



Before the Night Falls

Author: *Christy Barritt*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: The roses are back. And so is the fear.

TV personality Olivia Montgomery thought her nightmare was over.

One year ago, she escaped the clutches of “The Admirer,” a serial killer who left roses as his calling card. A serial killer who kept her in darkness. The monster who was shot and killed by police.

At least, that’s what everyone believes.

When a dozen red roses arrive at her door, Olivia’s hard-won peace shatters. Her nightmare can’t be happening again.

Fitness guru Tyson Stone never expected the spunky reporter assigned to his forty-day health program would bring danger to his doorstep. Now he’s determined to protect her, even as his own problems haunt him. But the closer the two grow, the more he realizes this isn’t just about saving her life—it’s about discovering what’s worth fighting for.

As the roses continue to appear and the killer’s deadline approaches, Olivia must decide whom she can trust. Because this time, she knows exactly what awaits when the night falls. This time, she might not survive her worst nightmare.

Total Pages (Source): 65

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:55 am

PROLOGUE

The darkness suffocated her.

It closed in until Olivia could see nothing else. If only she had a ray of light, a ray of hope . . . but she didn't. She only had this blinding abyss of despair.

She pulled against the ropes that bound her wrists to the wall. The concrete floor felt cold and damp beneath her. A chill crept into her chest and rattled every time she drew in a breath.

The damp scent of the earth mingled with the sickly-sweet perfume of roses The Admirer always brought with him.

Roses shouldn't be in this underground prison. They belonged in sunlight, in gardens, on the sets of The Inside Scoop with Olivia , where she interviewed celebrities under bright lights. Not here where the flowers' scent was twisted into something sinister.

No one was around to help her—except the monster who put her here. The monster who began his countdown with twelve perfect roses delivered to her door. Ten the next week. Eight after that.

His calling card became clear too late. By the time the bundