitchen and down the hallway. The chatter from the dining table buzzed like white noise. The same sound as the fan I heard whirring in my bedroom as I padded down the hallway. A smile crept upon my face. That damned fan in my bedroom was still running all these years later, despite it being the same one I'd used growing up, and I knew that was why Colette was still asleep. No sound had ever managed to penetrate the loud spin of that fucking thing. At least I'd not met one that did yet.

Whether she had patients at the clinic or not today was something I didn't know, which meant disturbing her sleep at least long enough to know if she needed to be up. Maybe she'd simply forgotten to set an alarm or slept through it seeing how she'd been up early this morning and only fallen back asleep again maybe an hour and a half ago in my lap. If she didn't need to be up, then I'd disappear quietly back to the kitchen, and save her some food for when she was finally awake.

At the end of the dim hallway, I reached forward and knocked on the door. Though, with the fan roaring in the room, I knew she wouldn't hear that, especially assuming she was asleep. I waited for maybe a minute or so without a response and knocked once more for good measure.

But still nothing. So, I grabbed the handle and lifted it slightly. The hinges squeaked quietly, and I tugged the door toward me, then twisted the knob just a smidge to the right and it popped open. A habit I'd picked up after years of figuring out how to leave my door locked but still get into my room without my parents knowing, because the lock would remain engaged if opened in this very specific way.

Gentle sunlight slipped through the small crack in the curtain. It draped streaks across the disheveled bed, and the blood stilled in my veins as I locked onto Colette.

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Lying on my bed, her eyes were closed with her head tipped back slightly upon the pillow, and her chest rose and fell with each panting gasp for air. One hand was hidden beneath the quilt as her other fingers tightened their grip on the sheets.

The door behind me quietly swung closed with a soft plunk, drowned out by the fan in the corner of my room. Her chest heaved faster, as her lashes fluttered with the rhythmical movement of her hand beneath the blankets.

She was not asleep. She was...

Shit. I shouldn't be here. I'd just walked in on Colette during some very personal time.

Her chest rose again, and a quiet moan left her lips. The sound—one word.

My name.

Chapter 22

COLETTE

Sweat coated my skin as I gave in to the very desire that had woken me from my sleep.

Even in my dreams, Ford had occupied every thought, every decision that I made. I'd finally found my safety and peace again. After all this time alone, I could love again and be in love with someone I never thought I'd get a chance with again.

Despite being so stubborn and such a hardened ass to him, he'd still found a way to protect me, and damn was it fucking hot. It finally dawned on me that he wasn't just a non-confrontational person at all costs growing up; he simply preferred to not have things escalate if they didn't have to, but he certainly would go to the ends of the earth to protect me if he needed to.

I could fight and handle shit on my own, but the way he took charge aroused feelings in me I'd long since written off as something I wasn't deserving of again. It made me feel vulnerable and safe at the same time, soft and feminine. But empowered more than ever before.

The way he'd touched me, guided me last night, took control had left me hot, bothered, and slightly embarrassed that I'd interrupted it by crying. But instead of making a big deal about it, or making me feel like some idiot, he'd held me and let me process all the shit that had happened.

Now here I was, unable to think of anything else except for Ford. It was his body I imagined against mine. I pictured his hands tracing every curve, and his touch against me. It was his lips I fantasized taking mine. I whimpered and let out a quiet moan with his name sliding off my tongue. Oh, that felt so fucking good. It was his handsome face hovering above mine. His intense gaze watching me with hunger by the door in the room.

Those beautiful eyes stared—

Every muscle in my body stiffened, freezing in place as if a blizzard had swept into this room. My heart skipped a beat as my gaze locked onto his.

Not a fantasy.

Not some picture or idea. But the actual him.

Ford stood as still as if he were made of stone directly in front of the closed and definitely locked door of the bedroom. His eyes were dark and remained firmly on me, and his chest barely moved.

My belly swirled warm, the arousal heightening as I couldn't help but notice the massive bulge between his legs. I wondered how long he'd been standing there. How long he'd been watching...

Slowly, I slid my hand out from between my legs and pushed myself upright. The heat from my figure was palpable, and my heart quickened as his eyes darted to my fingers that I pulled out from beneath the sheets.

His tongue flicked across his lips as his chest heaved with a breath he'd been holding. Did he want...?

Better question, did I want that?

The answer was easy and quick, yes, I fucking wanted that from him. Cautiously, I brought my hands to my lap, wondering how to tell him without—

And fingers wrapped around my wrist just before they brushed against the sheets.

A calloused, massive hand stopped me, and my eyes locked onto Ford's face, hovering so close to mine. He'd crossed that room so deathly silent and fast that I nearly fell over backward. But he wasn't looking at me, he was watching my fingers with the hungriest stare I'd ever seen.

Every thought disappeared from my mind, and a fire roared low in my belly as he brought my fingers to his mouth. When he was done, he slowly dropped my wrist and pulled the sheets off the rest of my body. He grabbed my pajama shorts and thong, dragging them off at the same time he latched onto my leg and slid me to the edge of

the mattress.

Without a word, he knelt down in front of me and draped my legs over his shoulders. I gasped, and his hand found my throat. He locked eyes with me and shook his head in warning to be quiet. I nodded fervently, shock and excitement coursing through me as he winked, kept his gaze steady with mine, and dove between my legs.

The world could be burning down around me, and I wouldn't have noticed. There was nothing else going on, not a rational cautionary thought as heat and sweat rolled beneath my skin. If he trusted that no one else knew how to open that door while it was locked to be able to indulge the way he was, then I let myself give in.

I had absolutely abstained, been celibate, for years, and all of that blew to the wind because of this man. This wasn't going to take long as everything in me seared hot with each wave of desire. I knew I'd want this. No, I had to have this again. And soon, as every pulse in my body drove me closer and closer to a wild cliff. This should not be happening. The consequences of the aftermath were either going to be very good or catastrophic, but I didn't give a rat's ass as of this moment. All I wanted was this. Him. This singular moment, as pleasure enveloped my world in stars and vibrant colors finally provided me with the explosion I craved.

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Slowly, he whispered kisses down the inside of my thigh as I gasped for air and drifted down from the high and release of his doing. I smiled to myself as he gently backed away and let my legs dangle off the edge of the bed.

“Breakfast is getting cold,” he said quietly, breaking the buzzing of the fan.

I cracked an eyelid open and squinted through the still-spinning room. “You better hustle then, I know how much you hate cold food,” I lazily mumbled.

“I just finished eating, Cher,” he replied with a wink, and my eyes widened. “And I’ve never been more satisfied.”

Once again, my gaze darted down between his legs involuntarily, and I could’ve sworn his arousal was bigger than before. A smirk lifted on his face as I locked onto his steady stare, and I sucked my bottom lip between my teeth. He knew what I’d just looked at.

Bracing against the bed, he leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss against my forehead. “Really, though. Azelie will eat everything if you don’t get out there soon.” And he disappeared out of the room without another sound.

I stared at the ghost of his figure, reveling in the high that he created. That was... With a smile, I pushed myself off the bed and grabbed my shorts and underwear from the floor. Quickly shuffling over to my duffel, I dug through the hastily packed bag and grabbed a clean, casual T-shirt and a pair of joggers.

Once I’d changed out of my pajamas, I opened the door and left the room with my

toiletries in hand. I knew I was in desperate need of some hair control, no matter how needy I was for a hot breakfast.

But I paused outside the closed bathroom door as the sound of running water reached my ears. I quickly scanned down the hallway and into the kitchen, where everyone except for Ford was seated around the dining room table. The kitchen was a jumbled mess of dirty dishes in the sink and a few trays with some straggling food waiting for me.

Azelie smiled at whatever was on her phone as somehow, despite the generations of fighting, my parents chatted with Ford's family. Though I wondered if they were arguing about something. Honestly, that was probably the more likely scenario.

Which meant that the only person who could be in the bathroom was Ford. Curiosity and something hot slithered low in my stomach as I stared at the dark wooden door. I should've just walked down that hallway, but instead, something compelled me to inch closer, and I pressed my ear up against the door.

I strained to hear past the rushing water of the shower.

But nothing. Despite lingering for far longer than I should've, I heard nothing. I sighed, expelling the unexpected and very inappropriate disappointment, and quickly jogged back into the bedroom. I could fix my hair later.

Tossing the toiletry bag back into the duffel, I spun around and wandered back down the hallway. Without a word, I grabbed the final clean dish waiting beside the platters of food and scraped the last pieces of sausage, bacon, eggs, and the final pancake from the trays.

Nobody looked up as I simply leaned my ass back against the counter and began eating. I barely registered the taste of the food as my mind played back the past

moment with Ford. Shit. I probably should've...helped him out. I wanted to, but I'd been too wrapped up in my own high and feelings that my mind had been unable to process a response fast enough. Now, he was subjected to his own—

“NO WAY!” Azelie suddenly shouted and sprang from her chair.

I nearly threw my fork at her.

“What?” my mom asked, sharing a quick glance with Ford's mom, who pursed her lips. Yep, there it was, confirmation that they had definitely been arguing.

“What's up, Azelie?” I asked as she lifted her gaze from her screen, and my stomach dropped.

Fuck. No. Her contacts. When we'd been attacked, she'd already taken out her contacts, and I couldn't remember packing them before coming here or if she'd put them in before coming over here or getting out of bed, and if she hadn't, they'd know.

Her eyes connected with mine, and relief flooded my system. Two green eyes. For the first time in her entire life, I was actually grateful that my parents forced her to wear it. I was grateful they must have remembered to grab it and gotten her to wear it. But through the consolation was a crack of uneasiness. Something rubbed me the wrong way about how obsessed my parents behaved concerning her around the Thibodeauxs. The fight after I called Ford. The fight while packing. The fight while he drove us here all lingered in my mind.

“When'd you get out here?” my mom asked, spinning in her chair and narrowing her eyes.

I looked down at my luckily empty plate and back up at her. “I mean, there aren't any

more chairs at the table, so I ate over here,” I replied without directly answering her question.

“Oh, true,” my mom muttered and spun back around.

“Anyway, what’s got you so excited?” I directed the attention back to Azelie.

She smiled again. “I just got a text from our cross-country coaches that the theme idea for the fundraiser run this year is ours!”

“No way. That’s awesome, baby,” I replied with a massive grin. “You didn’t tell me that you guys entered an idea.”

“Well, it was Cory’s idea, technically. He wanted to do something to honor his brother, so he asked if we could make it about honoring military members. The coaches usually pick the senior submissions, which makes sense, but I guess we won it this year! The cross-country coaches got the track coaches involved, who got the Junior Reserves Officers Training Corp from school involved, too, and apparently, it’s going to be this massive two-day event now! The 5k run will still be held Saturday morning in two weeks with a whole bunch of other events too.” She placed her phone against her chest as her eyes sparkled.

Even Ford’s parents grinned.

Azelie briefly glanced over my shoulder, then looked back at me. “Which means lots of planning for us. Captains of each grade and event are supposed to meet in an hour. Can Ford drive me to the school?”

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“Ford?” Everyone in the entire dining room said at the same time my mouth fell open.

Red bloomed on Azelie’s cheeks. Her eyes widened, and her gaze flickered over my shoulder again.

I slowly spun on my heels to find the very man she spoke of with a fresh pair of shorts and an old T-shirt-turned-cut-off adorned on his body. He held a towel to his damp hair, stiff and unmoving. It took everything in me to not lazily slide my gaze down the tattoos that covered his right leg and peeked out along his ribcage exposed by the cutoff.

“Me?” he asked, his two-colored eyes darting around the kitchen as every face turned and stared at him.

Through my peripherals, I noticed Azelie nod her head. “Cory really likes motorcycles, and you have one...” she sheepishly said under her breath and immediately stared down at her empty breakfast plate still sitting on the table.

I inhaled deeply as Ford’s eyes flickered to mine. And I knew he knew exactly what I had just pieced together too.

“Why do you care what Cory thinks? We’ll have Fleur here drive us to get our car, and then we can take you to the school on our way to the restaurant,” my mom quickly said and shot a glare at Ford.

I wished I had a pause button to give me time to think. At this point, my parents

hadn't picked up on the fact that she clearly had a crush on Cory. So, I couldn't let on that I knew, or that would cause Azelie to not open up to me.

Shit. That was probably what she was trying to eventually lead to in our conversation that was interrupted last night. I needed to quickly jump in. But how? If I said it was fine, that would drum up questions. Questions that might reveal Ford and me... But on the other hand, this was my daughter.

"I gotta sign for a package at the post office, so I was headed to town anyway. And the high school is more on my route than the restaurants. It's not a big deal," Ford began and wandered into the living room. He locked eyes with Azelie and nodded toward the guest room. "Go get your stuff."

"Uh, you're not—" my dad started but stopped the moment he caught Ford's steely glare.

"Thank you!" Azelie squealed, jumped from her chair, and shot down the hallway. I took a mental note to thank Ford for stepping in like that.

"Look, we adults need to talk about the upcoming couple weeks, O'Connor, and what happened. But not with her around," Ford stated. His voice was sharp and commanding, and I subtly squeezed my thighs together.

"Plus, I know damn fucking well that she should not be going back to see her home that was trashed last night until she's had some time and maybe a therapy session or a few to process what the hell even happened," he continued. "She's still a kid. So, as adults, it's our job to keep her away from it as much as we can. Got it?"

Mumbled agreements came from my parents, and I caught a brief grin passing on his mom's face as I quickly looked back at Ford. He finished drying his hair and scanned the room once more.

“Colette, do you have any doctor shit to do today?” he asked.

“You know, Ford, honey. Your language has really gone to trash,” his mom quickly said before I had a chance to answer, and I bit down on my bottom lip to stop the smile.

“Sorry, Mama,” he said, raising his brows at me. “The question still stands.”

“No. I’ve got a couple tomorrow, but honestly, I think I might give them to Doctor Brandt and take a temporary extended leave, until everything gets fixed with O’Connor,” I answered without filtering my thoughts. I hadn’t even allowed myself to toy with the idea of not being a doctor for a while, yet for whatever reason, I just spilled my guts to Ford.

He tipped his head, and something flashed in his eyes. Sympathy? I wasn’t sure what. “I know you hate that idea, but that would be the safest thing for a bit. Look, O’Connor’s out of town for a couple weeks, but I don’t know exactly when he’ll be back, or if being out of town means he won’t send anyone to do sh—” Ford paused and cleared his throat. “Stuff. He may still send guys to intimidate us.”

“He’s left for a couple weeks?” his mawmaw asked. Ford nodded, and my brows furrowed with hers. “How do you know that?”

“Intel I got this morning,” he replied without directly answering the question.

Confusion sparked in my veins. Intel? Who the hell says intel?

“Anyway, I’m gonna go put long pants on since shorts and motorcycles aren’t the smartest combo; though, that also wouldn’t be the stupidest shit I’ve done before.” Ford tipped his head and chuckled to himself. He turned around and disappeared into the bedroom I’d slept in. His bedroom. The bedroom that had seen much of Ford and

me growing up.

The bedroom that would definitely see more of us.

Chapter 23

FORD

The package of security systems wasn't even at the post office yet, but I'd seen Azelie's face, and Colette's. Plus, making sure Azelie was squared away with a crowd of her friends and some trusted adults would help ease my worry. Then I would confront Colette about all the shit I knew and meant to talk to her about last night.

Azelie sat unusually still behind me as I steered the motorcycle off the main road and up toward the high school. The parking lot was visible from here, and I knew the moment that her eyes had scanned all the cars already there because her fingers tightened around my shirt at my waist.

Releasing the throttle, we slowed as I shifted down and turned into the lot. I pulled into an empty stall near the base of the path that led up the hill. With the engine rumbling beneath us, I shifted to neutral and raised an arm to help her off.

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Except I was met with her furiously shaking her head beneath her helmet. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

Her eyes swept frantically across the parking lot once more. “He’s not here yet.”

And I knew exactly what she was getting at.

“All right,” I replied and straightened in my seat again. Scoping out my options, I threw the bike into gear and quickly raced out of the parking lot. Turning left, I pulled up near the same bushes I’d parked by the first time I’d come to pick Azelie up, and then killed the engine.

“From this vantage point, you’ll be able to see into the parking lot and down the road,” I explained and glanced behind me. Azelie pulled the helmet from her head as her cheeks bloomed pink. “As soon as you see his ride, I’ll wait another minute or so, and then we’ll make our entrance.”

She blew air out slowly and tucked the helmet into her lap. “Do you think Mom figured it out, too? I saw the look she gave me,” she muttered, refusing to make eye contact with me.

“Oh, she knows.” I leaned sideways on the seat and studied her face. The longer I stared, the more I knew she was mine. That point one percent chance of doubt that I’d been carrying left with the gentle summer breeze.

“I’m gonna be in so much trouble,” she added, sliding her hand across the top of the black helmet.

“Why? Having a crush is totally normal. It’d be very hypocritical of your mom to be upset at you for liking this kid. Besides, I may only have met him once, but I was pretty impressed.” I gave her a soft smile as she pushed a loose curl from her messy braid behind her ear.

“He did stand up to a couple of nasty dudes, didn’t he,” Azelie continued with a hiccup.

I nodded as an old square-body truck with some rust around the wheel rims turned onto the road and chugged up toward us. “If your mom gives you a hard time, you let me know. I’ll have a chat with her.”

She snickered. “Right. Like you’ll be able to do much.”

“You might be surprised by the amount of influence I have with your mom. Especially since I saved her ass by offering to take you so your grandparents didn’t connect the dots between you and your feelings for this young man.” I patted the side of her helmet as the truck turned into the parking lot. “Is that him?”

She nodded. “Yep. That’s Mark’s truck, and I think Cory is in the passenger seat.”

“All right, put your helmet on,” I answered and straightened the bike, but waited to start the engine. I had to time this right. If I waited too long to start the motorcycle, the lack of a rumble and then the sudden ignition would send red flags that we’d been waiting. But too soon, and Cory might not notice it was Azelie on the bike.

Just as Mark signaled to pull into a parking stall, I kicked the bike on. Twisting the throttle, we roared out from behind the bushes, but at an angle where it looked as if we’d simply been cruising down the road.

As I turned the bike into the parking lot with a bump over the drive, Cory jumped

down from the passenger seat and looked toward Azelie and me. Keeping my smile at bay, I drove us around the edge of the parking lot and pulled into a stall near, but not directly next to, where Cory and Mark had parked.

Cory's older brother looked much like him with the same black hair, except it was cut military short, so I wasn't sure if it was curly as well. They had the same rectangular faces with chins that had yet to sprout a single hair. Mark, however, walked with that same situational awareness that had my eyes constantly roaming every inch of my surroundings.

Cory grinned as I offered an arm to Azelie, and she climbed down from the bike. Mark raised a brow but quietly watched. The moment I killed the engine and kicked the stand down, Cory jogged over to us. His deep, brown eyes widened as he scanned the motorcycle.

"Woah, Azelie, this is cool!" he exclaimed as she offered me the helmet.

Her cheeks shifted from pink to red, but Cory had yet to look at her. "I guess I'm pretty lucky Ford offered to give me a ride to the meeting," she said.

"Yeah, you are. Dang." Cory walked around the bike as I dismounted and sat the helmet on the seat. He stuffed his hands into his jean pockets and whistled slowly. "Hey, Mark. When are you gonna get a bike?"

"When are you two gonna get up to the meeting?" Mark replied without directly answering Cory's question.

"Right, come on Azelie," Cory said and finally looked at her. His smile brightened. "I like your shirt."

Her eyes widened, and she glanced at me. She wore some new band's graphic T-shirt

with a pair of jean shorts. A band that I had never heard of, but I guess Cory had. I shrugged and nodded toward the track.

“Th-th-thanks,” she stammered as Cory gestured for her to follow. She jogged a couple of steps, closing the distance between the two of them. I said nothing as they walked up the hillside. Azelie smiled and giggled a few times as I noted some other girls strutting across the lawn toward the same entrance from further down the parking lot.

Once the new girls’ backs faced me, I silently wandered up the hillside after the kids. I knew it was overkill to follow, but after last night, I wanted to double-check that Azelie was safe with a crowd of people.

“Where you going?” Mark called out.

I glanced over my shoulder to find him running after me. “To make sure they all get to where they need to be,” I replied and resumed walking.

“They’re teenagers. What are you gonna do when they break the rules?” Mark asked, catching up to me.

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“I don’t expect them to do exactly what they’re asked. I’m just making sure Azelie is safe.”

“Why do you care? Isn’t she a LeBlanc?”

“Because she’s not quite fifteen, Mark. Because I don’t give a fuck what her last name is. The beef is between her grandparents and my parents, not her. Yet somehow she’s mixed up in all the shit that’s going on.” I clamped my teeth together as we approached the gate, and his hand wrapped around my arm.

“So, it’s true. O’Connor attacked them at their house. Or he allegedly sent some dudes to do so,” Mark said.

“Small fucking towns,” I grumbled. I knew I shouldn’t have been so shocked that everyone already heard about what happened last night, but I was still a little surprised that the rumors had spread so fast.

“Sorry, man.” He gave me a tight smile as I paused at the gate.

“Army?” I asked, noting the dog tag around his neck.

He nodded. “You walk like a military man yourself.”

I raised a brow and chuckled. “There’s a distinctive military walk now, is there?”

“You haven’t put your hands in your pockets once. You’re constantly watching everything around you. And you—”

“All right, all right,” I inserted without directly confirming as we stopped at the edge of the track. I ripped my attention to a slender blonde hooking her arm around Cory’s shoulders. Narrowing my sights onto the two teenagers, I strained to filter out every conversation through the crowd of kids except for theirs.

“Hey you,” she said, standing an inch or so taller than Cory, and she smoothed out her already perfectly curled hair.

Cory’s eyes widened, and a hesitant smile lifted on his lips. “Becca, hey!”

“I thought your idea for honoring our military men and women with this whole fundraiser thing was such a great theme idea. You’re taking me to the dance on Friday night, right?” she continued.

“I-I-I—” he stammered as his eyes darted around the track.

“Great. I’ll send you the color of my dress. Anyway, are you going to the mother/son, father/daughter dance on Saturday? I volunteered us junior girl captains to be in charge of it. I figured that having the sophomore girls plan it would be a little...insensitive, you know, what with Azelie’s poor circumstances.” Becca shot a wry smile at Azelie, who was in earshot of the conversation but seemed to be doing really well either pretending not to hear her, or ignoring her. Instead of the expected sympathy I should have felt for Azelie, the walls of my heart hardened with nothing but pure anger.

“What do you mean?” Cory asked, his brows knitting together.

Becca returned her gaze to Cory and cocked a hip. “You know how she doesn’t have a dad at all? Or the fact that not a single person in her family has been involved in the military. Even her grandpa—”

“It’s not her fault, though, is it?” Cory interjected.

Despite my blood boiling with rage over a fucking teenager’s dig at another teenager, I remained still and let a smidge of pride trickle through my veins. Cory was clearly being hit on by an older girl, yet hadn’t been willing to let Azelie be thrown under the bus.

Tipping my head to Mark, who was clearly watching the same interaction, I nodded at Becca. “Is she dating Cory? Or is this some flirtation thing?” I asked.

Mark pulled his lips into a thin line. “I know they’re flirting, but last I heard, she doesn’t want to put a label on things.”

“What’s she the captain of? I heard they got the entire track and field teams and cross-country involved.” I glanced back briefly at Azelie. She remained facing away from Cory with her arms crossed tightly in front of her chest. Faint red outlined her eyes as if she was doing everything in her power to not cry. Macy stood in front of her, chatting her ear off about who the hell knew what, clearly oblivious to the gossip that was tearing Azelie apart.

“She runs hurdles, if I remember correctly,” Mark replied. “Look, I know I want to step in and smack Cory across the backside of his head, but that would make shit worse.”

“Yeah, I know.” I clenched my teeth together and then raised a brow as an idea danced through my mind. I may not be able to change the fact that Azelie wouldn’t be going to the students’ dance with Cory, but there was something I could handle.

“Good to meet you, Mark. But I’ve got some phone calls to make and some errands to run,” I quickly said and pushed off the fence.

“See ya.” He lifted his chin in a nod as I jogged away from the track.

Reaching my bike, I snatched up Azelie’s helmet and paused as another person came into view.

There was no way. Strutting across the parking lot toward me was a tall, much more muscular man than the last time I’d seen him, heading my way. His dirty-blond hair, however, hadn’t changed a bit in the fifteen years I’d been gone. His thin lips pulled wide into a smile, and his blue eyes lit up as his features crystalized in my vision.

“The rumors are true,” Turk shouted and waved.

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I shook my head and placed the helmet back down. “Been a long time,” I replied and met him halfway across the parking lot. He grabbed my outstretched hand and pulled me toward him, clapping me on the back as I did the same to him.

“When you left, you told me you’d be back. Didn’t think it’d take fifteen fucking years to see my best friend again.” Turk grinned. “And don’t worry, I never told a soul.”

“I would’ve known if you had, ’cause my parents still don’t know,” I said. I couldn’t believe it. “You look exactly the same, just a bit bigger.”

“And you grew at least another six inches in height and maybe more in muscle. Damn.” He clapped his hands on the outside of my arms and shook his head.

“I’m really sorry I didn’t reach out at all.” I felt my smile fall from my lips. What an ass of a friend I’d been to him. We’d grown up together; he was the only other person I cared to hang out with besides Colette. Despite how I’d left, despite ghosting him as I’d done to everyone else, despite being the only person I’d ever told about my relationship with Colette, all these years later, he seemed not to hold any anger or resentment toward me.

Turk shook his head slowly. “I always knew that something would blow up the moment you told me about you and her. So, when I found out that Ford Thibodeaux had bounced town, I knew that that was the moment when shit hit the fan. There’s no apology needed. Just promise you’ll stay in touch from now on.”

“Even with fifteen years of not talking, that’s still three years less than how long we

were friends.” I grinned, feeling that temporary burden leave my shoulders.

He nodded and chuckled. “How many times did my mom drop me off at your house and tell us to just not go swimming in the bayou till she got back?”

I laughed and clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Too many. Especially since your mom started doing that when we were still in diapers. Anyway, why are you here at the high school?”

“I’m in charge of the JROTC. With the theme of the fundraiser this year, it seems I get to be involved as well.” He forced a grin on his face.

“You seem so excited about that.” I raised a brow and smirked, catching the sarcasm in his tone.

“Just unexpected is mostly it. Anyway, those of us who are still in town, we all get together at James’s house once a month for drinks and to shoot pool and shit. You should swing by tomorrow night. Colette usually comes.” He winked.

I shook my head and sighed. “When you say those of us still in town, you really mean everyone.”

“Everyone but you.” He pulled his lips into a straight line. “It’d be nice to catch up with you. I’ve got two kids now.”

I raised my brows. “You and Cassy get hitched?”

He grinned, and his eyes sparkled. “She finally said yes.”

“About fucking time. All right, I’ll see if I can.”

We clasped hands again, quickly patted each other's backs, and then he was gone. Turning around, I wandered back to my bike.

Honestly, it sounded both fun and daunting to see everyone from high school again. Mostly daunting. I wasn't exactly the most social kid, but with such a small class and small town, it wasn't like I'd been a complete ghost. Besides, if Colette apparently always went, it would be an excuse to see her outside of my house and the restaurants.

It would be a few hours of adults chatting, catching up, and maybe a minute or two of some semblance of normalcy—something I hadn't had since returning. I'd at least think about it, and maybe see if Colette was actually going. If she wasn't, then I'd catch lunch with Turk later or something.

But all of that could wait. I needed to make those phone calls first. Digging in my pocket as I stood in front of my motorcycle, I unlocked it, opened my contact list, and tapped on Dom's number.

Chapter 24

FORD

Shit. Glancing at my watch, I closed my eyes and realized how horrible of a person I was and that I owed Colette another fucking apology. I'd sent her a text earlier this morning asking if we could meet later and chat. She'd replied that we could after she picked up Azelie. And here I was, the dumb ass who had left his phone at home after installing the security camera to help my parents with the late dinner rush and then close up.

The streets were practically empty, and the LeBlancs' restaurant was dark. My pops had already taken Mawmaw to the van as I waited for Mama to run back in and grab

her jacket. A jacket that she took everywhere with her, even in the dead heat of summer as it was.

“Something’s on my son’s mind,” my mama quietly said as I typed the final code into the alarm box.

“Too much, Mama. Always too much,” I replied and held the door open for her. She quickly slid past me, and I shut the back exit with a tink.

She raised her brows, and the tension that still slithered between us stiffened. We’d hardly spoken since I’d returned, and I’d still not had a chance to apologize. Everything with Colette pushed to the side as I inserted the key in the lock and twisted.

“Mama?” I began, stuffing the set back into my pocket.

She tipped her head as we shuffled through the back lot toward the idling van.

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“I’m really sorry. I never meant to hurt you,” I whispered and looked down at the dark tar beneath my feet. “I-I-I did something to protect someone else and hurt you, and that wasn’t fair at all. I just—”

Arms wrapped around me, cutting me off. As tears bubbled in my eyes, my mom pulled me closer to her and buried her face against my chest. I was a kid again, seeking my mama for comfort from something that really wasn’t a big deal.

My own body seemed unable to move, unable to process that after fifteen years, I was finally being hugged by my mom again. As the hot tears slipped over my cheeks, she shuddered against me and then tightened her embrace.

“Mama,” I cried out and collapsed into her.

“Welcome home, my little bear,” she said, muffled against my chest.

I gasped for air, sobbing like I was four. “I never thought I’d hear that again.” I swiped the back of my hand against my cheeks, quickly hiding away the evidence that I was crying. Something that Bernie would never find out about.

“I should probably start calling you big bear now, instead of your father, since you’re bigger than he is now,” she added, tipping her head back.

I chuckled lightly as a tear slid down her cheek. “You’ve been carrying something heavier on your shoulders lately, though, I can see it. What’s got the bravest, strongest man I’ve ever seen so worried?”

I slid my teeth back and forth as she stepped against my side, and I kept my arm slung around her shoulders. Before I could tell my mom about Azelie and Colette, I needed to confront Colette first. That much I knew, especially after all the shitty mistakes I'd already made.

"I'm worried there's something more than just some power play for the fu—" I stopped myself with a clear of the throat. "Excuse me. I mean, I'm worried there's something more than just some play for the restaurants going on. O'Connor attacked the LeBlancs in their home, Mama. I've seen assholes like this guy before. They rough up around the businesses, but unless there's something personal, they try to keep the intimidation tactics as..."

"As distant as possible?" my mom finished for me.

I nodded and helped guide her around a pothole in the cracked lot. "Or I'm reading into things, hoping and begging that the shit I've seen hasn't found its way here."

She inhaled deeply, her shoulders rising beneath my arm. "Well, at least for the next couple weeks, we can breathe a little easier with O'Connor gone for a bit."

"Or—"

"No, little bear. I know you're used to assuming the worst, but we're not going to do that right now. Go ahead and prepare for the worst, I'm okay with that. But I want you to at least take a moment to relax. Enjoy the fundraiser next week, especially since I know that not another person in this town is a Navy SEAL like my son," she explained as we stopped outside the van. "And yes, it's my prerogative to brag about you."

I scoffed. "How can you switch so quickly from being so angry at me to this? Not that I'm complaining, but yeah."

She patted my cheek and smiled at me. “I wasn’t angry. I was shocked. I had grieved you, Ford. It took me a minute to reorient myself, and then I’ll admit, my pride got in the way a bit because I shouldn’t have slammed that door in your face when you showed up.”

“Yeah, you definitely shouldn’t have,” I teased.

“Get in, little bear, or I’ll go get my wooden spoon again.” She winked.

I crept silently down the hallway. After thirty minutes of listening to my parents and Colette’s parents argue, I knew why Colette and Azelie hadn’t been waiting in the living room by the time we got home. They’d been smart because it took me at least fifteen minutes of slowly backing out of the conversation to finally have a moment to disengage from the chaos. Assuming Colette and Azelie were holed up in the guest room, I made a beeline for my bedroom.

Once things quieted down out there, and the adults—including my silent but nosy mawmaw—finally decided it was time for bed, I’d find my way back out to the couch so Colette could have the bed. But right now, I couldn’t stand another minute of listening to the strangest argument ever.

With a careful twist of the knob, I pushed the bedroom door open and rushed inside, shutting it with my palms braced against the door.

And giggles drowned out the bickering. Heat rose in my cheeks as I slowly turned around.

“Uh, hi, girls,” I said, pulling my lips between my teeth. “I thought you were in the guest bedroom.”

Colette’s eyes widened as she clamped a hand over her mouth, and she attempted to

push Azelie's head up from her lap.

"Ouch, Mom. Stop," Azelie whined.

Colette froze, every muscle in her body stiffening as she kept her gaze locked with mine.

Which reminded me that in the whirlwind of discovering Azelie was my daughter, Colette also had no idea that I knew Azelie was her daughter.

"I-I-What-Are—" Colette stammered, and Azelie scrunched her brows together.

"What is going on with you?" Azelie asked, whether to me or her mom, I wasn't sure as her eyes darted between the two of us.

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“Better question,” I began and took a couple steps into the room, still refusing to remove my eyes from Colette. “What movie do you girls want to watch, because I’m not going back out there. No way.” I tossed a thumb over my shoulder, and Colette’s wide eyes shifted to confusion as she tipped her head.

“You don’t have a TV in here,” Azelie stated and plopped back down in her mom’s lap.

“True, but I do have a laptop, and I’m pretty sure I’ve got Bernie’s password to one of his streaming services.” I wiggled my brows as Colette’s confusion softened.

“You knew?” she mouthed.

I nodded once. Worry briefly flashed across her face as every line on her beautiful, freckled skin deepened. So, I winked. “It’s okay. We’ll talk later,” I mouthed in response. Later. How many days would this “later” turn into?

“Who’s Bernie?” Azelie asked, clearly oblivious to the exchange between her mom and me.

I chuckled and ran my hand through my hair. “A buddy of mine. He’s a bit of a shithead, but he’s a good dude.”

Shouting increased from the living room, and the two girls stitched their brows together. “Why the hell did you stay out there as long as you did?” Colette asked.

“You think I wanted to?” I rolled my eyes. “Every time I tried to sneak off, my mama

or yours would look at me and be like ‘back me up on this Ford.’ Do you know how awkward it was to be in the middle of that?” I walked toward my dresser, where my laptop was sitting.

“Why do you think we hid in here the moment we got home? Breakfast was too pleasant,” Colette continued.

“Yeah, well they’re politely arguing now, and it’s the strangest fucking thing. My mom said that your restaurant’s tators are the best tots, and then your mom argues back with, and I quote, ‘that doesn’t matter ’cause your gumbo is the best!’” I grabbed the laptop and spun around.

“Then my mawmaw cursed in French, your dad spat back also in French some words I won’t repeat in front of the child. And here I am, somehow wondering how it took me, with actual training, thirty fucking minutes to get myself out of that conversation,” I finished.

Walking around the foot of the mattress, I plopped the laptop beside Colette as the two girls snorted at the same time.

“I’m sorry,” Colette quickly apologized and then covered her mouth quickly as Azelie burst out in a full belly laugh.

I clicked my tongue. “Anyway, what you girls chatting about?”

“Nothing,” Azelie quickly stated, cutting her laugh short. Colette chuckled quietly and continued to play with Azelie’s hair.

I grinned widely and dropped to my knees. Placing my elbows against the edge of the bed, I plunked my chin in my hands and wiggled my shoulders. “Oooo, boy gossip. I love it! Tell me more.”

Azelie giggled as Colette smiled.

“Did something happen with Cory after I dropped you off?” I pressed, and Azelie rolled her eyes.

“Nooooo,” she defensively stated as her cheeks flushed red.

I couldn’t help but smile even wider as my chest grew warm. Even if things were going to blow up eventually, at least in this moment, here I was, talking to my family like we were normal. As if everything was okay. As if Colette and I weren’t chasms apart with secrets and danger separating us.

For a moment, I had it all. Because I had her.

“How about this,” Colette said, watching Azelie. “You go brush your teeth so you’re ready for bed while Ford and I pick out a movie. But make sure you’re quiet and don’t get caught.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Azelie replied with a smile and sat up. She glanced at me as she climbed off the bed. “Thank you for taking me, by the way.”

I nodded as she quietly crept from the room, leaving Colette and me alone.

“So, how long have you known?” she immediately asked the moment the door latched shut. I studied Colette. She watched me intently in return, an indecipherable number of emotions flashing across her face.

“Since the first time I picked her up,” I answered and pushed myself up from the floor.

Her brows inched together as relief dropped her shoulders away from her ears. “And

you're not mad I didn't exactly...tell you?"

I shook my head. "Nah. Cher, we've experienced fifteen years of life without each other. There's going to be surprises and new things to share with each other."

A timid smile lifted on her lips as her eyes misted over. "Even though I technically lied by not correcting you?"

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Reaching forward, I brushed a curl away from her brow and let my fingers linger against her face. Warmth seeped through my skin as she leaned against my touch. “The only thing I’m wondering is why you didn’t?”

Her bottom lip trembled, and a tear slid out as she closed her eyes. But she didn’t pull away from my hand. Her chest expanded as silence stretched between us. But it wasn’t the kind that made me want to run. It wasn’t the kind that churned my belly, begging me to fill the space with words. No, it was the kind that allowed for the answer to be unspoken. I somehow knew her biggest concern was the worry at that time that it would open a can of worms she wasn’t ready to reveal concerning Azelie’s lineage. I also understood that she didn’t keep that secret from me to hurt me, but out of the same fear that stayed my tongue for an entire week. The only thing that left me wondering now was why she hadn’t told me before I’d left town fifteen years ago. Or why she hadn’t called me after at any point to tell me about my daughter.

But now wasn’t exactly the best time to bring that up, even though I’d been the one to express that we needed to talk earlier and then practically ghosted her. “Sorry about asking to talk earlier and then leaving you hanging,” I gently said, breaking the stillness around us, and dropped my hand from her cheek.

Colette turned her eyes to the bed and picked at a fraying thread on the quilt. “I saw you get roped into helping at the restaurant. I get it. We can talk now.” She glanced up at me, caution but a glimmer of hope twinkling upon her face.

Without hesitation, I swept the stain left by the tear off her cheek with my thumb. She inhaled sharply, and my heart jumped in my chest.

“There’s a few things, but let’s start with the most important one since Azelie will be back fairly quickly. Cory,” I started, once again ignoring what really needed to be discussed. Once again, I ignored confessing my feelings and what I knew about Azelie and Liam. I wanted this moment, this smidgen of time before I blew shit up. It was selfish, I knew that, and I thought I’d grown, but I mean, this was important to discuss too, wasn’t it? Especially considering we were limited in the amount of time we had to talk.

Colette slid over on the bed, making room for me. “I didn’t know until this morning. I feel like such an idiot for not seeing it sooner.”

I pulled myself onto the mattress and leaned back against the headboard. “If Azelie didn’t want you to find out, you wouldn’t have. Think about how sneaky we were.”

She nodded slowly and stared blankly across the room. “Yeah, but still. She’s never really hidden anything from me, so why did she wait so long?”

“Maybe because it’s unrequited,” I answered, and Colette whipped her gaze toward me.

“What do you mean?”

“Does the name Becca ring any bells? A blonde-haired junior who’s captain of—”

“The track team. Yes. Why?” Colette replied.

I tipped my head back against the wall. “Two things, she pretty much told Cory that they’re going to the summer dance on Friday and then did this passive aggressive shit about Azelie not having anyone to take her to the father/daughter dance the night after and how her grandpa was too old and then more shit about not having any family in the military.”

“That little fucking asshole bitch. I’m—”

“Wow,” Azelie inserted.

Colette’s eyes snapped wide, and she darted her gaze toward the door as Azelie swung it shut behind her. I bit down on my bottom lip and hid the smile.

“That’s some strong language. Who are you calling a bitch?” Azelie grinned and skipped over to the bed.

“First off, you don’t say that word. Second, it’s none of your business. Now, we’re gonna watch that old John Wayne movie you wanted to see and just hush,” Colette demanded.

Azelie giggled and launched herself onto the bed.

It wasn’t long into the movie before Colette was out cold and Azelie yawned, sleep quickly coming to take her away too. With silent guidance, I helped Azelie take out her contact and placed the lens container on the nightstand. Then she curled up into a ball, tucked her head against my chest, and was out like a light.

I dared not move as Colette slid up against Azelie, cocooning her between us. She draped an arm over her daughter and then slid her fingers between the hem of my shirt and my pants. Fuck changing into pajamas tonight. I wasn’t about to disturb this moment. The woman I loved and our daughter felt safe enough to fall asleep within my arms.

Scooping both of them closer to me, I gently placed my chin on top of Colette’s head and closed my eyes. I was holding her. Again. Not in some dream, not in some fantasy, not in my mind. Here, in this moment of solitude, I held Colette. Right at this moment, I held my entire world in my arms.

My daughter was safely sheltered between Colette and me. And Colette was cradled within my embrace, hopefully finding some reprieve from the dangers that surrounded her.

I'd find myself six feet under before I ever let something happen to either of them ever again. For this single night, the stars aligned. Fuck the pain, the past, the regret. I'd walk through the ashes of fire to be there for these two women.

How the hell was I so lucky to have come home to not just Colette, but someone she and I created? How the hell was I deserving of a woman as incredible as Colette, let alone a daughter?

I peeked out through slitted lids at two heads of the most curly, cherry-red hair nestled in my embrace. And I couldn't help but smile. I'd long forgotten what it was like to have warmth in my heart. It was Colette who created that sunshine again. She brought the color back to my life.

My gaze snapped to the doorway. An open door with one lone figure stood in the frame. Shit. No. Azelie must've forgotten to lock it as my mawmaw crossed her arms and raised a brow.

I blew out some air. Just my mawmaw.

She smiled, but said nothing. There were no words that needed to be spoken. She knew.

I knew.

And with that, she quietly slipped out of the room, closing the door behind her.

It left me with the love of my life and my daughter. My family. My world. The beauty and color I'd been missing.

Chapter 25

COLETTE

The conversation around me was mere jumbled, indecipherable words. Faint music bumped in the background as a cue ball clacked against another one on a pool table. This once-a-month adult get-together was anything but the distraction and relief I'd been looking forward to.

He'd been gone the moment Azelie and I woke up this morning, and a passing glance was all that was shared between us as he returned from a morning run, then I headed into town to drop Azelie off at Macy's and meet my parents at the restaurant.

All day, all we'd had were shared glances. He'd been at his parents' restaurant, while I was at mine, and then boom, evening came, and I left for James's before Ford ever came home.

The only thing, or I guess person, that consumed my thoughts was—

“Ford Thibodeaux?” Sylvia gasped beside me, jarring me back to the present

moment.

Huh?

Following her widened gaze, came the very man I couldn't stop thinking about trudging down the stairs across the room. He'd cleaned up rather nicely. His hair was neatly combed, and he'd ditched his hat. The navy-blue T-shirt sat perfectly against his body as if tailored at every seam to form to his frame. It highlighted his broad shoulders and brought out the vibrant colors of his tattoos, as if begging me to wander over there and dance my fingers across his skin.

Jeans that were just the right size hung low on his hips, and I immediately clenched my legs together. Damn... Well, this was an issue.

Turk grinned and turned away from the pool table, carrying the stick over to greet Ford as I leaned back against the wall between a couple of girls. Several others raced over to say hi to him while whispers danced around the crowd.

"I heard he was back in town." Margie whistled quietly beside me. "Damn. He got hot."

"Right? I saw him at his parents' restaurant the other day, and I did a total awkward double take. Some men age like milk, but not him," Lyla added and took a quick sip of her beer.

"Okay, but he was kinda weird during high school, you know? Never dated anyone," Sylvie whispered.

I pulled my brows together and tore my gaze away from Ford. "You're saying the only reason he was 'weird' in high school was because he never had a girlfriend?" I asked.

Sylvie shrugged her shoulders. “I mean, other than hanging out with Turk, he also kinda floated from friend group to friend group, so yeah. I guess I am saying that.”

“So, did that make me a weird kid in high school too? I never dated anyone,” I asked with a raised brow.

The three girls shook their heads but continued to stare at Ford.

“No, you at least had us as a steady group of friends. Wait,” Margie stated and brought her gaze to me. “Is this a LeBlanc defending a Thibodeaux, I hear?”

Pinching my lips together, I stuffed my hands into my pockets and shrugged.

“But what about your rivalry or whatever shit your two families have?” She narrowed her eyes and took a step toward me. Sylvie and Lyla both tipped their heads and nodded in agreement.

“A rivalry that I think is stupid and petty,” I mumbled and glanced back at Ford.

He gave a crooked but tight smile to someone and then shifted through the crowd. His progression was slow as he attempted to weave through a jumble of people, all vying for his attention.

Lyla gasped. “Oh, my goodness, you think he’s good-looking too.”

I tore my gaze away from Ford. “And what are we? Back in high school? Because this sounds a lot like teenage gossip.”

Margie clicked her tongue as Sylvie giggled. “That’s not a denial,” Lyla pressed with raised brows.

She wasn't wrong, though. Maybe it was time to finally admit that I had feelings for Ford. Not to myself because I'd already done that, but admit it to others too. What good had come from the petty ass feud between our families anyway? Absolutely nothing. In fact, being closer andtogether, despite the weird ass arguments and passive aggressive shit going on, things were finally...a little more peaceful.

Free.

“Man, I’ve always loved the two different colors of his eyes, but now, he also has all these delicious tattoos, and got more muscly?” Sylvie whispered, and I chanced a glance over at the very man they’d continued to quietly gossip about.

Ford’s gaze slipped above Turk’s head and met mine. She wasn’t wrong. Anytime something challenging blundered into my life, I’d briefly close my eyes and imagine his intense stare. The blazing of an ember behind the hazel in one eye and the deep, beautiful brown in the other. Plus, that smile of his. But this time, as the memory of his grin sifted through my mind, it wasn’t just some fantasy of him, but actually him across the room, offering me a quick one right now.

The maturity upon his face captivated me more now than ever before. Deep lines at the edges of his lips drew me like a magnet to metal. I wanted him. I wanted to soak up the warmth from his arms again. I wanted him to hold our family as we watched some stupid show and fell asleep together again. I wanted that simple nothingness. I wanted all of that mundane shit with him.

His brows twitched upward, and my eyes widened.

Shit. I was staring.

He’d caught me staring.

Look at anything else, Colette, I thought to myself and quickly snapped my gaze down to my toes. Oh, fuck. Why the hell had I worn this outfit? I could’ve put some

effort into something other than a pair of leggings and a wrinkled tank top. He'd dressed himself up into something that wasn't a pair of shorts or those cargo pants he liked to wear. Though, I had to admit, the way those joggers fit on him when he wore them was... attractive to say the least.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I quickly tore it out, grateful for the distraction from thoughts I shouldn't have been having at that moment.

As I read the contact, I tightened my hold on the cell. Of course. A text message from Ford.

Turk invited me to come tonight when I saw him at the school yesterday. Just thought I'd let you know that I'm not stalking you.

I reread the message as my stomach rippled like an alligator swimming across the surface of the bayou. Was that really such a bad idea, though? I mean, hadn't he sort of been stalking me already, just disguised as the Rougarou to protect me? What would be the harm in a little flirting anyway? I mean, we'd flirted all through high school, and I know he flirted with me a few times since returning home. There may be some secrets we still needed to air, but right now, as my body tingled, I simply wanted to let loose and carelessly flirt with that man.

Biting down on my bottom lip, I tapped on the screen and typed my reply.

Damn, why not? That would be fun;)

Excitement ripped like fire through my veins as I refused to remove my gaze from my phone screen. If I looked at him right now, I might lose the gumption that fueled my boldness. Besides, the bubbles appeared on my screen, which meant he was about to reply.

It was as if we were seventeen again, running from our parents and the world with nothing but hope and reckless adventure full of love in front of us.

I'm sorry, what? You'd find it fun to have me stalk you?

My thumb hovered over the keyboard. Was he simply testing to see if I was flirting or was he oblivious to that fact? There was only one way to find out how far I could push this.

Well, I know the woods between our houses better than you, so it's not like you could find me if I didn't want you to anyway;)

I tapped the send button, and the "delivered" turned to "read" almost immediately.

Sticking a nail between my teeth, I chewed and stared at the screen like a hawk hovering its prey. And then the message slid through with a silent buzz.

I don't think you understand what stalking means. It's not just following you through some woods... regardless of whether you think you know them better than I do;)

A smile pulled my lips wide as I furiously typed a reply.

Exactly. Stalking is a lot more difficult than that. And since you couldn't catch me even if I told you where I was running to, you'd be a terrible stalker.

Wait. As those pending bubbles popped up, indicating he was typing a reply, reality slithered through me. Why was I fucking flirting about being stalked? Even better question: Why was it exciting instead of terrifying, especially knowing he had already kind of done so while leaving me flowers and pretending to be the Rougarou?

I swallowed stiffly as my phone buzzed with a notification.

You don't think I could catch you if I was chasing you through the woods?

To hell with rational thought.

Nope, since I know them better than you, I bet you couldn't.

I knew what I was doing, what I was enticing as my thumb tapped the arrow and sent the message. Competing against him had always led to something much more satisfying after, and while I believed we'd both grown as people in fifteen years, this was one pastime I was grateful he was still indulging in and one that I'd missed.

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And there it came, barely a few seconds after I'd sent mine.

Don't bet something unless you understand there are consequences to losing.

Wicked fire burned in my core, and I glanced up from my phone for the first time. He smirked and raised a brow as my gaze met his. Intense. Hypnotic. It was then that I knew he'd known this entire time what I was doing. No, what he was doing. I furiously typed a reply.

It's a hypothetical situation, that's all.

I tapped my toe quietly against the floor, impatiently waiting for his damn reply. How long—

So, hypothetically, if I chase you through the woods, and catch you, what would a fair consequence be?

Goosebumps prickled at my skin, and a chill danced up my spine. We were both in our thirties? How responsible and adult-like was this? But it felt nice to be reckless again. Besides, I'd opened this bottle already.

What would you want?

I'd barely tapped send when his reply crashed into my phone.

You.

One word. A very clear answer that couldn't be misinterpreted. I stared at his single-word response as the oxygen around me thinned. The lights dimmed, and there was nothing but the steady drum of blood pounding into my ears. This wasn't some romance book I'd read. This wasn't some fictional scenario I'd fantasized about in my head. This was a real conversation, and that text was an actual message on my phone.

Me. He wanted me.

But we were discussing a hypothetical situation... Right?

My hands trembled, and the screen blurred. Not because I was afraid that it would happen, but that it wouldn't. The logistics of how he'd followed me before and known I was in danger every time the Rougarou had shown up were of no consequence right now. Knowing that he would eventually catch me, no matter how confident I was in my ability to navigate the woods between our houses, elicited a desire on a level that made my cheeks heat up.

Shifting my stance, I attempted to close my legs tighter together. Don't look at him, don't look at him, I repeated over and over in my head because I knew the moment I did, my arousal would take over the self-control holding me against this wall. All those years and effort of hiding the fact we were lovers would fly out the fucking window behind him the—

Vibration shot through my palm, and I jumped. An involuntary squeak left my throat, and the three girls I'd forgotten I was still standing by stopped talking. Their gazes sparked to me as I squeezed the phone in my hand tighter.

Phone.

Vibration.

Notification.

I quickly glanced at the screen and sighed. “Uh, I gotta take this,” I muttered and flashed my screen at them. A phone call from Azelie was my quick escape from a situation that I created.

With a tap on the answer button, I placed the phone against my ear and pushed off the wall. “What’s up?” I asked, weaving through the crowd.

“So, Macy and I were hoping we could stay for one more round of bowling. I know it would put me past my curfew, and we would both need a ride home since Macy’s parents can’t come get us that late,” she explained, and the racing in my heart slowed.

“Cory’s there?” I asked.

Silence ticked between us for a couple seconds. “Yes,” she finally muttered.

“Is Becca there too?” I paused at the base of the stairs.

“Becca? No, why would she be? It’s just Macy, Thomas, Cory, and me.”

“All right,” I replied as a shadow swallowed the light around me. “You can have one extra hour, and then I’ll be there regardless of if the game is finished or not. Thank you for calling, and please be safe.”

“Always, Mom. Love you,” she answered, and the line went dead before I had a chance to say anything in reply.

“Everything okay?” a deep voice asked.

With a jolt, my shoulder slammed against the wall. “What the hell, Ford?” I hissed

and stuffed my phone in my pocket.

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“Sorry,” he said with a quiet chuckle.

I rubbed my hand against the tender skin, knowing a bruise would form later, and faced the very man standing beside me. “Yeah, everything’s good. Azelie just wanted to stay a little longer with her friends at the bowling alley tonight.”

His shoulders fell, and he nodded. “Good. Good.”

Suspicion crept through my skin, and I tipped my head. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, well, the motion sensors went off at the house, but both of our parents are still at the restaurants. Must’ve been some critter or something.” He ran a hand over his hair.

“We—”

“Ford! Get your ass over here and play a round of pool,” Turk shouted over me, and I sucked my bottom lip between my teeth.

Ford cocked a brow. “Hold on!” he loudly replied without removing his gaze from me. “What were you going to say?” His deep-set eyes intensified as if they were staring into every corner of my soul and soaking in every ounce of pleasure from me.

“Nothing. Go hang out with Turk. You haven’t seen him in a while,” I whispered with a subtle nod of my chin.

Ford lingered. Just a moment longer, his gaze clung to mine as his chest expanded and deflated with silent breaths. He was the strokes of paint I hardly saw in the breeze

anymore. He reminded me of the silver stars at night and the cotton clouds in the day, adding that adventure onto a canvas filled with one plain color. Our timing had never synced, but at least, as he stood quietly in front of me, our clocks ticked in rhythm with each other right now.

As he turned away, his fingers brushed briefly against mine, and then he was swallowed by the crowd forming around the pool table.

Clearly, no one else had seen his tender touch. No one else had noticed our private and intimate interaction, for if they had, I would've never been able to slip away. I needed some time alone with my thoughts, so I drove to the bowling alley, parked, and then simply waited for the hour to be spent.

Chapter 26

FORD

Colette tipped her head and gave me a tight, apologetic smile. "Sorry. Again," she mouthed as her mom latched her hand around her wrist and dragged her down the hallway. I couldn't even catch her alone for a moment in what was technically my bedroom to chat. All fucking week. Every time I made any attempt to steal a moment with Colette to at least tell her that I knew Azelie was mine, and that I knew about Liam, I was interrupted or ruined by her parents or Azelie.

Her daughter interrupting us and needing her mom was completely acceptable and only happened twice. But for an entire week, the amount of codependence her parents displayed had my hackles raised—it seemed more and more intentional. All the rage that consumed me in anticipation of when O'Connor would finally strike again boiled against the lid of a very full jar.

And I was struggling to keep that bottle shut. For a week, we'd passed like strangers

in the night despite never living so close before. It was as if her parents purposefully monitored every move she made to keep us apart. We couldn't use any old excuse, either, as to why we were leaving the house, because now they knew we'd be gone at the same time.

I stared at the open doorway as their chatter slithered away behind me. Azelie would be home soon from the final meeting about the fundraiser shit this weekend, which, seeing as it was Wednesday, meant it started in two days.

The window available for me to have a polite and mature, private conversation with Colette was quickly fading. I was trying to be courteous for both Colette and Azelie's sake, but as I glanced over my shoulder and caught Colette's mother's smirk and side eye to me, that glass shattered.

"No," I said and spun around. Colette and her mom stopped walking as I stalked down the hall. Red danced at the edge of my vision. "Are you that fucking dependent on your grown child? For over a week, I've let you drag her away from me when all I've wanted is a single moment for a private conversation."

"Don't you dare talk to me that way," Colette's mom hissed, and her dad appeared around the corner.

"Or what? What will you fucking do? Force me out again? I'm not some scared, eighteen-year-old kid anymore," I calmly stated. Too calm. I knew that was never a good sign when my rage was in so much control that I was otherwise utterly relaxed.

Colette's brows pinched together. "Force you out?" She looked at her mom and dad as they stared at me. "What is he talking about?"

I smiled at her parents and reared my head back. "You know, I wondered how you guys found out all those years ago. The only person who knew outside of me and

Colette was Turk, and he for damn sure hadn't said anything. If he had, then it would've been my parents that would've known. Not you two."

"Known what? What are you talking about?" Colette asked as I glanced at her. This wasn't how I'd wanted all of this to come out. I had vowed to take the real reason I'd left to the grave, for Colette's sake. But something snapped. Whatever restraint I'd had on that secret frayed in an instant.

"Nothing, sweetie. He's talking about nothing," her mom quickly stated and narrowed her eyes.

"Even now, despite everything and all this time, you're going to keep up the lie?" I took a step forward. "Was it really all about this fucking restaurant rivalry shit?"

"I did what I had to!" her mother shouted and tore out of her husband's embrace. She marched up to me and slammed her finger against my chest. I simply stared down at her. "You should've stayed gone."

"What are you going to do this time?" I cocked a brow as Colette snapped out of her shock and stomped forward.

"What the hell is going on?" She wrapped her hand around her mother's arm and tugged her gently away from me.

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“I just wanted to protect my daughter! I wasn’t about to let her become some trailer park whore for the likes of you!” her mother hissed.

Red blinded my eyes, and I lunged forward. How dare she call Colette a whore. Fuck the fact this was a woman and my elder. Fuck the respect I’d been taught to give to anyone older than me, especially women. This bitch didn’t deserve it for calling her daughter—

“FORD!” Colette screamed, jumping between her mom and me.

And from the kitchen came my mawmaw with her wooden spoon raised. The paddle crashed against Colette’s mother’s side.

Pausing my assault, I wrapped my arms around Colette instead and held her. Every inch of my skin against her body leaked the rage that coursed in my veins. I needed some grounding. Soaking in her warmth and the smoothness of her skin beneath my palms, I stared at the woman who had nearly destroyed my life for the selfishness of her own.

Colette’s mother spun around just as my mawmaw raised the wooden ladle again. She shook her head, and that was all Mawmaw needed to do to get Colette’s mom to back down.

“Someone tell me what is going on,” Colette whispered, pulling my attention back to her. She didn’t wriggle out of my hold. She didn’t fight my touch as I tightened my trembling hands around her arms.

I closed my eyes and dropped my nose into her hair. “This isn’t how I wanted to do this,” I quietly answered, swallowing the killer I’d chosen to become.

“Please,” she gently begged.

I took a deep inhale of her cinnamon scent, letting it coat every fiber of my being, and then stepped back. “High school graduation. We’d just finished the ceremony, and my parents headed to the restaurant while I went home to change for the party that night,” I began.

“Don’t,” her mother hissed.

Colette spun around; with her jaw trembling, she curled her lip up in disgust. “You called me a trailer park whore, so you’re going to be quiet, because clearly the only person who’s even attempting to tell me the truth is Ford.”

Her mom stumbled back against her father but remained silent. Colette turned back to me and gestured for me to continue.

“Your mom and dad stopped me, brandished a knife, and told me that if I didn’t disappear, that they’d burn my parents’ restaurant down, kill me, and make sure you were never able to go to college.” Sliding my thumb over the small scar against my jaw, I gave Colette a tight smile. With the lid removed, everything I’d held to my chest for all these years poured out like a never-ending waterfall. “That’s where I got this. I’m sorry, Cher, but I wasn’t going to be the reason that you never became a doctor like you always talked about. I couldn’t see my parents’ livelihood destroyed. I felt like you and they were safer with me gone than around. And for all their wrongdoing, I couldn’t see your parents end up in prison for any of that.”

Her brows tightened as tears welled up in her eyes. “No. No. You left. You chose to leave. They told me—” Her voice broke as she shook her head in denial.

“It’s okay, baby,” I whispered. I’d carried this secret for fifteen years, and I couldn’t blame her for not wanting to believe her parents were capable of something like that.

“They said—” She attempted to speak again but couldn’t.

I reached forward, but she shrank away from my extended touch, so I dropped my hand and continued. “So, I packed a duffel, got in that old pick-up my dad and I built together, and drove. I honestly wasn’t sure where I was going, but I left. I didn’t know, though, Colette. I didn’t know you were pregnant, and when I returned four years later because I finally felt like I could protect you and my parents better being here, I saw you happy with your husband.” I paused and swallowed as the memory of her smiling at Liam flashed in my mind.

“You looked so happy, Cher,” I softly choked out.

A soft gasp shivered from her lips, and she wrapped her arms around her body. I wanted to be the arms wrapped around her, but I knew at that moment she needed space to hear what I was saying and then time to process it.

“It definitely wasn’t the closure I wanted, but it was closure for me because all I’ve ever wanted was for you to be safe and happy. The way you looked at him reminded me of...of how you used to look at me, so I checked on my parents and saw that business was good. Plus, since Liam wasn’t someone we’d grown up with, I knew you’d been to college, and so I left. Unlike the first time, though, I knew I would never come back.” I studied her as silent tears streamed down her cheeks.

“How long have you known about...Azalie being yours?” she whispered.

“I figured out that Azalie was mine when you sent me to pick her up the first time. She asked about my eyes and showed me hers. Plus, basic math. But I didn’t know Liam passed until I came home and decided to visit Pawpaw’s grave and I saw

Liam's headstone. I thought you'd been happily married all this time or..." I exhaled deeply, unable to finish the sentence.

"I'm so sorry, Colette. For it all," I quietly added.

"This entire time you've been trying to confront me about knowing Azelie is... is your daughter. That you knew I was married, that you knew I kept Azelie from you, and yet you still care for me?" Her entire body trembled, and all I wanted to do was wrap her up in my arms, but I needed her to open up to me on her own.

"I've never stopped loving you. I just... I just want to understand why you didn't tell me you were pregnant. Why you never called to let me know after I left? That's all. I just needed to hear it from you that she really is mine," I said.

Colette's disbelief and tenderness abruptly twisted. Rage tensed her figure as she spun around and glared at her parents. "How could you? You told me he left with some girl he'd fallen in love with. That he chose someone else over me. That he cheated and couldn't face me to tell me the truth! I can't believe I never connected why you made sure that Azelie never got too close to his parents or Mawmaw. You convinced me to support that stupid fucking colored contact lens, because of bullying when in reality you were hiding Azelie from Ford and his entire family. Because he never even knew! You-You-You told me he fell in love with another woman, so I told you that was impossible and I was pregnant with his baby as proof. I believed he'd come back for such a long time because I just knew that wasn't true, but this entire time..."

Her mom rolled her eyes. "I wasn't going to let you have anything less than you were deserving of. So yes, I lied a little. I also knew you were pregnant before you said anything because I found your pregnancy test in the trash weeks before graduation. I had to stop all of this. Everything was to protect you. And to protect Azelie. This... This boy doesn't deserve Azelie or you, and you know it!"

“You’re right,” I said and stepped forward. “I don’t deserve either of them. But I damn sure would’ve spent every fucking moment of the rest of my life doing whatever I had to do to maybe someday earn that privilege. But you took that from me. You took that from Colette. And you took that from Azelie, too.”

“They had Liam! Liam was good for them, much better than you,” her dad finally said.

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I glanced at Colette and gave her a tender smile. “I bet he was. And I’m not looking to replace him.” Tears once again swelled in her eyes as she stared back at me. “I’m just asking for a chance. At least to—to be a dad to my daughter, even if you can never forgive me for leaving.”

“How are you not mad at me?” Colette blurted out.

“Because you were doing exactly what I did fifteen years ago. You were protecting someone you love,” I answered. Her eyes sparkled beneath the lullaby of tears.

“And now? Is that what you’re doing now?” she asked.

“I’m tired of secrets, Cher. My entire career is a job full of secrets. The past fifteen years have been nothing but secrets and lies that destroyed something beautiful. I’m so grateful you found love again with Liam because you truly deserved it, even if, for a brief time, that love wasn’t for me. I’m okay with that. In fact, I can’t wait for the day I meet him and get to shake his hand because I know how lucky he is to have been on the receiving end of Colette’s love. So yes, I’m protecting the woman I still love, have never stopped loving, and the girl I hope might consider calling me Dad someday.” I took a cautious step toward Colette.

Everything was out in the open. All the answers to the holes in life had been answered. Out of something so cruel and dark came a bridge over the chasm the past fifteen years had created. A bridge that I couldn’t cross on my own. Colette had to meet me halfway. If she didn’t, I understood why and would accept it. But oh, how I wanted her to.

“No. I won’t stand for this,” her mother inserted. “The worst thing for Azelie would be to have you as her father.”

“Ford’s my dad?” Azelie’s innocent voice sliced through the tense air, and Colette stiffened in front of me.

Silence stretched like yarn in a loom. My heart raced in my chest as everything came crashing down around me. I’d opened this bag of worms by confronting Colette this way. Now, instead of giving Colette time to process and then decide how she wanted to proceed, Azelie had to find out by overhearing a damn conversation.

Chapter 27

FORD

The front door clicked shut, and footsteps padded across the living room. Azelie’s innocent face appeared around the corner, and she stopped by Mawmaw. “Grammy, did you just say that Ford is my...my dad?” she asked again, but instead of seeking her grandparents or her mom for comfort, she glanced up at my mawmaw.

“Azelie, baby. There’s a lot that—”

“Just stop, Mom,” Colette quickly inserted. “The charade is up. All these lies and secrets were your fault. I get that your intentions were to protect me, but the one person I never needed protection from was Ford. Apparently, I needed protection from you.” She shoved her hands on her hips. “And you, Dad. You what? Just went along with it?”

“She’s my wife, honeybee,” her dad muttered. And part of me could respect that. Not a large part of me, because he still absolutely destroyed his daughter, but still.

Colette quickly swiped the tears from her cheeks and shook her head. “The Thibodeauxs offered us their home after we were attacked. Yes, over the years, there’ve been some petty things that happened between our families because of the restaurant rivalry, but when it mattered most, they have always been there for us. And you made a mockery of that.” Colette briefly closed her eyes.

“Nobody is answering my question,” Azelie desperately asked again and stepped into my mawmaw’s side. Green eyes darted my way, as if silently asking me to tell her the truth.

I wasn’t even sure what to say or how to break this ice. A simple yes didn’t seem efficient in this situation, but I wanted nothing more than to finally start building something with her. “I will never try to replace Liam, Azelie. But, yes, I am,” I finally managed to choke out.

Her eyes widened as my mawmaw squeezed her shoulder, and then a grin spread on her face. “I KNEW IT!” she squealed and jumped up and down. “The moment I saw that you had the same eyes as me, I just knew it. Then I also saw your mom, and I was like, holy cow, there’s no way. Besides, my face is much more like yours.”

“Your great-grandpa had heterochromia too,” I added. Everything in me begged to run over and scoop my little girl up in my arms. To properly hold my daughter for the first time in my life, but I remained frozen in place as a smidge of anger boiled within the excitement.

I sliced a glare at Colette’s parents. “Because of you, I missed it all. Colette’s pregnancy, the birth. I missed out on taking care of Colette during all of it and meeting my daughter as a baby.” I took a menacing step forward as my body shook with rage. “I missed her first steps, her first words, her first smile. I missed fifteen fucking years of a life with two of the most incredible women that exist on this planet.” Hot tears rushed down my cheeks. I’d cried four times in my entire life

before this—when I was forced to leave, when I’d returned four years later, when I finally got to hug my mama, and when Duncan had died.

This cry was different.

Burdened and heavy. There was a sickness that came with these tears. The stain on my soul for all of the blackened death I’d delivered compared little to this anguish. “Fifteen f-f-fucking years,” I stammered as some spit spewed from my lips. “I never thought I’d ever have the chance at-at-at a family let alone—”

And Colette threw her arms around me. No amount of strength willed my limbs to move as every single moment that I had been deprived of seethed through my body. I wanted to kill them, but at the same time, I knew I ultimately shouldn’t. Azelie had also missed out on fifteen years of a family, and I wouldn’t be the person to take two members of that small group away.

“How’d you explain this away with all of her cousins and aunts and uncles?” I finally asked Colette’s parents while she kept her arms around me. My breathing began to slow as I found a new lock to cage this excruciating rage up with.

“Liam.” Her mom sheepishly shrugged her shoulders.

“I’ve had a dad who wanted me this entire time,” Azelie blurted out, ignoring what her grandma said.

I snapped my gaze to that girl to find tears down her cheeks as well. But not tears of anger or sorrow, ones of excitement as she bounced from foot to foot. “I knew you had feelings for my mom, too,” she quickly added.

Colette chuckled against my body and slowly peeled away as I finally managed to raise a hand and weave my fingers into her hair.

I gave Azelie a cautious smile and tipped my head. “I know this is short notice, and comes after a major bomb has dropped, but uh...” I cleared my throat as nerves trickled in my veins. “Uh, would you do me the honor of being my date to the father/daughter dance on Saturday? I’m a terrible dancer, you can ask your mom. And I’ve never done this whole ‘dad’ thing, so I might be awkward and clumsy and—”

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“Yes!” she squealed and grabbed my mawmaw. “I gotta go dress shopping! I’m gonna call Macy!”

“Wait!” Colette quickly said, and Azelie slid her hand into her pocket. “You’re taking this...very well. Are you sure you’re okay? Maybe we could talk about this in private? The three of us, and fill you in on what you missed before you call Macy.”

Azelie nodded slowly. “All right. But can we do that right now? This is a small town, and the dance is in three days.” She skipped away from my mawmaw and pushed through her grandparents. “I’ve never been asked to a dance before,” she added with glee and disappeared into the bedroom behind us.

I glanced at Colette’s parents as Colette slipped around me to follow Azelie. “I have no desire to ruin your relationship with Azelie or Colette. So, how you go about repairing shit with your daughter and granddaughter is on you because I won’t lie for you ever again. What I will do is protect those two, from anyone. Even people who pretend to be family. Even you. Oh, and Colette and I will tell my parents about all of this, so I suggest maybe you head to your restaurant like how they’ve been there this entire time, and stay there until my parents have closed and come home.”

And without another lingering second, I disappeared into the bedroom after Colette and Azelie.

She had a lot of questions. All of us did, and things were a little awkward at first, but then the wings of freedom lifted every burden that had separated us. Except for the anger that now seemed to boil within both Colette and Azelie. They were angry at her parents, at the two people who robbed all three of us of something priceless. Then

there was the matter of where I stood on a personal and intimate level with Colette—a shit load of “who the hell knows.” But at least regarding to Azelie, we were on the same page.

Which left me terrified. Colette and Azelie disappeared to go dress shopping for Saturday, as I remained sitting on my bed. Time spiraled in such a way that made it difficult to decipher the world around me. I was a dad. Azelie was my daughter.

After all this time, Colette hadn't called me because she thought I'd left with some fucking woman who I apparently cheated on her with. There had never been another woman and never would be. Lies and secrets and threats created by a man and woman who were supposed to protect their daughter and granddaughter destroyed fifteen years of a family.

I wasn't entirely innocent, I knew that. If I'd reached out or something, maybe things would've been different. But with everything in the open, it felt like a clean slate for a second chance with Colette. Not as someco-parent, but as her lover and friend. As something more than just an acquaintance.

She hadn't seemed mad that I'd known for a bit before finally telling her. But it still made me wonder if she would retreat into that stubborn and hard space to keep me at a distance. Even though I'd practically confessed that I was in love with her, she hadn't acknowledged it or said anything in return.

And we'd done some...stuff before all of this came out, so I couldn't be upset if she wasn't exactly open to me. There could be some guilt because I'd made moves on her while keeping a secret. But she also kept it a secret from me. There had been plenty of opportunities to tell me that Azelie was my daughter.

On the basis of no more secrets, I decided I'd let all of those questions go. And start from scratch. Time to woo that incredible woman again. This was going to be fun,

and excitement coursed through me as I realized I could flirt in an entirely new way without any reservations. Like how I had when she and I texted last Tuesday night.

In fact, she seemed rather inviting of that kind of...desire and intimacy.

This would be fun, and I no longer had to hide the fact that I was going to have Colette, no matter what. The sadistic side of me that I picked up from spending way too much fucking time with Bernie actually reveled in the idea of rubbing it in her parents' faces. They were in for a show and treat because I would not hold back or sneak around.

No, if they so much as touched a hair on her fucking head, they'd find themselves without a fingertip. At least.

"Little bear? Are you all right?" My mama's voice danced into the room with a knock on the wide-open door.

Blinking to bring moisture back to my dry eyes, I squinted through the darkness. Damn. The sun was down, and my parents were back from the restaurant.

"Your dad and I were surprised you didn't come in to help tonight," she continued and flicked the light on.

"Shit, I'm sorry Mama. I hadn't even realized the time," I answered and patted the bed beside me. "I've got something I need to talk to you about. And Pops."

She shouted for my dad, and once he was in the room, I explained everything about Colette, Azelie, and me.

Neither of them moved, nor showed any expression.

At first.

And then they shared a glance, and a smile crept upon my mom's face. Suddenly, both of my parents tackled me into a big hug. "We're grandparents! I want to be Mawmaw to Azelie like Mawmaw is to you!" my mama cried out.

"I get to be Pawpaw!" my dad exclaimed and held me tighter.

"You're not—you're not mad?" I stammered.

Both of them shook their heads. "It makes so much sense, little bear," my mom quietly said.

"My son is a dad. My son is a dad," my dad kept repeating.

"Oh, and one more thing," I said as reality smacked into me like an RPG to a cement wall.

"What's that?" Mama asked.

"I just realized that they still don't know what I do for a job. It kinda never came up, and I was way too focused on the whole 'I'm a dad' thing that it slipped my mind, and I haven't exactly mentioned it."

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My papa cursed under his breath in that Cajun-French I loved while my mama clicked her tongue. “I thought you said you were tired of secrets,” she admonished.

“I am. It wasn’t like it was meant to be a secret, but can I turn it into a surprise that I need your help with?” I continued, and my parents peeled away from me with a raised brow.

“You’ve already got a plan cooking, don’t you,” my pops began.

I nodded as my mom grinned widely. “What do you need from us?”

Chapter 28

COLETTE

Azelie had decided to keep things quiet about Ford being her dad with this idea of making some major reveal at the fundraiser run or dance this weekend. But she had stuck really close to him every moment she could. Which I had a love and hate relationship with because I wasn’t quite sure where Ford and I stood on a romantic level, and we’d had zero moments alone.

Until now. Until somehow that big oaf managed to weasel his way into him and me driving together after sending our parents ahead for their booths by saying he didn’t want to risk his motorcycle getting hit in such a crowded parking lot.

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel, and my knuckles turned another shade of white as I drove us toward the school for the festival that had begun. Not a word

passed between us, mostly because I had no idea what to say. After everything came out, and all this time where we simply crossed paths, I—

“I give it three, four days tops,” Ford said, breaking the silence. He leaned back against the seat and twisted his ball cap around backwards. Flames roared hot in my stomach at such a simple movement by him. No. No. Stop. This was the most inappropriate moment to become aroused.

Ford spread his legs a little wider, and the seams on his joggers strained with the movement.

Stop, please, I quietly begged in my mind. Why was all of that so hot? So fucking attractive. This was not the time nor place to start thinking about how sexy he’d look butt-ass naked in bed with me. But the thought of him sweaty, crawling between my legs, and burying himself inside me created a slick pool of heat within my body.

“For what?” I gasped, shaking out of those thoughts. “For O’Connor to attack us again?”

He smiled to himself and closed his eyes. “Nah. For us to fuck.”

“WHAT THE HELL, FORD?” My eyes widened. There was no way he read my mind, had he? And worse, now I was definitely thinking about that. Every desirable but dirty thing I wanted him to do to me flashed like a movie, clear as day in my head.

“Oh, my bad. For us to have sex. Sleep together. Make love.” He raised a brow and flopped his head toward me. “Which would you like to call it?”

“None.” I pursed my lips as he chuckled and looked back out the front window. “How is this appropriate? It’s only been a couple days since everything came to light,

don't you think we should allow a little bit of time to pass?"

"That is exactly why it's the appropriate time. We don't have to sneak around, hide, or any of that shit anymore. I can be open and upfront with exactly how I feel about you. Well, after Saturday because the entire fucking town will know by then, too," he explained.

He wasn't entirely wrong. The logic was sound, and it was honestly something I wanted. But how insane would I sound accepting this with ease after all of these years? The idea of dating Ford, like a normal couple out in the open, outweighed that inkling with a heartbeat.

"You've become quite bold," I said with a smile.

A smirk filtered on his face. "I didn't come back just to stop all of this shit with O'Connor, you know that right? It was a nice excuse, but I came back for you, no matter how much of an ass that made me because it was time for closure. I couldn't stay away any longer."

I pulled my brows together and turned into the packed high school parking lot. "Don't ask me to tell you what I would've done if Liam..."

His smirk softened, and his eyes met mine. "I would never, baby."

"I'm sorry I'm not just already jumping into things with you," I added quietly, looked away, and found one of the last parking spots available.

"Ah, now I get why you've had us avoiding both of our parents. Not ready to take the questions and heat from them, I see," he teased, and then something shifted in his expression as his gaze lingered on me, but I refused to turn his way.

“Look at me, please,” he tenderly asked as I put my vehicle into park.

Slowly, I glanced at him. Sitting upright in the seat, he faced me with adoration on his face. “I will never ask you to apologize for moving on. I will never ask you to compare me to Liam or expect you to choose between us. Ever. You loved him. You lived a life without me, and that is something to celebrate and cherish. I’m just grateful for a second chance at seeing what could happen between us. Without some stupid shitty rivalry that never really made sense anyway.”

My heart fluttered in my chest like a bird’s feather in the breeze on a cool autumn day. “You also got sappy,” I quipped, ignoring the fact that he had called me out on the “avoiding both of our parents” shit. That was at my request and very much for the reason he stated, plus I wasn’t keen on forgiving mine for everything they’d done. They’d altered the course of not just my life, but my daughter’s and the man I once loved and now loved again.

He grinned and twisted in his seat. “Yeah, I probably did.”

“I like it. This...This you.” I gestured up and down his body as he pushed open the door. “But that’s not me agreeing to us being anything yet.”

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He didn't turn toward me or say anything in response, though he briefly paused, then finally exited the car. At least I could give him that much. I was so grateful for his understanding and his patience. And for how forward he was being with me.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I quickly dug it out as I turned the engine off. A message from Azelie stating where she was flashed on my screen. Time to go find our daughter.

Once I was out of the car, Ford pushed my door closed, having quickly dashed around the front to meet me, and wiggled his brows. I clicked the lock button on my key fob and glared at him. "You can't do that shit here. Not yet. Not until after the father/daughter dance, and you know it," I chastised and threw my hands on my hips.

"Or what?" He narrowed his eyes in a flirtatious glare.

"Or I'll stab you. Again."

"You've already tried that and failed."

"Not the first time." I flicked the tip of my braid over my shoulder and strutted past him.

"Have you ever considered that I let that happen?" His shadow fell over my body as he silently jogged up beside me.

"Don't lie to yourself; it's not a good look." I glanced up at him and caught a smirk on his face. He totally knew I was right. "Oh, by the way, you know you can't

interfere with anything going on between Cory and Becca and Azelie, right?”

His Adam's apple bobbed in his throat, and the lines deepened on his face. “Yeah, I know.”

“I hate it too, Ford, but Azelie has to handle this on her own,” I quietly added as we wandered toward the high school field that wasn't just an empty, grassy patch anymore. We weaved through vehicles that overflowed the parking lot and walked closer to the hustle and bustle of the chattering crowd. Faint music bumped on speakers behind the conversation that danced on the breeze louder than a buzz saw. The scent of every style of Cajun food permeated the atmosphere, and I was grateful that we managed to keep our parents' booths on opposite ends of what looked more like a town fair and local festival than a high school fundraiser.

News had carried fast, and every high school sports team and club had become involved. A teachers versus students game of most of the sports was scheduled throughout the day, starting with tennis. Football was right before the dance and had sold the most tickets—not surprising since everyone and their dog grew up watching Friday night football.

I paused right before we passed between the first row of canvas tents and grabbed Ford's arm. A quiet whimper brushed past his lips, and every muscle in me stiffened. Whatever I'd been about to say to him fled my mind as his skin beneath my hand turned warm. My touch, something so simple, had elicited an involuntary and sensual sound from him.

My eyes cautiously raised to his face, where his gaze remained locked on my hand that still held onto his arm. His chest heaved as everything in my body softened. It no longer mattered what I was going to say, as words weren't needed. Not as we stood here, sheltered from the crowd by the canvas tents, wrapped up in a moment that only existed between him and me.

A faint whiff of regret simmered within my soul as all the cruelty that I'd given to him swam through my memories. Yet, here he was, whimpering at my nonchalant touch. What more could a girl ask for?

Goosebumps prickled upon his skin, and the ink upon his arm seemed to come alive, dancing with the ripple effect. It was beautiful, and a reminder that despite everything, he'd never given up hope that one day, he'd have me. That one day, he'd be able to call me his. He'd let me go, given me a chance to live my life while spending his with a broken heart as I loved someone new. Secrets and lies had fueled the path that we once tread, but they also brought us back together.

Freedom whispered upon the breeze. A forward movement with no baggage, no past pain, and it was as if Liam rested his hand upon mine, then he let me go. That fear that held me so tightly wrapped in armor wrestled away as I opened my heart to the love that Ford offered me. All hesitation was gone. Everything that had fractured us all those years ago was no longer a part of this current chapter in our story.

Everything from here on out was new, fresh, and unburdened from the pain of others' doing—and some of our own.

"Just... I'll see you this evening," I whispered and peeled my hand from his skin.

He slowly nodded, the lines on his forehead deepening as a chill swept beneath my palm. "Do you trust me?" he suddenly asked quietly.

Stitching my brows together, I tipped my head. "Yes, of course. Why?"

His hands balled up into fists as silence briefly swept between us. The fates seemed to shift with a simple question that came from nowhere, yet held unexplainable weight.

"Don't get into too much trouble," he replied with a wink and then silently slipped

between the two nearest tents and faded into the passing crowd.

I remained frozen in place for half a second longer, wondering why he asked that and then didn't provide me with an actual answer. But, when no answer whispered in my head, eventually my feet carried me after the ghost of Ford's figure. I searched every corner of my mind but failed to come up with any reasoning as to why he'd ask that out of nowhere. Unless he had something stupid planned at some point? But Ford wasn't stupid. He was anything but that.

The scent of funnel cakes and typical fair foods wafted into the air, melding with the chattering crowds that pushed past me, eager to see what freebies might be offered at the next booth. Children laughed, bubbles danced into the atmosphere as frequently as excited shrieks of groups reuniting with each other.

As my gaze scanned the passing booths, I caught sight of a waving hand paired with bright red curls at the far end of the row I wandered down.

"Mom!" Azelie shouted and jogged over toward me. She slung an arm around my waist; her grin stretched from ear to ear and didn't disappear as she guided me around the trodden grass. Sweat coated my lower back, making my chambray shirt stick to my skin, but I didn't mind. Her excitement as she explained what different booths were and how her idea had helped with all of this kept me going.

As we rounded another corner, cheering grew louder and louder, as if someone were competing for something. Azelie's brows inched together, and she left my side, quickening her pace just enough to weave through the forming crowd before I reached the edge.

Where I immediately stopped walking. My feet slunk into the ground, as if lodged into muck as sticky and heavy as wet concrete hardening by the second. Azelie was visible from here, even with the masses forming a half circle around the JROTC's

booth, as the curls on her head bobbed with every step.

But it wasn't my daughter and the sun's heat that had me sweating; it was the man standing at the base of one of the pull-up bars with his arms crossed over his chest. Two recruiters from the Army stood on either side of the stand, leading the crowd in the chant to get Ford to step up. His cheeks were bright red as he shook his head, slicing a glare toward Turk, who smirked in the shade of the canvas tent.

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Now, that made sense. Ford would never voluntarily do something in the spotlight like that, but Turk... Turk would volunteer Ford for it, all just to humiliate him, knowing how much Ford preferred to not be the center of attention.

His gaze flickered across the crowd, briefly lingering on something in shadows on the outskirts, then latched onto Azelie, who now stood in the front of the crowd. His eyelids crunched over his eyes, and then he turned and effortlessly latched onto the pull-up bar. With ease, he began pumping out rep after rep as the cheers escalated in both vigor and volume.

I smiled to myself as Azelie began jumping up and down and Cory pushed his way to stand beside her. I knew then that I'd lost her to a boy for the rest of the day. But it was okay, because my thoughts were swamped with the man who seemed to barely have broken a sweat doing pull-ups. Not to show off, but because his daughter was watching.

And, maybe to show off. If only a little. Which I was totally okay with. The heat dancing upon my skin had nothing to do with the blazing sun overhead and everything to do with each contraction of his muscles beneath his T-shirt.

Shit. I had it bad.

Pursing my lips, I exhaled heavily and shook my head. Oh, the irony. A full circle had been drawn in the sand. It seemed as though the very place that had once seen our love story, now experienced it again.

With a final glance at the man, I quietly disappeared from the edge of the circle,

knowing I wouldn't be able to speak to him or be with him again until after his parents closed their booth and brought him home.

Where I'd be waiting.

Chapter 29

FORD

With the tap of a button ending my phone call, the room was bathed in silence. A foreign concept after all of the hullabaloo from earlier today, and a stark contrast from the muffled sobs that floated from my bedroom before I'd snuck out of the house. I'd stood at that closed door for what seemed an eternity, unsure what I could say that would patch up a teenage girl's broken heart. I thought she'd brushed things off after overhearing Becca announce that Cory would take her to the dance, but I guess with the fact that the dance had been tonight, brought all of the emotions in her to a head.

Once I'd found the strength, I'd broken that barrier by offering her a hug because no words seemed sufficient enough. Despite knowing what that felt like, despite knowing I'd once caused a broken heart, there never seemed to be a single word that would mend what had been shattered.

Azelie hadn't said anything to me either, simply shook within my arms and then eventually pushed me away and collapsed back on the bed. So, not wanting to listen to the quiet bickering between my parents and Colette's, I escaped to the one place I'd always found some peace.

But this time, the solitude was overwhelming. Everything was about to boil over, whether I liked it or not. Final decisions were made, and I wasn't sure if there was a way back from the trauma that I might cause in the process.

The moment Colette found out what my job was, once I revealed that I may or may not have been keeping tabs on her and masquerading as the Rougarou, she may immediately revert to her closed-off self. The blame sat squarely on my shoulders, too, forgetting to mention any of that before or around the time all the secrets about her parents were revealed. All of this was also annoying me because the main question that tumbled through my head was: Why? Why hadn't I said anything? Why had I hidden this from her, whether intentionally or not? Why wasn't I handling this like the grown ass adult I was?

Maybe because secrets were my way of life. I was very good at keeping them—everyone on my team was. Which explained why we so easily reconciled after Dom's plan and Mikey's fake death. But Colette? She wasn't a part of that world, nor was Azelie, or at least they hadn't been. It seemed they'd been unintentionally dragged into it all without their consent, and I still hadn't provided them with the knowledge they were wrapped up in shit that shouldn't involve them.

My decisions had brought this here. My parents knew about my job; I had to assume they understood the potential risks that came with it. But Colette didn't know. She said she trusted me, but I wasn't sure I'd done anything to deserve it.

Leaning back on the couch, I ran my hands over my face and shook my head. Maybe confining myself to the cabin wasn't the smartest move. Maybe I should've stayed back at the house because my thoughts wouldn't consume what final morsel of sanity tumbled around in my mind.

I'd lost a lot along this pathway I'd chosen. Taken maybe even more. And here I was, asking for blind faith from a woman who'd spent most of her life in a small town where nothing interesting happened.

Until now.

And granted, she seemed to be handling herself just fine.

I glanced at the coffee table in front of me and stared at the linen-wrapped around the gift I'd been meaning to give Colette. And piled beneath the small package were years of yellowing letters I'd never had the guts to put in the mail for her. Would she even accept these now? Or if she did, and connected all the dots, would she still accept me?

Especially considering the danger that lurked around the corner with O'Connor.

A click from the door handle snapped my gaze to the front door. My hand slipped to the gun hidden in my waistband, and I watched as the golden knob quietly twisted. He wasn't back yet. He couldn't be. Unless...

And a short, barely five-foot female frame I knew all too well appeared in the open doorway. Colette took a step inside the cabin and pushed a wayward curl from her messy bun behind her ear. She glanced toward my still figure on the couch and gave me a tight smile.

"Azellie finally fell asleep," she muttered and shut the door behind her. "She mentioned you visited and just held her. I know it meant a lot to her, even if there was nothing you, nor I, could say or do to fix this, since she didn't think Cory would actually go to the dance with Becca. Yet here we are, post-dance, and he went with her instead of Azellie."

Her bright green eyes met mine as she crossed the room and plopped herself down beside me on the couch with a soft bounce. I pulled my hands to my lap and leaned my forearms against my knees. "Part of me would like to give a good talkin' to Cory, another part of me would like to wring that Becca chick's neck, while the rest of me just feels helpless. I'm not used to feeling helpless," I quietly replied.

Colette inhaled deeply beside me and raised her brows. “I figured it out, you know.”

“Figured what out?” I asked with furrowed brows and glanced at her.

She smiled to herself. “That you always took care of any arguments or shit I got into when we were growing up. Here I was, thinking you were the most passive guy I’d ever met, but your most basic instinct was to always protect the people you love, even if it meant doing some...” She paused and tipped her head toward me. “Some slightly crazy things that I won’t ask for details about.”

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“Anything would be inadmissible in court anyway, seeing as it’s been fifteen years,” I quipped back, feeling a soft weight leave my shoulders.

“I don’t think it quite works like that, but I’m also not just talking about growing up, Ford.” She pulled her legs up onto the couch and slid sideways so she was facing me straight on.

Leaning back, I stared at the wall across from us. “What are you accusing me allegedly of doing?”

She giggled. “You know what I’m talking about, Rougarou.”

I gasped and let my jaw drop in overexaggerated shock as relief flooded my figure. She knew. She’d already known. For how long, I didn’t care; it was nice to know that she wasn’t pissed at me. “You know what will happen if you speak that name out loud!”

Her smile widened. “I think the curse would be much less than whatever fate you face impersonating it.” I finally looked at her, and the crinkles at the edges of her eyes softened. “Thank you for finding a way to take care of me, no matter how awful I’d been to you. I’m not great at accepting help.”

I studied her for a moment, soaking in every freckle that dotted her cheeks, every eyelash that curled upwards and brushed against her eyelids. Every imperfection that had never looked so perfect upon a face danced in front of me as delicately as the petals of a flower just coming into bloom.

“I’m surprised you’re not a little upset about it,” I muttered, and she rolled her emerald eyes.

“I was, for only a moment, until I realized why you did it that way. And when another dude stabbed you with my knives that he stole, then I was no longer mad at you but at him, because no one stabs you but me. With those knives anyway,” she answered with a twitch of her lips.

“Oh, so if I hadn’t been stabbed by that guy, you’d still be mad at me?”

“Obviously, because I wouldn’t have been more mad that my knives were stolen,” she teased, and a twinkle danced in her eyes.

With a shake of my head, I scooted forward to the edge of the couch and reached into the duffel. “Speaking of knives, I got you something,” I said and pulled the wrapped package out but left the letters inside.

Her brows stitched together as I slid back and faced her. Colette dropped her knees and smoothed out a few wrinkles in her black leggings. “What’s that?” she asked.

“I had a buddy help me make these a few years ago. I don’t think you’ll miss your old pair.” I extended the gift to her, and she reached forward. But then I yanked it back and narrowed my eyes. “But, you first have to promise you won’t use these on me.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and tipped her head. “What happens if I don’t make that promise?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Well, then I guess you’ll never know what this is. I’ll just give them back to Mikey. He’ll find good use for them.” I twisted to the edge of the couch one more time as her hand shot forward and slapped against my forearm.

“I was kidding. I promise I won’t use those on you,” she quickly stated and sucked in her bottom lip.

With a shake of my head, I chuckled to myself and passed the gift to her. She placed the present in her lap and briefly clenched her hands. “Who’s Mikey?” she suddenly asked and snapped her eyes away from the package.

I pursed my lips. “Will you just open it? Damn,” I said.

She clicked her tongue but looked back down. “Fine, fine,” she replied and dove at the brown twine tying it together. With a quick tug, the rope fell apart, and she peeled the cloth back to reveal the contents.

Her eyes widened as her mouth fell open. “No. Way,” she gasped and slid out two knives from their leather sheaths. The same green alligator design was etched into the hilts, but these weapons were meant to do someserious damage. They weren’t the toys that I’d crudely crafted all those years ago.

The faint yellow lights of the living room flickered against the untouched steel of the blades as she let them twist in her palms. “These are...” Her voice faded out as the perfectly balanced daggers rested perfectly in her hands. “And the sheaths? The spider lilies were your doing?” she breathlessly asked.

“Mikey helped me with the knives since he’s rather proficient in that style of fighting, but leather work is something I am rather good at on my own,” I replied. A slow whistle left her lips as she slid the pristine blades back into their covers. Her fingers stroked across the leather that, while larger than her old knives, they’d still conceal easily while being worn on her thighs or wherever she saw fit.

“They’ll probably take a bit of getting used to, and if you want to learn more shit with them, let me know and I’ll wrangle Mikey into teaching you. I’m better with big

fucking guns and shit like that then the finesse of knife fighting,” I added as her eyes lifted to mine again.

“That makes zero fucking sense, but okay!” she squealed, rapidly set the knives on the table and launched herself at me. She tossed her arms around my neck. “Thank you! Just thank you! That’s the most thoughtful gift I’ve ever received, aside from the first set of knives you gave me.” She squeezed tightly as I remained absolutely still. I hadn’t expected her to react so...giddy-like.

This was much more how she’d once been around me—more carefree, and definitely less mature than she acted now. For a moment, the burden of life lifted, and the shadow of a moonless sky faded to a starry canvas of beautiful memories. We weren’t plagued with what was still to come.

“And the spider lilies,” she whispered as she slid her arms away from around my neck, but she didn’t move away from me. The warmth of her body heat wrapped me in a painting of where we’d first fallen in love. Now, it seemed to be happening all over again, but in a new way. In a way that was stronger and lasting.

“They didn’t scare you off?” I hesitantly asked.

She giggled gently. “I mean, it was a little startling at first, because it was kind of stalker-ish. But then I realized the only person who knew they’re my favorite flower is you.”

I shook my head. “Damn it. Apparently, I’m not even a good stalker.”

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Her grin widened as tension slithered in the air like smoke from a bonfire. “Technically, you’re the best kind because you never got caught. I had to pull a confession out of you.”

“See, but you still knew it was me before I admitted to it,” I teased.

“I’ll admit the Rougarou disguise did get me for a while, and if I hadn’t caught a glimpse of your tattoos, I probably wouldn’t have put that together.”

“At least I got that goin’ for me,” I replied with a smile. “Anyway, why’d you come out here tonight and not stay at the house?”

Her gaze slid around our temporary getaway from a world that would be waiting for us in the morning. “Because I knew you were out here,” she whispered and brought her beautiful eyes back to mine.

Maybe it was the way she spoke, or the way she looked at me, but not a word came to my mind. The devil that constantly barked was quiet, so silent that the gentle bellows of the gators in the distant outside seemed to be the only sound to break the slowing of time between us.

She’d always been the one for me. I’d known that my entire life, but at this moment, it had never been so difficult to breathe, yet I’d never felt so alive and free at the same time. Her chest rose slow and steady as her eyes bore into mine, as if she could read every dark thought and discover every depraved hollow part of my blackened soul.

But I didn't want this to happen unless she knew everything about me that I could share.

"There are things I still haven't told you," I finally croaked out. "And there are things I'll never be able to tell you."

Her face softened as she reached forward and traced a finger across the scar on my jaw. "I don't care because every secret you've kept from me was with the intention to protect me. You never gave up on me, and you never stopped loving me. I don't care right now about anything you haven't shared with me, because I love you, Ford." Her bottom jaw trembled as she rested her hand against my cheek, and tears glistened in her eyes. "I think fifteen years is long enough, don't you?"

I closed my eyes as her lips crashed into mine. She was the only heaven I'd ever make it to.

Chapter 30

COLETTE

It seemed only fitting that the first place we had ever made love happened to be the very same place that, after fifteen years, we finally shared everything of ourselves with each other again.

But there was something entirely different about it this time. More binding, as if not a single thing existed in this world that could tear us apart again. Things were rawer, and more vulnerable. More passionate. Hewas simply more. Every sweep of his hand upon my body, every touch against the swell of my hips from his calloused and roughened skin ignited a fire within my bones that had never been there before.

He was patient and exacting, taking in every freckle that littered my skin and every

imperfection that had come with time and aging. And he seemed to relish in it—no, devour it. He wasn't the ghost in my mind that I begged to come home all those years ago. He was here now, holding his girl once again.

Life had taken us on the most unexpected and unfair route, but somehow, despite all the odds that fought against us, here we were, lost in the most perfect moment. Even if it were just for tonight, I'd sink into every ounce of beauty and love he offered me and believe it was for forever. Because his love was everlasting. He'd never stopped loving me. He'd never even given another woman a moment of his time, and I knew he never would. I hadn't entirely figured out life yet, but one thing that remained true to the course, no matter the rocky edges I'd crashed upon, the one thing that had never changed was his love for me. And in the end, mine for him.

There were no regrets as we tumbled from the couch to the floor, losing our clothes in the process. Words were not needed as our bodies spoke every thought that painted between us. Gentle and rough exactly when it was needed, I lost myself in his touch that took me to the most exquisite and excruciating high of my life.

There he offered me the release I sought, but it wasn't the ending of this perfect moment. It was merely the beginning as he fell back into my kiss and melted once more against my body. As sweet as honey, the ridges of his lips became a sealed memory against my own. I would never hold another man in my arms—I would never want to hold anyone else. He was my everything. He came home to me. In the end, after everything, here he was, speaking without words. Every fear of his, every desire, everything that made him smile and laugh became wrapped up in my soul.

And he finally took me. After all of his selfless love, giving me pleasure, he eased himself in with an involuntary whimper that matched my own. Never to be alone again, we became one at this moment. Wherever life took us after tonight, I'd ride that wave with him. There was no one else I'd dare to travel this terrifying world with. Time was of no consequence, and all the sounds that permeated the night air faded

behind the moans and whispered pants of my body moving in perfect sync with his.

Stars of pleasure pounded at the back of my vision as his eyes filled with the most undeniable gaze of love. It was as if we were the only love story to ever be captured in this painting we'd created between each other.

Ford was mine. And I was his. No matter how long this life lasted, for this moment would cross into the eternities. Everything I was, I gave to him. There was no other love as strong as ours, and I knew that, even if I wasn't able to spend every moment with him, nothing could destroy it. With his arms holding me, safety and warmth enveloped my body along with the rising passion from him until he, too, found that beautiful cascade at the end of that building pleasure.

And we lay there, panting and exhausted in a messy heap upon the floor. Once our breathing slowed, in silence, he eventually helped clean me and himself up, and then, still without speaking, we simply cuddled up on the couch and held each other.

His lips pressed gently into my forehead as my heavy eyelids drooped. In all the years we'd shared, I'd never felt so calm and safe. For this night, the violence and doom spanning around our families were absent. There was only him and me.

And I drifted to sleep as the whole sky fell around me, cradled within the arms of my best friend and lover.

Morning light danced across my closed eyelids, rousing me from the most blissful and deep sleep I'd ever experienced.

And I shot up on the couch.

"Shit," I exclaimed. This morning was the 5k that Azelie was running, and I hadn't set an alarm. In fact, she'd had one of the worst nights of her life, and I'd been here

with Ford, having the best one of mine. I ran a hand over my face and glanced at the ticking clock on the wall.

A sigh escaped my lips as it read six in the morning. I had at least an hour before participants started lining up, and two hours before the race started. Slowly, I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and scanned the empty room.

Empty.

Wait, what?

Ford wasn't here. Instead, I was draped in a blanket with my clothes neatly folded on the coffee table beside a stack of letters tied together in brown string. I furrowed my brows and tucked the blanket tighter around my shoulders as I scooted forward on the couch.

Some of the envelopes had become a shade of yellow, others the ends were curled and worn, while some seemed to barely be holding together anymore. The whitest were on top, to the most frayed on the bottom, and I cautiously reached for the ominous pile. Carefully, I slid the stack to me and slid the twine off the center of the envelope.

My name, neatly scrawled in Ford's slightly messy handwriting, stared back. With a tug of the string, the bow quickly fell away, and I sifted through the large stack of letters. Upon every single envelope was my name. As I made it further into the pile, the writing became a bit more faded, with many of the letters smudged across the paper.

The bottom few were so worn, I was barely able to make out my name addressed on the center of the envelope. Or maybe it was the tears misting my vision. There had to be years of letters here, all holding something Ford had desired to share with me but never had the chance to.

My hands trembled as I held the oldest letter, creased in the middle as if it'd been folded and unfolded countless times. Stains littered the paper on both sides, reds and browns, smudges of fingers, and things that held stories I wasn't privy to because of

cruel lies that had ripped us apart.

Part of me wished I'd had the chance to tell him that I'd have given up being a doctor if that had meant I'd have been able to be with him. He'd left to protect me and make sure I was able to pursue my dream, when in reality, it had only been a means to make sure I could go anywhere in this world with him. Doctors were needed everywhere, right?

A wet tear slithered down my cheek, and I quickly swiped it away with the back of my hand. Now was not the time to wallow in self-pity or what could have beens. Now, I needed to gather up the beautiful knives that Ford had made for me, these letters, and somehow sneak back into the house without anyone realizing that I'd been gone all this time. As well as get changed and get Azelie to the starting line for the race.

Getting to the house was the easy part, and I knew how to sneak into Ford's room through the window. It was the fact that if Azelie were in the room and saw me climb in through his window, we'd have a major problem. But, coming up with some excuse to Azelie was easier than trying to explain to my parents and Ford's parents where I'd been.

Fuck it. Whatever happened, I'd deal with, especially since it wasn't like I was trying to hide whatever Ford and I were doing now. It just may not have been the best...timing, considering the heartbreak our daughter was dealing with last night.

With a final glance at the stack of envelopes, I quickly tied them back up and snatched up my neatly folded clothes. The blanket slid from my shoulders as I stood, and I winced at the stretch and abrupt movement.

Gritting my teeth, I attempted to shove down the soreness between my legs as I stepped into my underwear and leggings. He'd never left me with this intensity of an

ache before, but then again, it had been quite some time since my last sexual excursion, and Ford wasn't exactly...small by any means.

I bit down on my bottom lip, smiling to myself as memories from last night flooded my mind. Yep. I would certainly accept being sore like this if it meant spending even a smidge of quality time with him again. Abso-fucking-lutely.

Once dressed, I carefully gathered the stack of envelopes and made the mindless journey back to the bedroom window I'd snuck in countless times before. Well, it was either now or never, and I pressed against the upper left-hand corner of the window. With a pop, the barricade unlatched, and I slid it open with barely a squeak.

As silent as the moon rising in the sky at night, I folded myself in half and snuck into the completely still and empty room. Relief flooded my shoulders, whisking away the worry of confessing to Azelie that I'd spent the night blissfully happy while I'd been unable to take away any of the pain she'd been experiencing.

With both of my feet firmly on the floor in Ford's room, I slid the window back into place with a click, and hearing the faint chatter of voices speaking outside the closed door, I wandered over to my duffel.

And paused.

There, stacked beside my bag, was another tidy pile of envelopes. Nearly as high as the one I carried, these also seemed to go from newest to most worn and faded, tied together with another brown twine.

Kneeling beside the bag, I slid a hand over the side of the letters. Ridges of paper bumped beneath my palm as I read my name in the center of the top envelope, written in Ford's handwriting. A knot welled up in my chest as I placed the stack I held beside that one. All these years... He'd written me letter after letter, despite knowing

I'd married someone else. Despite the lies, the pain, he'd never stopped thinking of me and caring for me.

Who was I to deserve a love made for the movies? Who was I to be a part of a painting even I couldn't create with a romance so precious and perfect, regardless of all the anguish between us? But my hand itched to pick up a brush for the first time since Ford had left. I desired an easel and a spring breeze where time wasn't ticking onward to doom. I hadn't painted or drawn a thing since I was eighteen, because my muse had left. But he was back, and that dam that had stifled my creativity seemed to have broken wide open.

I smiled to myself and closed my eyes. I knew that O'Connor was still a threat, and no matter how strong Ford was, we were all still in danger. But the worry I'd been consumed with about O'Connor was completely absent. We had this. Ford would take care of me, no matter the cost.

Now, I needed to quickly get dressed in my running gear, go snag at least a muffin and banana or something from the kitchen, and drive Azelie to the starting point for the race. No matter how brokenhearted she was, I prayed that at least us doing this run together would help brighten her spirits.

Chapter 31

COLETTE

"There," I said with a smile as I snapped the last pin in place, securing Azelie's racing number to her tank. She wore her cross-country uniform, as everyone on her team would be. I'd quickly thrown on a simple, black compression tank and pair of shorts, hoping to blend in but give Azelie the support she needed.

She barely looked at me as her eyes darted around the forming crowd. Chattering

filled the bright morning air. The starting line was already packed full with teenagers and runners alike, all here in support of a small-town school that barely had funding for a decent education. I prayed that all the proceeds gained during this was enough to help give the school some much-needed upgrades. But mostly, I hoped for Azelie's sake that sophomore year wouldn't start with such a heavy heart as she carried now.

"If you'd rather meet up with your friends and—" I started, but Azelie spun around with a scowl and crossed her arms.

"Friends? You mean Macy, because Cory hasn't even sent a text, and Macy is running with Thomas after he took her to the dance last night. So no, Mom. I don't want to meet up with so-called friends," she snapped.

That was on me. I should've known better than to even bring it up, seeing as she'd not said a word other than yes or no to me this morning, and her eyes were still puffy from crying last night. I wished I could make it better. I wished I could take all her heartbreak away, but I knew that wasn't possible.

"You're right, sweetheart. I'm sorry," I gently said, and the tension creasing lines on Azelie's face slipped away. Her bottom jaw trembled briefly, and she ran the back of her hand beneath her nose with a sniffle.

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“Just so you know, I will beat all of them, including Becca, so if you can’t keep up, I’m not waiting,” she muttered with a little less anger than before.

I gave her a gentle smile and nodded. “I wouldn’t expect anything less. Let me know if I can do anything.”

“You and Ford both won’t stop asking if you can do something for me,” she grumbled and turned away, weaving through a few groups of people across the grass to inch closer to the starting line.

“Speaking of Ford, have you seen him at all this morning?” I asked, casually hoping to divert her thoughts and mood as well as find out where the hell he’d disappeared to. And how. How the fuck had such a big man just...disappeared?

She paused and tipped her head with her back to me. The bottom of her braid brushed lightly against her back as she slowly shook her head. “No, actually. Even his mawmaw asked where he was at breakfast, but nobody knew.”

I inhaled deeply as the scent of sunscreen and summer filled the stuffy, humid air. Too many people all crowded into one spot on the field that had only yesterday housed hundreds of tents. Now, the opposite side of the high school held a marked path that we would follow, eventually bringing us in a loop to end at the same place we’d begun five kilometers later. Cars crowded the parking lot, and while I caught a glimpse of my parents sitting on the opposite side of the roped-off racetrack from Ford’s family, he was nowhere to be seen.

Azelie spun around, her eyes glistening with tears. “Is this what he does? Things get

messy or-or-or I ruin stuff and he runs away?”

I violently shook my head. “Absolutely not. That’s why I’m very confused. This is so unlike him. So very unusual,” I stated firmly. But there was a lump forming in my throat as I scanned the crowd again and found no sight of him. I couldn’t have been that wrong about him, right? Especially now knowing why he’d left in the first place. Especially after learning that even in the past fifteen years, he’d loved no one but me. All of those letters he’d written, why he’d stayed away after returning eleven years ago, there was no way he would just skip out now.

Right?

Azelie’s shoulders sagged as she adjusted the headband keeping the wayward strands of her hair out of her face. “I don’t know why I’m disappointed. It’s not like he’s been around for fifteen years anyway.”

I threw an arm around her waist and tugged her toward me. “You also had no idea who he was, and technically, he didn’t know who you were either. You’re allowed to feel whatever it—”

“Azellie!” Macy’s voice wafted above the crowd, sliding into our private conversation. She waved vigorously, standing with Thomas and Cory just past a group of adults.

“Azellie, come here! Run with us!” she shouted again, bouncing up and down on her feet.

Thomas and Cory faced where she was waving, and the moment Cory’s eyes met Azellie’s, his cheeks turned bright red. Azellie didn’t move as she stood silently beside me.

“Why would you want her to run with us?” Becca’s snide voice slithered into my ears as the blonde teenager pushed her way through a couple other kids to stand beside Cory. She smirked as his gaze fell to his feet.

“What are you talking about?” Macy snapped, throwing a hand onto her hip.

My heart swelled briefly in my chest at the guts that Azelie’s best friend had to stand up to the older girl. Azelie’s brows flickered up with surprise at the comment. Maybe there was more going on than we knew at this point.

“Yeah, Becca. Did you not get the hint last night when we ditched you?” Thomas spat and scooted a little closer toward Macy.

Becca rolled her eyes and tossed her sleek ponytail over her shoulder. “Ditched me? You mean, I left you guys.” She sighed and tipped her head, keeping her eyes locked onto Azelie. “But I still don’t understand why you’d want to run with her or be associating with her during this fundraiser. Did y’all forget the whole theme of it?”

“We didn’t forget. But why does that matter?” Macy shook her head as Cory’s brother jogged up behind them with a grin on his face, clearly unaware of the tension happening between these teens at the moment.

“What’s up?” Mark exclaimed and slapped his hands on his brother’s shoulders, his dog tags dangling around his neck glinting in the bright sunlight. “You ready to run for dumbasses like me?” He wiggled his brows, but none of the teens reacted.

Except for Becca, who waved her hand toward Mark. “Because of this. Cory has a family member who’s in the military. Thomas, both you and Macy at least have a grandparent or great-uncle or something like that who served, right? My great-grandpa served, but Azelie.” She paused and stepped forward, crossing her arms.

As if she commanded the crowd around us, even the alligators bellowed a little quieter. The murmuring of people speaking dimmed and even shifted away from the starting line, parting behind the very blonde who bullied my daughter. I balled my hands up behind my back, holding myself back. Azelie was strong, and I couldn't figure out why she wasn't saying anything, but then again, Becca was older and very popular. Classic high school beef that pissed me the fuck off. Plus, everything that had happened last night with Cory set Azelie off her usual game. That had to be it; otherwise, I was pretty sure Becca would've had a bloodied lip by now.

Or maybe it was the fact that Becca's parents were the biggest donors to the school and could easily get Azelie kicked off the cross-country team, which the little pissant teenager made sure everyone knew. Whatever the fucking reason was, I was ready to blow my levelheaded adult façade apart and rip Becca to shreds.

Becca smirked once more as my daughter remained silent and stiff beside me. "Even her little friend Cory chose me over her. She has no father, no family in the military. So, I ask one more time. Azelie has...who?" Her eyes darted to me. "You? Pathetic."

My jaw fell open as six shadows filled the parted crowd behind Becca. All eyes slid away from the very blonde who sought every ounce of attention she could lap up.

Six shadows that siphoned the rays of the sun and spread shadows of death around them. Six commanding figures who unintentionally turned every head toward them.

The world silenced, and their feet were the beating drums, rhythmical and intimidating as whispers grew around them. Five massive men and one woman who marched with confidence as if they carried the Grim Reaper himself and had no issue delivering souls to his hands.

A shiver stole down my spine as they finally came close enough that I recognized the face of the man in front. As thunderous as a thousand horses, yet as silent as a feather,

Ford led the group directly toward us.

Azelie stepped forward as Becca finally glanced behind her, and her eyes widened. Mark raised a brow and smirked, slowly nodding as the six people finally reached Azelie's friends, and the parted group behind them remained quiet but crowded in.

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My eyes slid down the only person I recognized of the six, but I didn't make it far from his hardened gaze as my eyes landed on the silver chain proudly displayed on his chest, bumping against the weighted vest he wore. A matching vest to the five others surrounding him. They all wore a simple T-shirt of varying dark colors and joggers, uniform but not exactly matching.

Ford's chest slowly expanded as he remained still, simply watching Becca, and I used the opportunity to quickly take in the other five people. Each of them had a pair of dog tags dangling around their necks. A blond-haired man with easily recognizable cauliflower ears had even me raising my walls in defense. The redhead who stopped directly beside Ford wasn't as tall as any of the other men in the group, but there was an intimidating arrogance lacing his rather muscled frame that made him seem as large as the massively brawny and tattooed man behind him.

Ford had one solid sleeve, but this guy... Both his arms were covered in gray-scale tattoos that migrated down the back of his hands and peeked out around the collar of his shirt. He stood like a ghost rider beside a man whose gaze alone sent goosebumps crawling across my skin. There were no tattoos visible on this man, but the veins that rippled beneath his dark black skin tensed as he tucked his hands against the sides of his vest. The woman standing beside him wasn't quite as dark as he was, but the strength exuding from her snapped as brazenly as an alligator catching its prey.

Ford finally lifted his gaze from Becca and locked sights with Azelie. He gave her a warm smile that seemed so ill-fitting to the rage oozing from his frame. "I hope we're not too late," he said with a tone that sliced as sharp as the new knives he'd gifted me last night.

Azelie slowly shook her head without blinking.

“Cool.” Ford tossed a thumb at the group. “I didn’t think wrangling these assholes would take as long as it did, but—”

“Wrangling us? You’re the one who couldn’t stop bullshitting with Bernie,” the blond inserted and smacked Ford on the back of the head.

“Watch your language, fucker,” the redhead quipped over his shoulder with a raised middle finger. “There are children present.”

Ford rolled his eyes as the bearded, heavily tattooed giant flicked the back of the redhead’s ear. “Shut up, Bernie,” he hissed. “You’re ruining the moment.”

“First off, ow!” Bernie whined, rubbing his ear as the rest of the group, including Ford, snickered. “Second, I’m not the one beefing with a teenager.”

“I’m not beefing with a teenager,” Ford snarled as I bit down on my bottom lip and stifled a giggle.

“Then what the fuck do you call this?” the blond said, gesturing between the group. “Are we not here to run with Azelie because some little shit bullied her because she didn’t have anyone in her family in the military?”

“Mikey, will you stop,” the woman hissed behind the blond. She shook her head and closed her eyes. “This is exactly why you guys can’t be together in public. You’d think none of you were adults, and not just adults, but adults who are almost all in your fucking thirties.”

Becca finally stepped forward directly toward Ford, though the confidence that she’d had a moment ago was lacking as she briefly glanced at his face and then looked at

everything but him. “I demand to know what is going on. Who are you?”

“Oh, you demand, do you?” Bernie snickered with a shake of his head. He glanced at the group. “This little insecure teenager demands to know what’s going on.”

Ford ran a hand over his face and shook his head. “This went entirely different in my head,” he rumbled.

The only man who hadn’t spoken shrugged his shoulders. “How many years have you spent with us, with Bernie, and you thought it’d go differently?”

Ford blew air out of his lips. “Fair. Fair. This one’s on me.”

“Seriously!” Becca quipped again. “Who are you?”

By now, the rest of the crowd had turned away, no longer interested in the very confusing insanity going on here. I, on the other hand, no longer felt intimidated by the group as nothing but humor sifted through me. Even Azelie shared a quick glance my way while biting back a grin.

“You’ve met Ford before, haven’t you?” Azelie said. Her gaze flashed to her dad, then me briefly as she took a step forward.

“Well, yes. Everyone in town knows about him. My mom won’t stop gushing about how much he’s grown up,” Becca snarled and rolled her eyes. “What does that have to do with you, and who the rest of them are?”

“Well, he’s my dad,” Azelie stated.

Macy’s, Cory’s, and Thomas’s jaws fell to the grass we stood on so fast I could’ve sworn I heard their bones snap. “Ford is your dad?! As in, Azelie LeBlanc’s dad is a

Thibodeaux?” Macy exclaimed loud enough that once again, the crowd’s attention shot toward our group.

Azelie nodded with a grin, and I peeked at Ford. His eyes gleamed with pride, and he seemed to stand a couple inches taller. I guess this was oneway to announce to the world that I was once in love with him, and was again, but the latter tidbit of information could come later.

“Big whoop. So, some dude whose parents run a restaurant is your dad. Again, what does that have to do with the entire group? Plus, it doesn’t change the fact that nobody in your family has any ties to the military. So, once again, I’m unimpressed. How sad,” Becca said and shoved her nose into the air.

“No military connection?” Mark stated, stepping out from behind Cory. “Ford is in the military, or did you not notice the dog tags hanging around his neck? In fact, all of them are in the military. Though, Ford.” Mark paused and nodded at the very man whose grin shifted from pride to that of a malicious smirk toward Becca. “You never did mention what branch you’re in?”

Ford raised a brow as the rest of his group chuckled. And the redhead clapped Ford on the back. “Dude’s a fucking Navy SEAL,” Bernie stated. “Like we all are. Except her.” He pointed at the striking woman who also wore a weighted vest and dog tags. “Though technically she’s like an honorary member since she’s the best damn sniper I’ve ever met.”

His eyes widened as the massive, tattooed man behind him stepped forward. “Only after the Commander here retired,” Bernie quickly added with a tossed thumb over his shoulder. “Both of them are phenomenal. Deadly. Watch out. Bang bang. Death. Yeah...” He finished his rambling as the rest of the group snickered.

And the information settled in like a ship to a yard. The man I once believed would

never hurt a fly now stood before me with evidence to the contrary. Everything made sense. And I understood now. All of his reactions, or rather lack of fear toward the physical danger we'd been dealing with. How quick he was to assess and react to the situations as well as the language he used and methodical approach he had to it all.

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The final question that lingered in my head as Ford's eyes met mine—why hadn't he told me earlier?

But then the answer came as quickly as a thunderstorm. It wasn't in Ford's personality to boast about his career, his status as a fucking SEAL, as a special ops guy in the military in general.

A giggle bounced in my throat as Ford's cheeks remained red. Even the rest of his team seemed a bit...bashful concerning the announcement that had every pair of mouths hanging open and eyes bugging out of their heads. I couldn't wait to embarrass Ford even further by how not-macho this went, but in the back of my mind, I knew that he'd succeeded in his intentions to knock Becca down a peg.

She slunk away from Ford and his team, disappearing into the crowd beside us with her tail tucked between her legs.

Success without stepping on his daughter's toes was evident in her eyes as she slipped out of my embrace and bounded over to her dad.

Chapter 32

FORD

I studied Colette's face, desperately searching to understand her reaction to Bernie's announcement. Waiting for the anger at another lie...though not technically a lie, but all the same, something I'd hidden from her, to dance across her expression. But instead, I found understanding and excitement? Was she...proud of me?

Two arms wrapped around my stomach with a force stronger than even Bernie had slugged me with, and I grunted on impact. Glancing down, curly red hair buried against my torso. “You came!” Azelie exclaimed, squeezing me even tighter.

“Wouldn’t miss it. I just figured you could use a few recruits to help with the Becca situation,” I replied.

She chuckled and peeled her face off me but kept her arms wrapped around me. “I was fine. I was going to let her have her moment and then tell her off later when I managed to dig up something good on her. But I’ll take this. This was even better.” She grinned as Bernie stepped toward us.

“You gonna introduce us, or now that we’ve successfully deescalated your situation, are we fucking chopped liver?” he asked.

I rolled my eyes as Azelie stepped away and scanned my team. Colette quietly crept up behind her daughter but said nothing.

“This asshole is Bernie. He likes to blow shit up,” I grumbled, tossing a thumb at my best friend. Azelie giggled as Colette’s brows furrowed. Pointing to Mikey, I continued. “That’s Mikey. If you can’t tell, he likes to get punched, but he tends to punch back. Also, he’s the one that helped me with your knives,” I explained and glanced at Colette. She smiled warmly as Azelie looked at her mom.

“Knives? You have knives? What knives?” Azelie asked, and Colette waved dismissively.

“Go on,” Colette said.

“That’s Scottie. She’s dating the bonehead Mikey and is a phenomenal shot, so best not to piss her off.” I pointed at Scottie, who winked at Azelie. “That’s Dom. He’s

probably the smartest guy I know, which is why it's a good thing he took over when Griffin retired, or we would've been fucked the next day."

Dom smiled and gave a brief nod toward Colette and my daughter. "I'm assuming that's Griffin?" Azelie asked, pointing at my old commander.

He nodded and raised a brow. "You have no idea how nice it feels to not be the only dad now."

Azelie's eyes widened, and she stumbled back. "You're a dad?"

Griffin sighed as the rest of us chuckled. "Why is that always so fucking surprising? I'm a great dad. The best dad. Jane at least tells me I am."

"Who's Jane?" Azelie asked, her eyes darting between me and Griffin.

"His wife and the only woman in the world to tolerate his ass," Bernie stated and tossed a thumb at the big oaf who scowled. "She's awesome and totally put him in his place the first time we met her. We had to rescue her when she got kidnapped, and she wouldn't let him forget that it took him three—"

"All right! That was what, five almost six fucking years ago. Can we not let it go?" Griffin inserted with a growl.

Azelie's mouth fell open as a strange snort-like sound rumbled up from her throat. "I can't figure out if I should laugh or be shocked. You let her get kidnapped? As in, she really got taken by someone...?"

"He didn't let her get kidnapped. It was this drug cartel guy who—" I stopped talking as Colette sliced a glare toward me. "Details don't matter. What does matter is she's safe, and I promise that won't happen with you, okay?"

Azelie slowly nodded as Macy scootched her way over to my daughter's side, dragging Cory with his head hung low and eyes locked to the ground. "Tell her," Macy muttered, shoving him forward.

"Tell me what?" Azelie's brows furrowed as my sights locked onto the boy who had crushed her. I clenched my jaw, holding back the anger that was also partly his fault.

Cory twisted his toe into the ground, refusing to look at Azelie. Or me.

"Cory," Thomas grumbled and shoved his arm.

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Suddenly, he inhaled sharply and snapped his eyes to Azelie. “I didn’t want to go with Becca. She asked, and it caught me off guard ’cause I was planning to ask you, and I wasn’t thinking clearly, so I didn’t say no. But my parents said I had to go with the first person who asked me, except I didn’t want to. The moment that Becca and I got to the dance, I ditched her with Macy and Thomas, but I accidentally left my phone in her car. Which is where it still is, or I would’ve texted you. I asked Macy and Thomas not to say anything so I could apologize to you in person because you deserve that because I like you.”

Colette covered her mouth with her hand to hide the smile forming on her face as I nodded to myself. There was the Cory who stood up for Azelie and Macy at the track when I first met him. Bold and proud. Even Mark grinned as he crossed his arms, remaining in the distance.

The warning that the race would be starting and all runners needed to line up was Cory’s answer as Azelie simply stared at him. With a smile that was almost too girlish and grown for her. Shit. I was gonna have to keep an eye on this boy.

“You like me?” she whispered as the crowd shoved forward toward the starting line.

He nodded. “I’m sorry I didn’t say anything earlier. But yeah, I have for a while.” His cheeks turned slightly pink as Griffin clapped me on the back and leaned forward.

“Glad I don’t have to deal with that shit for another few years. Good luck, buddy,” he muttered in my ear.

I pursed my lips as Azelie grinned, and it was as if she forgot that I existed. She

giggled and skipped ahead into the forming line-up with Cory and her two friends.

“Well, so much for a heartfelt run together with my daughter,” I grumbled.

A gentle hand rested on my arm, and I glanced at piercing green eyes that melted me on the spot.

“Is that her?” Bernie gasped beside me with a wiggle of his brows. “I knew you had a thing for redheads. Makes so much sense.”

“Careful. She might stab you like she did me, and this time, the blade is longer than two inches,” I quipped back.

Bernie blinked rapidly as Mikey burst out laughing behind me. “She stabbed you? When did she stab you?”

“When he decided to sneak up on me after disappearing for fifteen fucking years,” Colette replied.

“Oh, I like her already. She reminds me of you,” Mikey said with a grin as he wiggled his eyebrows at Scottie.

She shook her head. “I should let her stab you, too. Just for good measure,” she teased with a smile as the signal to start the race rang loud over the crowd.

And we were off on a 5k run with my team, my girl, and somewhere around here, my daughter.

Loving chatter filled the emptiness around me as I did up the last button on my shirt. Conversation that involved every person I held near and dear to my heart. I imagined Scottie leaning back against Mikey on the couch, as Bernie’s loud cackle was joined

by Kat's gentle smile and a loving roll of her eyes. She and Jane had met us at the finish line, surprising both Bernie and Griffin. Jane explained that their kids were with her mom, and they could use this time as a spontaneous little weekend getaway.

Here they were, my team with my parents and Mawmaw, Colette, my daughter, and yes, even Colette's parents, all squished into the tiny front room of my house. The scent of the crawfish boil started in the back wafted in through the open bedroom window as I grabbed the tie from the top of the dresser.

But it wasn't calmness or safety that filled my heart. Dread sat at the tip of my tongue, hanging on like a bait to a hook. I wanted to bite it back, swallow it, ignore it, and just enjoy this moment as was intended, but I knew too much to be able to truly let it go. Knowledge was a blessing and a curse, though right now, the good part of it seemed a faint light at the end of a long tunnel I was barreling down.

A knock rapped against the wooden frame of the bedroom door.

"Yeah, come in," I grunted as I slung the tie around my neck. The hinges creaked as the door opened, and I glanced up from the emerald green fabric. A masquerade of relief settled on my shoulders as Colette quietly entered and closed the door behind her.

The edges of her eyes crinkled as her lips lifted into a bright smile. "I dreamed of a day like this, you know," she whispered and stopped in front of me.

"I'm just sorry it took so damn long," I replied as she lifted her hands and slid them down either side of the tie. Her eyes studied the fabric and slowly began knotting the two ends together as if she'd practiced for this very moment.

"Hmmm," she mumbled, her attention stolen by the slick tie.

Disbelief slid into every darkened corner of my mind. She had no idea what I'd done with my life. She had no idea how much destruction and death I'd brought, yet here she was, unafraid of me.

"I didn't purposefully not tell you about my career," I blurted out as she tightened the tie and pushed it up against my throat.

Her lips lifted into a smile as her hand slid gently down my chest, smoothing out the finishing touch to my suit. "I know. The moment Bernie said that you guys were special ops dudes, SEALs to be exact, I understood."

My brows furrowed as her gaze finally met mine. "You did?"

She giggled quietly and dropped her hands. "You are not the type to brag about anything. Your job never really came up, and watching how adorably awkward, though successful, your arrival was, it made sense."

"Awkward?" I groaned and tipped my head back.

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She giggled again. “It was perfect. You guys all showed up like some action heroes in a movie, and then it became beautifully hilarious. But your daughter hasn’t stopped talking about it since, and Becca certainly slunk away like a scared bully.”

I shook my head and glanced at the dress shoes on my feet. “I just wanted to help Azelie.”

“And you did. Now, get out there. She said she’s about finished with her makeup, so I need to help her with her dress.” Colette sighed and stepped away from me.

I met her gaze as it shifted from one of admiration to almost desperation. Her eyes widened, and the lines deepened in her face. It was an almost innocent fear that tensed her entire body up.

And while what I should have felt was something less calming, maybe anger or rage, it filled me with the control that came before every mission. I placed my palms against her cheeks and lifted her chin. “I’ve got her. Okay? Everything will be fine, I promise.”

She chewed on her bottom lip and nodded slowly. With a stiff swallow, she inhaled deeply and patted the outside of her thigh. “Thank you for the gift. Mikey’s been giving me tips,” she quietly said.

“They’re idiots, but trust them. They’ve kept me alive all these years,” I replied with a smile.

Her brows stitched together, forming two red lines between them. “What are you

talking about?”

Slowly, I let my hands drop from her face and brushed a curl behind her ear. “Cher,” I admonished, and she rolled her eyes.

“Right, sorry. I think I’m still processing the fact that you’ve literally been in life-or-death situations. Frequently. And slightly by your own choice, too. You know what, I should get upset that you faked being hurt when I stabbed you.” She suddenly shoved her hands on her hips as I threw my head back and laughed.

“I love you. Go help our daughter get in her dress. I’ve got a date to go on.” I winked, adjusted my tie, and quickly pecked her lips.

She giggled as I walked out of the room, directly into whoops, hollering, and whistles that I’d expected from those dumbasses who had never seen me in a suit until now.

Chapter 33

FORD

Azelie slipped her hand into my offered elbow as we walked up the stairs toward the high school. “How’d things go with Cory, by the way?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes, though her cheeks turned a shade of pink as she grabbed the skirt of her emerald dress to avoid stepping on it with her matching heels. “Good. We talked things through and...” She swung her narrowed gaze my way. “You know what, you don’t need details. That’s between me and him.”

I grinned to myself as my fourteen, almost fifteen-year-old daughter took another step beside me. “All right, well, only kissing. Got it? I don’t need to become a grandpa the same month I found out I’m also—”

“Oh. My. Gosh. Stop!” she squealed as the pink in her face deepened to a dark crimson shade, highlighting the freckles she’d inherited.

“If he tries anything more, just remember that I am well-versed in ways to hide a bodyand—”

“SERIOUSLY!” she shrieked and dropped her hand from my elbow. Her heels clicked against the cement as she hustled toward the brick building a few steps in front of me. I simply watched her for a moment as she put space between us. One second in the eternity of time where everything was...normal. I had a woman waiting at home, while I was taking our daughter on her first daddy/daughter date.

My family was safe. Everyone I cared about was here. I knew it was temporary, but at least I had this moment. This was exactly what I’d been fighting for my entire life. The only way my soul was going to be saved was by this. Despite the chill that swept up my spine, knowing that death and destruction were a mere next set of orders and deployment away, at least right now, there was warmth blazing at the walls of my heart.

“Are you coming?” Azelie stated, turning around. Her hair was pulled up into a bun sitting at the base of her neck. Each usually frenzied curl perfectly gelled into place with makeup brushed upon lashes that were as long as her mom’s. Lipstick highlighted the cherry red of her hair, while the emerald ball gown with off-the-shoulder sleeves accentuated the beautiful gold necklace that I also recognized was Colette’s.

But it was her eyes that made me stare for just a moment longer. She wasn’t wearing her contacts, and the two different colors blazed brightly back at me. Eyes just like mine. For this split in time, my weary bones rested.

“Coming,” I said with another smile and marched over to her.

She tucked her hand back in my elbow as we rounded the corner and merged with other students and their parents, all dressed nicely for an evening out that offered reprieve from the burdens of life.

“You look very pretty, by the way,” I quietly said as we reached the double doors and I held one open for her.

She smiled and passed beneath the balloon arch that invited us toward the gym where music already bumped beneath the floorboards. “You’ve said that a few times now,” she replied when I caught up with her. I nodded at a mom and her son who pushed past us. “But I like hearing it, so thank you.”

“All I ask is for one dance before you go twirling off with your boyfriend, all right?” I tipped my head her way with a grin as we followed the line of people toward the metal doors that were latched open.

“We are not boyfriend-girlfriend, gosh. You’re worse than Mom.” She pursed her lips but tucked her polished nails a little tighter into my arm. “Of course you get at least one dance,” she quickly added as I gestured for her to enter first.

Swirling multicolored lights danced around the dim gymnasium. The basketball hoops on either side of the courts were pulled up and out of the way, replaced by a DJ stage with black curtains for a backdrop on one side, and a photographer with the school colors for the backdrop on the other side. The bleachers were tucked away, making room for a table of treats and a punch bowl that was most likely spiked on one long side, while a few small tables and chairs lined the other.

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“AZELIE!” Macy’s high-pitched squeal immediately interrupted whatever new song the DJ was playing. She dashed away from her dad, who shook his head but gave me a polite nod. I ignored the eyes that stared, long after Macy and Azelie hugged. I knew what they were talking about, as it had been the gossip during the entire race—my relationship with Azelie, which obviously meant that Colette and I had slept together. Years ago. During high school. The parents seemed worse than the kids, who simply accepted the news and hadn’t said much after.

“Hi, Mr. Thibodeaux,” Macy said as she kept her arm around Azelie’s shoulders.

I shuddered. “Yeah, just Ford. That sounds weird. And old.”

“But you are old,” she stated with an innocent blink.

My mouth fell open as her dad laughed. “Still, just Ford is fine. Where’s Thomas?” I replied, changing the subject quickly.

She pointed to the middle of the dance floor where Thomas waited beside Cory. They waved as soon as they clearly noticed Macy was pointing.

“Please?” Azelie asked with wide eyes.

“Go on. I’ve got you. But again, Cory better—”

“Stooooop,” she groaned, grabbed Macy’s hand, and ran off.

Macy’s dad walked up beside me, and we watched as the four of them got lost in the

music. He clapped a hand on my shoulder, pulling my attention briefly away from the kids. “You are the talk of the town,” he said. “It’s finally nice to meet you. I’m Jason.”

“Ford,” I replied with a curt shake of his hand.

“Everyone always assumed Colette’s late husband was the dad, but um, clearly things were misinterpreted,” he continued.

“I didn’t know until a few weeks ago myself,” I said.

I glanced back at my daughter, who now slow-danced a little too close to Cory. Stuffing my hands in my pockets, I watched as she giggled and blushed at something he said.

“You’ve clearly stepped into the role of dad very nicely, or she wouldn’t have been embarrassed about you setting rules concerning a certain boy,” Jason continued.

“I was fifteen once. I’m not too concerned about Azelie,” I replied.

Jason chuckled. “Same with Thomas and Macy. I’m happy and know it’s inevitable, but just like you, I was once a teenage boy with certain...tendencies.” He turned and looked directly at me. “Also, I wanted to say how sorry I am about what’s been going on with your family’s restaurant and this O’Connor fellow. He’s really got it out for you and the LeBlancs it seems.”

I knotted my jaw, the temporary feeling of ignorance to the world dashed by a couple sentences. All I managed was a nod in reply. The fire that raged in my belly, reminding me of the fast-approaching return of O’Connor, roared hot with blue flames, and I immediately scanned the room. Every exit, every person acting a fool and dancing wildly noted with areas that left wide-open targets blazed in my head.

Situational awareness, my training, kicked back in, unintentionally turning me from a carefree dad on a date with his daughter, to the man I'd been conditioned to be all these years.

This man I was more comfortable with. This version of me fell into my lap much quicker and easier than the unworried version I'd been impersonating a moment ago. I knew then that this "me" had never technically left, and I'd been existing in some charade, just biding my time until this man was needed again.

This version would never go completely dormant, considering the fact that I had never figured out how to separate the constant search for danger from the understanding that I was home. I had accepted that years ago, but now, it seemed I had at least a few minutes in time where the charade of being nonchalant seemed less fake.

I'd soak those memories in and hold tightly to them for the rest of my life.

Like this one.

Watching my daughter spin in a circle, with the beautiful glow of her green dress highlighting the gentle curve of her smile.

And like last night, where the woman I'd longed for, spent years thinking of and dreaming of, had finally been mine once more. The reckless, scared boy I'd once been had unintentionally built something beautiful. I'd been gifted a family with the only woman I'd ever loved, and she had accepted me in return.

I couldn't screw this up. Not again. There was no second chance that I would be offered. There was no failure allowed. Even when that final bell rang, recalling this blissful moment back and sending our worlds into a tailspin once more, I would not fail.

“Come dance with me!” Azelie’s voice shattered my thoughts, and I blinked myself back to the present. Some old, early 2000s tune I remembered from my own high school time bumped loudly on the speakers. She grabbed my hand as Macy snatched her own father’s and dragged me toward the center of the dance floor.

I wasn’t one who really got the thrill of dancing, but as she threw herself into the music and let herself become carefree, I accepted my plight. I knew I looked strange and awkward, like some big, uncoordinated oaf, but Azelie merely grinned and laughed and danced even wilder.

Several songs later, a few trips to the hallway for some fresh air, and more dancing, sweat coated my forehead and brow. I’d even managed to not step on Azelie’s toes during a couple sweet, father/daughter slower songs.

She had twirled off with Cory for a moment, and as I weaved to the edge of the dancing crowd once more, someone suddenly threw themselves against my waist. I stiffened as the embrace tightened until I glanced down and found a head of red curls. Azelie was simply hugging me.

I stared at my daughter, unable to move. Such a simple, beautiful gesture that she wasn’t mad at me, and we were finding some sort of rhythm as a new parent and child.

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“Thank you for the best night ever,” she whispered.

I sucked my lips between my teeth and cautiously wrapped my own arms around her. And then just like that, Azelie whirled away again.

I couldn’t wait to tell Colette what just happened, and I dug into my pocket for my phone. Unlocking it, I tapped into my messages, and right as I pulled up our thread, a call seared through the bliss.

It was Dom. He knew where I was, and I knew at that moment that there was no more pretending.

I tapped the answer button and put it up to my ear. “What’s happening?”

“It’s your family’s restaurant,” he stated as faint crackling and sirens pierced the speaker.

With a deep attempt at a steady breath, I clamped my hand over my other ear and blocked out as much background noise as I could. “How bad is it?”

“The fire department is on the defensive, just trying to contain it to the restaurant only. There’s no saving it. Any of it,” he replied.

I closed my eyes. “Who’s all there?”

“Your parents, Mawmaw, Mikey and Scottie.”

There it was. The explosion that we'd been waiting for. I knew deep down that there was no coming back financially from this for my parents because I could practically guarantee that there would be some evidence that it was arson, yet no evidence that it wasn't my parents or Mawmaw.

"Anything on the security cameras?" I finally asked and glanced back to the middle of the dance floor. Azelie spun with a carefree smile up on her face in the middle of her friends.

"They went down about fifteen minutes before. That's what got us here, but it was already too late," Dom answered. "Ford," he added with a tone that sent a shiver down my spine. That wasn't just a friend talking anymore, but my lieutenant commander, drawing me back to the present.

"Roger," I said and hung up the phone. There was no logical need for me to end up at the restaurant, especially since Azelie wouldn't need to see that. Colette was at home, which was where we would be heading, because I couldn't protect both of them without being with both of them at the same time.

A stone weighed heavy in my heart as I watched Azelie spin around the dance floor with Cory. She clearly felt free and happy, and I knew the moment I told her we needed to go that I would crush what was supposed to be the most blissful night of her life, or at least one that ranked high on the scale.

And selfishly, I didn't want it to end and be ruined either. Maybe five more minutes letting her dance would be alright? Griffin and Bernie were back with Colette and her family, even Kat and Jane were there, and both of them could put up a fight. Colette had her knives and wrestling gators was a fuck ton scarier than a couple dudes, right? Except these dudes probably had guns, and she had daggers, not a weapon that worked well from a far distance. Griffin and Bernie were certainly carrying. Kat and Jane possibly were, too, right?

Still, I wasn't too fond of the odds that were quickly adding up in my mind.

Scanning the room once more, I locked on to three familiar faces standing at separate ends of the gym. Except this time they weren't nearly as greasy and drunk-looking as the first time we'd crossed paths, and they were staring directly at me.

The same three assholes who had approached Azelie and her friends while they'd been waiting at the track a couple weeks ago.

Shit. I'd had my suspicions then, and it only pissed me off even more that I was right to begin with.

I wasn't a fool and hardly believed in coincidences, and I'd first chalked up those three drunk and high bastards as potential cronies of O'Connor's then let them off as some simple fucking creeps. Never again would I second-guess my gut.

Keeping the three menaces in my peripherals, I quickly stuffed my phone back in my pocket and paced over to Azelie. The moment I reached her side, all three stepped off the walls they leaned against simultaneously, leaving one single escape route.

"Time to go," I gruffly stated in Azelie's ear and grabbed her arm.

"Ow! What are you doing?" she cried out, clawing at my hand.

"Don't fight me. We need to go," I ordered again and dragged her away from her friends as the three men funneled us toward the same entrance we'd come through. Shit. Shit. Shit. One exit route was never good.

"You're hurting my arm," Azelie stammered again and dug her heels into the gym floorboards.

“What are you doing?” Macy demanded and slapped her hand around Azelie’s free arm.

I glanced at my daughter. “Azelie, we have to go,” I said and immediately swept the room again. We were losing any distance that could possibly allow me to usher us out and disappear as the three men marched toward us with deadly sights locked onto my daughter.

Her eyes widened as she straightened herself upright and scanned our surroundings. Though I knew she had no idea what I saw that had me on high alert, it was enough to get her to agree. “Right. Sorry, Macy. I’ll text you!” she shouted and nodded at me.

Without running, we walked as quickly as we could without drawing too much attention toward the double doors beneath the glowing green exit sign. “No matter what happens, you keep going, got it?” I instructed as we slipped out of the gym into the hall.

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A few straggling partygoers out here barely glanced our way as we hustled toward the entrance to the school that I just knew they wanted us to go through. I hated playing their game, but at least out in the parking lot, I stood a much better chance at keeping them distracted so Azelie could leave than I did in here. Especially seeing as the school had been smart and shut the doors down either hallway that split away from the one we currently speedily walked down. If they were shut, I assumed they were locked, and there was no time to check as the three men darted out of the gym behind us.

Digging my hand into my pocket as we skirted around a corner where not another soul was, I snatched out the car keys Colette had let me borrow. “Here,” I said and pushed the keys into Azelie’s palm. Her eyebrows stitched together as she gathered up part of her skirt, and we started jogging.

“I don’t have a license,” she gasped as I let go of her arm and took note of a few stacked metal chairs pushed up against the wall near the entrance.

“I’ll pay whatever the fucking ticket fee is. You get out into that parking lot, and you run to the car. Don’t worry about me. Get in, and drive home. Got it?” I instructed as the men behind us picked up their pace. They were closing in on us.

“But—”

“Azelie, your mom is waiting. I’ve got this,” I reassured as we reached the front doors.

She nodded and shoved against the car, pushing the door open. I darted to the side,

snatched a chair up, and turned around as she raced outside.

The three men skidded to a stop as I stood up straight, blocking their escape to Azelie.

Adrenaline prickled beneath my skin. Finally. I'd get to bash someone's face—

A sharp pinch pierced the back of my arm. "The fuck?" I muttered and slid my hand around, grasping for whatever might have caused that. The world spun as the man in front of me cackled, and footsteps sounded behind me.

"The sedative will kick in, in just a few seconds," the man behind me spoke.

And it hit me that I'd never heard the door shut after she'd pushed it open. Shit. I'd made this too easy for them. Every contingency that I'd been trained for, I'd ignored. I should've stayed with her. We should've left together. This was all my fault. I'd fucked up.

"Thank you, Doctor Brandt," the greasy leader in front of me said as a fourth man walked out from behind me. His hooked nose appeared in my blurry peripheral first, followed by an unusually thin face hidden behind a pair of glasses that swamped his beady eyes and hid his light brown eyebrows.

The chair slid from my hands and clattered to the floor. "Azelie," I gasped as my knees buckled, and I slammed against the hardwood floor.

Another cackle danced down the hallway as the tall and extremely thin doctor joined the other three men. "I thought you SEALs were supposed to be smart?" he said.

Not this one, apparently. I'd broken the one promise that should've never been destroyed.

“Don’t... Don’t...hurt...” I stammered as the world blurred and stars danced around me.

“DADDY!” Azelie’s scream pierced the silence, shattering any cage that held the grim reaper inside me at bay. But it was no use.

I was of no use. Everything turned black.

Chapter 34

FORD

My head spun as if I were experiencing the worst hangover of my life. With ringing ears, I groaned and attempted to pry my eyelids open. Like Velcro held them together, my lashes ripped and tore as I attempted to gather myself and figure out what was going on.

Through grated metal that made my teeth ring, a voice brought all of my senses alive at once. “This is taking too fucking long,” O’Connor grumbled, and a sharp burn split through my cheek.

I lurched backwards instinctively attempting to get away from the blade slicing through my skin, and cold chains clamped down tight around my wrists. The binds ripped my arms high above my head. My shoulders groaned against the weight of my body, but not enough force pulled me from kneeling on the dirty floor as I rocked forward to relieve some of the pressure.

“What’d—” I attempted to choke out and rolled my neck again as O’Connor squatted down in front of me. I scanned the room I was in. Surrounded by a few boxes and crates that looked empty and long since abandoned, the chain wrapped around my wrists ran through a hook lodged in a wooden beam running across the ceiling. It was

secured at the other end of the room to four cinder blocks. Empty. Alone. Dust that had settled from years of abandonment in this grimy warehouse left my fate in the hands of the man in front of me.

“What happened?” I groaned. But I remembered. It flashed through my mind as quickly as I noted the lack of any windows and a single door over my shoulder in this small warehouse.

O’Connor slid the metal blade beneath my chin, and I looked up at his eyes that gleamed as if he’d already won. A single flickering yellow light bulb swung a few feet from a hook in a separate wooden beam, glinting off the knife tinged in my blood.

“What happened is exactly what I planned, just a few days early. You really think I needed to leave for business? You may have...put a dent in the amount of men I had brought with me here, but I quickly filled those empty slots without much necessary change.” He stood up and walked across the room.

I studied him but remained silent.

He patted the stack of cinder blocks keeping me hostage. “Honestly, I thought it would’ve been harder to get to this point, considering I had anticipated a lot more guns. What happened to you hillbillies and your love of weapons? Doesn’t everyone own one?”

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Cotton coated my throat as I attempted to swallow and ignore the pounding in my head. “Take the damn restaurant,” I spat. This wasn’t worth it.

O’Connor chuckled. “Doctor Brandt told me you weren’t that bright, but come on. Have you really not figured it out yet?” He tucked his hands behind his navy blue suit and walked to my left. Eyeing him, he approached a stack of boxes with a laptop opened on top, but the screen was blank.

“Private First Class Maria Santiago,” he said and tapped the keyboard.

Time froze, and the blood in my veins stilled. It’d been years since I’d heard that name spoken out loud, yet the guilt that bubbled up in my throat was as pungent and sour now as it had been then.

“Since her mother and I didn’t marry until she was sixteen, she kept her mother’s last name,” O’Connor continued as he bent over in front of the screen of the laptop and typed something.

“You really think I went through all of those men, paid off how many hit men and teams all for two fucking restaurants?” he asked with a calmness in his voice I recognized. It was the same tone I’d get right before unleashing mayhem and death.

He spun around. His face twisted, contorting with tension that pushed the veins in his neck and forehead to pop and pulse with rage. “I am going to make you feel EXACTLY what I felt. You should have answered the fucking phone and she would still be here!” He stepped out of the way of the screen.

Horror split the ice in my veins as the two people I loved most appeared in front of me. “Don’t hurt them!” I screeched as fear slid like lightning down my skin.

A hand clamped down around Colette’s hair and jerked her head back. Her eyes were wide, and tears stained her cheeks, turning two spots on her gag a dark grey. Azelie was positioned next to Colette in the same kneeling position with hands bound behind her back. Except the muzzle of a gun pushed her head down further toward the floor.

“I won’t,” O’Connor said and strolled away from the computer. “Not yet anyway.”

I lunged forward against the chains as dirt dug into my knees through my pants. “You fucking monster,” I spat.

He grinned maliciously. “How hypocritical of you, when you’re the reason my daughter is dead.”

With a shake of my head, I leaned back against my heels. “I didn’t kill her, O’Connor. We both made it back from that tour, but not everyone with us did.”

He darted forward as the grin twisted to hate. “You just needed to answer the phone call! If you’d answered her phone call I wouldn’t have found her hanging from her fucking fan in her room after you decided to put in for an interservice transfer! YOU LEFT HER! YOU QUIT!” All calm left the building as he darted toward me and thrust the knife beneath my neck.

My Adam’s apple dipped against the cold blade. “I was—I was—”

His chin trembled as he stared at the blade in his hand. “Why couldn’t you have saved her?” he whispered, and a tear slid down his cheek.

I closed my eyes as that same burdening guilt washed over my body. “I’m sorry,

O'Connor. She saved my life out on that tour, and I wasn't there when she needed me most."

"She was your battle buddy or whatever shit you guys call it." The cold blade slipped away from my neck, and I cracked my eyes open.

I nodded as he pushed himself up from his squatted position. "She was home. I didn't think...She'd received an honorary discharge and..."

"AND WHAT?" he roared, lunging toward me again. "You think just because she was home, she was safe? She needed you. She called you." He pointed at the screen where Colette and Azelie were both hunched over and shaking with guns to the back of their heads. "I'm going to take your daughter just as you're the reason I lost mine. Yes, I know about Azelie and who she is to you. Though I guess that's no longer a secret, is it?" He chuckled to himself and exhaled deeply, then continued. "Then, I'm going to destroy the woman you love just as you're the reason my wife left me."

"I was at BUD/S when Maria called me. I didn't have my phone, or I would've answered. Her voicemail nearly destroyed me. I nearly—" I stopped talking as O'Connor threw the knife into a box off to the side of the laptop with a resoundingthwunk.

"YOU THINK I FUCKING CARE WHY YOU DIDN'T ANSWER? Your friend needed your help, and because you weren't there, she's dead." He stood upright and dusted off his suit coat. "You killed her. And because of what happened to Maria, my wife left me. So, I'm going to kill your daughter and the woman you love so you know exactly how I felt. How I still feel."

"No! Please," I begged. "They're innocent. It's me you want. Take me. Torture me. Kill me. Do whatever you want to me, but let them go."

He shook his head. “I won’t kill you. That’s too easy of a way out. Torture you, though...” He paused and grinned. “That I can do without a second thought. Maria stopped you both from being blown up by that damn IED, but after that, she was never the same. Any little...sound set her off. The survivor’s guilt...”

O’Connor strutted toward the laptop and hovered a finger over a key. “I will take great pleasure in causing the same pain to you, and then killing your daughter and love. You’ll never forget Maria’s name again.”

He tapped the key, and whimpers pierced the speakers. “Colette? Azelie?” I gasped as rage boiled in my blood.

“Ford!” Colette cried out. “Don’t do it! We’ll be fine. Just—“

“Shut her up!” O’Connor inserted, and the gun bumped against the back of Colette’s head with the click of a safety flicking off.

“Thank you. Now, obviously this laptop screen isn’t that big.” O’Connor walked over to the knife he’d thrown into the box and paused in front of it. “But just know, I also have your parents and mawmaw held actually just outside this little warehouse. I wanted them to hear all of this, too.”

“You kidnapped them, too?” I asked.

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“And your, well...” O’Connor paused and tipped his head with a furrowed brow. “I guess what would’ve eventually become your in-laws, except there won’t be a daughter for you to marry and no granddaughter left for you to have any connection to them.”

No words. There was not a single word in any language that would encompass the rage and simultaneous failure that coursed thick through my veins. All hope, that blissful peace I’d been temporarily dancing in, became a restless dream I walked alone. A halo of darkness settled over the light that had once blazed endlessly within my mind as I imagined just what life was going to be like now that I had Colette left.

“Please, no,” I quietly begged and glanced back at the screen.

Colette’s shoulders trembled as her body crumpled a little more forward. Tears slipped off Azelie’s cheeks, and she raised her head briefly. The muzzle of a gun shoved her back down, and a soft whimper of desperation left her lips.

The fear that had held me in a daze shot away as quickly as the silence that clouded my mind with nothing but the grim reaper barking at the cage. I tipped my head back and studied the hook in the beam above me.

“And how do you expect to get away with this?” I asked as a guttural chuckle full of what little self-control I had left bubbled in my throat.

“What?” O’Connor asked, and I shot a steely gaze in his direction.

“Two dead bodies with me, my parents, my mawmaw, and yes, those people that call

themselves Colette's parents as witness to your torture and murders? How do you expect to get away?" I tugged at the thick, metal links looped around my wrist, and the hook in the ceiling groaned softly.

O'Connor closed his eyes and smiled to himself. "There was a point to buying up all the things I had. Money buys. And with all the money and power I have, I've chartered myself a cushy little flight to one of those beautiful countries that don't have any extradition treaties with the United States." His shoulders dropped as he looked back at me.

"You know, it just dawned on me," he added.

"What's that?" I asked as my heart raced in my chest. With a tingle along my elbows, the familiar sign of adrenaline finally made its appearance. I only lost myself for a moment, but the real Ford, the one who'd spent fifteen years honing the skill of dealing death at a moment's notice, had never truly left.

"You don't have that luxury, do you?" He ripped the knife from the box and stepped toward me. "I truly am a lucky man. It'll be so easy to pin this on a Navy SEAL who got rejected by the woman he loves, and went into a fit of rage where he murdered the woman who turned him down and their daughter."

O'Connor squatted down in front of me and dragged the flat end of the blade across my cheek. Blood from the wound painted the knife as he pulled it away and stood up. Pacing back across the room, he stopped beside the stack of cinder blocks and leaned against the concrete.

"Well, I better get started since the State Police will be here in the morning." O'Connor leaned his head back and laughed a maniacal laugh that shook some dust on the floor his fancy dress shoes left footprints on.

“That’s right, another win for those of us with power and money. Your little local sheriff’s department that I paid off warned me. Which is why I had to bump up the plans to tonight and ruin your little daddy/daughter date.” He set the bloodied knife down on the top cinder block and gave me a petulant sigh. “Oh, and sorry about your family’s restaurant. But you know, I had to get you guys separated somehow. Plus, that was and still is my first cover story. It’s like the cherry on top of ruining you and your family.”

His eyes narrowed as he stood upright and brushed the concrete dust from his suit coat sleeve. “You’re awfully quiet for someone who is about to watch the woman he loves and his daughter get murdered.” O’Connor pursed his lips and in a baby voice said, “Too much for a big, bad, traumatized Navy SEAL to handle?”

A crackle in my ear sent a shiver down my spine.

And I grinned.

Fina-fucking-ly.

Chapter 35

FORD

O’Connor stiffened, and his brows pinched together. “Why...Why are you smiling like that?”

“You know, I always thought it was cliché when the bad guy in every fucking movie would give some long monologue about why they’re doing this. Do you guys get off on that shit or something?” I asked.

His eyes darted to the screen where Colette and Azelie remained kneeling and

hunched over, then back to me. “I don’t get it. I just explained why you’re here and what’s going to happen. You’re about to watch me torture and kill Colette and Azelie, and you’re smiling. I—”

“It was such a cringey monologue, too,” I continued and subtly wrapped my hands around the chain. Not much, but the fucker had left just a smidge of slack if I sat up a little straighter. Enough slack that would do the trick. “Did you copy half your lines from some fucking movie or something? Is this your first time being the bad guy?”

“What the hell is going on?” O’Connor cried out.

The comm in my ear crackled. “We got everything,” Dom said. “You’re clear to engage, Tank.”

“What’s going on,” I began and jerked on the chain with every ounce of sheer strength and force I could muster. The muscles in my back and shoulders burned with the strain as the cold links bit into my wrists. The cinder blocks scraped against the floor with a gravelly groan. More. I needed more.

Sweat dripped from my brow as I locked sights with O’Connor. “Is I fucking knew this entire time,” I finished and jerked again with every ounce of my weight. With a little advantage from the angle of the chain and the traction from the gritty concrete floor below me, the cinder blocks hoisted further off the ground and swung.

Directly into O’Connor’s side.

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He stumbled to the ground as the wood above me groaned. Splinters cracked, and dust rained to the floor as the hook shifted with a metallic screech. I grinned through the sweat and blood from my cheek that had tracked into the corner of my mouth. One final push with adrenaline, I surged to my feet. Every fiber in my body screamed at me as my spine bowed to the pressure, but I closed my eyes, hooked a leg on top of the slack in the chains, and with a savage grunt slammed down against the slack.

Tension dissipated from the chain as the hook wrenched free from the rotted beam. Links splattered against the ground around me with a hiss as cinder blocks crashed to the ground. The warehouse walls rattled with a boom. Boxes and crates tumbled from the force, and dirt exploded like a plume from a grenade.

“Woah,” Azelie gasped from the laptop, barely audible through the ruckus.

With the chain caught between my shin and the ground, I braced against the thigh of my supporting leg and pried the loop around my wrist apart. He should’ve used actual cuffs. I glanced over my shoulder just as the faces of Mikey and Scottie appeared on the sides of the laptop screen. Colette smiled and waved as Scottie helped Azelie to her feet.

“All good here,” Mikey stated with a wink, and the shaking laptop clattered to the floor.

My attention immediately returned to the groaning frame of a disheveled man pushing himself out of the dust. Ignoring the trembling in my legs and the roaring burn in my muscles, I stood upright and watched the writhing figure push himself to his knees.

“What—” O’Connor coughed and rocked back on his heels. Dust coated his suit, and his gelled hair stood up in random places as a thick layer of dirt and grime covered his face. “What do you mean you knew?”

I stalked forward and shook out the tingling numbness from my hands, itching for him to attempt something. Anything. “I mean, I clocked your real plans weeks ago. I made the connection of Maria to you a while ago. Plus, I found one friend in the sheriff’s department who tipped me off about the state police’s arrival being tomorrow, too. Our plan was set in motion before I left for the dance. You should’ve checked me for a comm when I was passed out.” I tapped my right ear and winked with a tip of my head. “Technically, you also never actually kidnapped Colette or Azelie. My team got there first.”

O’Connor stopped attempting to brush the dust from his thighs. “First? First when?”

“Every fucking time. Do you not realize how easily I could’ve fought off the men you sent to the school? By myself? How easily I could’ve escaped with Azelie? I let those three men corner me. I knew the door hadn’t shut behind Azelie at the school and let the doctor drug me. I let them take me to you. The moment some of your other men showed up to kidnap Colette from the house, and my parents from the restaurant, yeah, my team knew that was going to happen. You’re not the smartest target we’ve dealt with. Azelie ran outside of the high school, straight into Scottie who was waiting for her with Jane, Kat, and Colette because they got her away to safety. Because I knew.” I leaned forward directly in front of his face and glared at him.

Tapping the comm in my ear, I grinned. “My team recorded everything you said, and yes, not just audio, but visuals too, because Mikey turned on the camera in this laptop you put in here. We knew about this warehouse. Out front waiting for us are my parents and my mawmaw, and unfortunately, Colette’s parents, too, yes. My team got there first. Dom. Griffin. Bernie. They’re all waiting out there where you’ll be joining the rest of your bound and properly shackled men. I played a role to get you to

confess. Azelie played a role. We all did.”

He swallowed shakily and leaned away. “You—You—”

I bent down and got directly in his face. “You should’ve never tried to fuck with my family,” I snarled.

“You’re not overseas! You’ll be charged—arrested—you’ll—” he stammered and backpedaled away from me.

“For what? I was kidnapped and tortured by you. You confessed to burning my parents’ restaurant down, and to your plans to murder Colette and Azelie. I never even touched you. All the state police will find is their target, AKA you, zip tied and gagged with all the evidence of what you did and your remaining cronies waiting for them.” I stood up straight, towering over him as my shadow fell upon his body. “I know I’m not overseas, O’Connor. But you tried to touch the woman I love, who yes, will eventually be my wife. And you don’t touch my wife.”

Adrenaline pumped hot through my veins as the world shifted to a shade of red around me. “You should be glad we’re not overseas. There wouldn’t be a body left if we had been. Luckily, you’ll just spend the rest of your life in prison, because if I ever catch wind that you’re on this side of bars again, if you ever even attempt to pin any of this on me, you can guarantee I’ll become the monster you only think I am.”

He squeaked and scrambled backwards again.

Another psychotic chuckle bubbled in my throat. “I may not have a lot of money, O’Connor, but I’m way more fucking powerful than you could ever imagine to be, and I’m a hell of a lot richer. Money can’t buy the kind of rich I am.” I kicked some dust his way, and he coughed. “Next time, I won’t be so fucking nice. Now, stand your ass up and let’s go outside. Don’t even bother trying to run or escape or do

something like that, it won't do you any good."

O'Connor studied me for half a second as the swaying yellow glow flashed back and forth across his face. And for a moment, I saw her. Maria had the same intensity in her gaze, though her eyes were a deep brown while his were blue. O'Connor pushed himself cautiously to his feet, and I stepped back to give him room to rise.

"I've never forgotten her, you know," I muttered as he attempted to brush dust from his suit pants. "You're the first person who's spoken her name to me in years, but I never forgot her."

O'Connor's gaze softened, and for a moment I believed I saw a smidge of regret and guilt flash across his eyes.

"Even when I made the connection and shared the news with my team, somehow none of them ever needed to say her name during recon and mission prep," I continued, and O'Connor's bottom jaw trembled. "I still carry the picture of us from that tour when I head out on a mission. It makes me feel like she's there, and somehow, I don't worry about getting killed. If Santiago is with me, nobody can touch me. I put in for the interservice transfer from the Marine Corp to the Navy to pursue being a SEAL so what happened to us, and the rest of the men that had been out with us and didn't make it home, wouldn't happen again. I know the only reason I wasn't blown apart like everyone else when that fucking IED went off near us and should've killed both of us, was because she managed to shove us out of the way in the nick of time."

His brows furrowed, and he scanned me up and down. "She managed to move you?"

I chuckled and ran the back of my hand across the dried blood on my cheek. "I was quite a bit skinnier back then."

O'Connor's shoulders slumped. "That's why it took me a minute to recognize you in person, even though I was waiting for you. You don't look like the picture Maria had." He took a cautious step toward me as a tear streaked down his cheek and left a stain in the dirt. "Did you... Did you love her?"

Scanning the wreckage, my heart stilled in my chest. "Yes," I stated and watched as the man in front of me crumpled beneath his grief. "Not in the way I love Colette, but yes. I did love her. She became the sister I never had."

Sobs wracked O'Connor's chest as he bent forward and placed a hand on his chest. Despite all of the pain and damage he'd had delivered to me, he'd also brought me home. He'd reconnected me with Colette and introduced me to my own daughter. Bridges I'd thought were fully burned had been rebuilt, and my family I'd made had met the family I'd been raised with.

He'd lost everything. Misguided anger and hate had driven him to become the shell of a man that Maria had once talked about.

"The moment I graduated from BUD/S, I went to the cemetery. My biggest regret is that I'll never be able to go back and change that day. That I'll never be able to introduce her to the people I love. To my family. I'll never be able to rewind time and be able to answer that phone call. I would've without hesitation," I finished.

He lifted his head. Eyes swollen and puffy, with stains down both cheeks, he slowly nodded. "Please don't ever forget her," he whispered and stood upright. With a brush down a sleeve, he walked past me toward the only door.

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I watched him go, knowing that the rest of my team was waiting out front.

There was no way I'd ever forget Maria. She was my first friend when I'd left and became my sister, similar to Scottie. She'd made me feel normal and given me the courage to become something more. It had been her idea for me to go for the SEALs.

Maybe I should've spoken about her sooner, talked to someone sooner, or even attempted to reach out to her parents. But something had held my tongue, as if speaking of her memory would cause me to lose them. So, I'd merely carried a picture and her spirit with me through everything I'd done.

With a deep inhale, I shook my head and turned around. Despite the ache in my muscles and the exhaustion from the finality of this insane fucking chapter, I wandered through the warehouse and shoved open the door.

A smile spread upon my lips at the sight. A row of dumbasses sat in front of the rundown metal building. They were all zip-tied both around their wrists and ankles, with gags in their mouths and hard gravel beneath them. Robert O'Connor sat quietly in the middle with a thumb drive sitting in his lap.

Standing in a line across from them were almost all the people I cherished most in my life—plus Colette's parents, who stood awkwardly off to the side. I shook my head as Scottie slung an arm around Mikey's waist and he pulled her against his side. Jane beamed with pride up at Griffin, who looked to have lost a few years in age. As if this anticlimactic ending had brought some life back into him—we all knew he wasn't entirely cut out for retirement.

Bernie tossed an arm around Kat's shoulders as she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth and I assumed was regaling the tale of helping Scottie, Colette, and Jane at the high school with Azelie. He was grinning from ear to ear as she bounced from foot to foot.

My mawmaw was chatting up Dom, who shot me a glance that read "help me." I merely chuckled as she dragged his attention back to her. My parents stood hand in hand, quietly surveying the scene behind my mawmaw and Dom.

All that was missing was Duncan.

"Dad!" Azelie shouted and darted away from Colette's side.

I stared at her as she crashed into me and wrapped her arms around my waist. That was the second time she'd called me her dad. Warmth buzzed within me as I hugged her back and glanced up at Colette.

She smiled. Soft and inviting, sweeter than honeysuckle in the summer, and slowly made her way over toward me. Red curls bounced against her rosy cheeks, highlighted in the soft glow of the silver moonlight. Her bright green gaze held steady with mine, capturing my soul within its longing embrace.

We'd so quickly gone from not sure what was happening between us, to saying we loved each other, that I'd so casually expressed it as if it didn't hold the weight that it did. If anything in our plans had gone wrong, she may have not been here after.

"That was so bad-ass," Azelie said, muffled against my torso.

Suddenly, her head shot back, and she stared up at me. "Sorry, I know I'm not supposed to cuss," she quickly added.

I smiled down at her. “I think this one time can be an exception. You handled things very well.”

“My acting was so good, wasn’t it?” She smiled as Colette stopped just an arm’s length away from us.

“Very believable,” I said, studying the woman I loved.

“Is this what you guys do all the time?” Azelie asked.

“Eh, some of it. Usually, there’s less pretending involved and a lot more violence and—”

“Ford,” Colette quickly inserted.

Azelie rolled her eyes. “Mom, I’ll be fifteen next week.”

“You’re not an adult yet,” Colette stated as Azelie stepped out of my embrace.

She pursed her lips and cocked a hip, looking so much like her mom. “I watched you literally get knife-fighting lessons from Mikey and use it against one of the dudes who tried to kidnap me at the school. I think some of the sheltering you’re still trying to do is no longer necessary,” Azelie countered.

I pulled my lips between my teeth and looked everywhere except for at the two women in front of me.

“Go talk to your grandparents or something,” Colette instructed.

“Yes, ma’am,” Azelie grumbled, and I returned my attention to those two as Azelie marched away. Gravel crunched beneath her shoes. She kept her arms crossed and

her chin lifted to the sky. I couldn't help but grin.

"She's exactly like you," I stated, and Colette gently slapped my arm. "Ow," I added, rubbing the sore spot.

With a roll of her eyes, she stepped directly in front of me and looked up at me. The tension left her figure, and the stars twinkling above were as soft as her gaze. "I can't wait to hear about Maria. She seemed to have meant a lot to you."

"I wish you could've met her. She was the sister I never had." I reached forward and gently tucked her coarse curls behind her ear. "You also handled all of that shit well. I almost believed those tears."

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A gentle chuckle left her mouth. “You gave me good instructions. I believed your fear. It was incredible to watch, and a little scary how...good you guys all are at all that shit. I wasn’t entirely sure how you were going to get out of there on your own. But then you turned into some modern-day superhero.”

My cheeks burned a little warm because for a moment the fear had been real. If anything in the plan had gone wrong... “That’s probably the nicest compliment you’ve ever given me. But it was just about leverage and angles, and I had help from some adrenaline.”

Her smile deepened as my gaze flickered down to her plump lips. “Thank you for coming home. And for never giving up on me, even though I certainly didn’t make it easy. I love you, Ford Thibodeaux, and I always will.”

“I love you too, Cher, and I always have,” I replied with a gentle whisper.

She rocked onto her tip toes as I scooped her into my embrace.

And she kissed me.

No other kiss ever experienced was as gentle and caring as this one. It spoke words that would never need to be shared and patched together anyfinal holes missing between us. It mended the shattered pieces of my heart and broke down those walls that caged away what little light remained within me.

She’d seen me. For I was now. She hadn’t shied away during my crazy explanations of the plan. She hadn’t shut me down or left or frozen at what was going to be

required of her. Instead, she'd accepted it and played her part well.

She knew all of me—the good, the bad, and the devil that I danced with on the daily. Yet she stayed. She wanted me and loved me.

I smiled against her swollen lips. In fact, it seemed she was and always had been just as crazy as I was.

Chapter 36

COLETTE

It had been years since I'd seen the Thibodeauxs' house this busy. The sizzle of a crawfish boil in the back danced behind chatter from people who had turned into family in the span of the week. Plus, half the town was here in celebration of Azelie's birthday. I leaned against the railing of the back porch and watched as she cuddled up against Cory with eyes full of stars, and narrowed my gaze.

I knew that look. It was the same one I'd given Ford for a year before our relationship escalated from simple make-out sessions to more, and I wasn't about to see our daughter fall into the same pattern. Though, if I had to admit, I wouldn't change a thing.

Here we were, happy and together again. Officially together. With O'Connor out of the picture, things had gone back to the regular small-town gossip. Police statements were done, and the destruction he'd brought had barely been a thought since.

I'd taken over the clinic full time, and whether from guilt or what, my parents also agreed to expand their little restaurant, and Ford's parents now served their menu from the same kitchen. It actually helped profits, and within the week, business for both of them was booming.

Our house wasn't quite rebuilt, but it was Ford's late-night confession yesterday that weighed heavily on my mind. I'd pursued being a doctor because everywhere in the country needed doctors, and that meant I could follow him everywhere. I loved my home here in the bayou, but when he mentioned that we should buy a home together, he'd also added that he wouldn't mind being closer to the guys on his team.

Luckily, the options were small towns in Idaho and the bordering state of Montana, but it wasn't the South. It meant going somewhere I'd never been before in a place I'd never thought of. Yet, the excitement that fluttered in my chest every time it crossed my mind only grew.

It was a big decision, and one we wouldn't make without also consulting Azelie, considering her entire life was here, and a specific boy, but Ford had seemed to almost outgrow this place, and maybe I had too.

This would always be home, and we'd always have a place to come back to. But spreading our wings and living somewhere else sounded thrilling.

Mostly because it would be with Ford.

I smiled as the big oaf himself walked out the back door with a massive platter of what I guessed was his mawmaw's steaming gumbo and over to his dad, who waited with the crawfish boil. Turk patted him on the back and said something; Azelie scowled at him as he "accidentally" bumped into Cory and separated the two teenagers momentarily.

There was my heart. My world.

A booming laugh startled me as Bernie stepped out from the house and shouted some dumbass thing at Ford. All Ford did was flip him off and curse him out in Cajun-French without even looking back at him. And Kat, Jane, and Scottie giggled behind

Bernie. They were wonderful. Over the past week, we'd become close, and for the first time in years, I actually enjoyed girls' nights.

Even with Mikey, Griffin, and Dom. It felt like we'd always known each other. They were as much family as Ford was, or Azelie. I understood why Ford enjoyed their company, even when they said shitty things or their humor turned extremely dark. I loved this. I wanted more of this. Even more so, I loved seeing Ford in his element. He was the man I knew with his team. Witty and full of life in a way I'd never seen with anyone else except for me.

A shadow fell beside me, and I smiled up at Ford. A cut-off T-shirt and a pair of shorts showed off the tattoos that covered half of his body, which reminded me that I still had no idea why he'd decided to design them that way.

"Why only the right side of your body?" I blurted out and slid my gaze down to his ankles.

"For what? The tattoos?" He faced me directly, and I nodded. "Well, because I was saving the side closest to my heart for when you became my present and future."

My heart pattered softly in my chest as his words softly fell in the summer breeze. Despite the crowded back porch, it was as if we were in our own little bubble. There were just the two of us. "But there was no guarantee," I muttered and raised a hand.

"I knew that," he replied as I slid my fingers along his arm. Goosebumps danced beneath my touch on his skin as I traced art that I hadn't seen in years.

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“I painted yesterday,” I quietly whispered as my fingers found the back of his hand. He turned his palm up and let me glide across roughened calluses that brought calm back to my spirit. “It’s not very good, but I haven’t felt the desire to paint in fifteen years,” I quickly added as heat rushed to my cheeks.

His gaze tracked the swirls of my fingers against his palm, but he remained silent. Everything faded around me. There was the sizzle of the crawfish boil and gentle slurp of water as a gator bellowed upon its surface. Birds squawked as the thick plants of the swamp blossomed with insects and critters of all sorts.

Silence as gentle as a feather slipped between us. He disappeared for a moment and brought back two beers. This was everything that I’d been waiting for, and as his eyes watched the crowd around us, I knew that this was everything for him too.

Not with the people from a town he hadn’t been to in fifteen years, but with the men he willingly protected at the risk of his life. His parents came and casually chatted with us for a bit, and of course, his mawmaw joined us for a while as well. He loved them. It was obvious by the way he spoke and interacted with them.

But every time one of his buddies came over, there was something deeper. Something more shared between them. I barely understood half of the jokes they shared, but seeing him light up as if he was carefree once more was worth it all.

Except for when they spoke of one name—Duncan. I hadn’t heard that name before, but there was a solemnity about them when they spoke of him. And they talked about him in past tense. Without wanting to insert myself where I wasn’t invited, I remained quiet. There was an ache that twinged through my heart as Ford’s body

stiffened each time they shared something about Duncan. Whoever he was, he'd meant a lot to everyone on that team.

And during a lull, Ford voluntarily shared with me who Duncan was.

He closed his eyes and slowly blew air out of his lips. "He would've loved it here. Always preferred the warmer, humid climates. Plus, he was the only one who could handle how spicy I really liked to cook. I always had to tone it down for everyone else. Well, except Dom, too, but I mean, he's a southern boy, so that's expected." Ford chuckled lightly and glanced down at me.

"He sounded like a wonderful man," I gently replied.

Ford nodded, his gaze distant. "He was. He really was."

That grief they shared would never go away. I knew that. It wouldn't just appear during times of sadness, but would mix in with the happy moments as well. Sorrow would show up not just in the sharing of memories they had with him, but in times when they wished he were here with them.

And I knew. At that moment, I knew that we couldn't stay here, no matter how much I may have wanted to.

"I'll miss this," I mindlessly muttered.

His brows stitched together, and he slipped his hand in mine. "Miss what? Where are you going?"

I giggled to myself and looked up from his massive palm. "Us. We're going."

The creases deepened on his face as confusion tightened the lines that I absolutely

adored on him. He opened his mouth to speak.

“We’re going somewhere?” Azelie inserted before he managed to make a sound.

We both glanced to our right as our daughter skipped up holding a root beer and eyes full of wonder.

“I think we are,” I continued and looked back at Ford as he shrugged, just as confused as Azelie. His gaze turned to me as he threaded his fingers through mine. “You’ve outgrown this place, Ford. In a good way. You can’t stay here. And I don’t want to live without you. We have to go. As long as Azelie is okay with it too.”

“Go where? Like move out of Willow Roux?” Azelie gasped as Ford tipped his head and kept his gaze locked with mine. They burned with questions and excitement.

I offered him a hesitant smile.

“I don’t know how much of growth another small town is, though,” Ford muttered.

“What’s going on? What small town? Some other place in Louisiana?” Azelie inserted.

“You can say no, Azelie. You’ve grown up here, and we don’t want to take you away from your grandparents and Cory and the life that you’ve built,” I explained and finally tore my gaze away from Ford.

“You’re not talking about staying close, are you? You’re not talking about a vacation or something. You’re talking about moving. Permanently.” Her eyes darted between Ford and me. She brushed some hair stuck to her neck from the humidity as her brows raised.

“We’d find a house somewhere in Idaho or Montana. Closer to the rest of my team,” Ford explained. “But we know you finally got things going with Cory and—”

“Are you kidding me?” Azelie clapped her hands together. “I can find another boyfriend. Literally since you showed up, things have been so exciting, and I don’t want to miss out on that.” She spun in a circle.

Ford casually threw his arm around my shoulders and pulled me closer toward him.

She paused and smiled up at him in a way I’d never seen her grin at anyone else. Her eyes sparkled as if she were staring at her biggest hero, and for a moment, she wasn’t fifteen, she was one again and just barely learning to walk.

“Plus, I finally have my dad,” Azelie said.

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The mask on Ford's face that hid away whatever he was feeling pixelated as if a computer program failed. His eyes misted over, and he swallowed stiffly. Within a second, he ran a hand over his unshaven face, and just like that, he was back to the man who let nothing affect him.

"You sure 'bout this?" he asked and cleared his throat. "Seriously, I know I've been teasing you about Cory, but he's a good kid."

"Eh. I'm fifteen, Dad. Besides, if it's meant to be, we'll find each other again. Maybe we'll try long distance since we'll be back to visit a lot. Or, maybe I'll fall for some cowboy wherever we end up living." Dimples deepened in her cheeks with her smile. "Apparently, Bernie has a brotherwho—"

"Absolutely not." Ford immediately shook his head and crossed his arms. "I will not be related to that motherfucker, no matter how much I love Raiden. That'll just be another thing that'll go to Bernie's already massive head."

I threw my head back and laughed as a vein popped in Ford's forehead.

Azelie wiggled her brows. "See, I heard Raiden broke up with his girlfriend a few weeks ago."

"Yeah, we're gonna move to Idaho. We'll go live by Griffin and Jane. Mikey and Scottie are closer to them anyway. Montana is out," Ford stated and shook his head.

Azelie grinned even wider and batted her lashes. "I also heard that Montana—"

“Nope. Absolutely not,” Ford reiterated.

I shook my head as the chuckle died in my throat. “We’ll talk about this later. Right now, go enjoy being with your friends. We’ll bring out your cake soon.”

“Yeah. Go be with Cory. He’s a good dude. I like this whole long-distance idea. We’ll fly back often to visit. A lot of times. Frequently. How about every time I’m out on orders, you guys come stay with my mom and pops? Besides, I bet your parents will appreciate it because it’ll give them plenty of opportunities to continue to try and repair their relationship with you guys,” Ford blurted out as if he were unable to control his thoughts and words.

I patted his arm and sighed. “Sounds like an excuse to avoid my parents on your end.”

His eyes narrowed. “Possibly. I never said I was going to try and have a relationship with them.”

Azelie giggled, and her sundress swayed in the breeze as she skipped away. We watched her go with excitement buzzing in the air, but in my heart, there was nothing but peace. I never would’ve guessed how much life would change in such a short period of time. I would’ve never believed it. But here I was, with the love of my life and our daughter, making plans for the future. Plans that involved all of us.

“I’ll miss the spider lilies. You know they’re my favorite,” I said and leaned up against Ford.

He smiled, slid his arm around me, and tipped his face up to the sun in the sky. “Good thing I get to take mine with me.”

I studied his face. The weight that had been on him when he first arrived seemed lessened. The crinkles at the corners of his eyes deepened with a soft smile, and my

heart fluttered like I was sixteen and just starting out on this insane journey with him. Yet, here we were, with a lifetime of memories behind us and a lifetime more to make.

He was my best friend, my lover, and the greatest blessing to have ever waltzed back into my life.

Plus, this time, he came with a hell of a lot more family, and I loved it. “By the way, the girls were talking about Kat’s friend, Emma.”

Ford glanced down at me. “What about her?”

“Apparently, she’s Dom’s type and—”

“You too? You don’t need to get involved in their meddling shit they like to do.” He pursed his lips, but his eyes sparkled.

“Okay, but here’s the thing,” I continued, and he shook his head.

“Cher, I love you. But I ain’t gonna get involved in this. Go gossip with the girls or something,” he said and smiled.

“I love you too, you big oaf,” I answered with a smile.

And there was nothing that could happen that would change that.

Not even death.

THE END... sort of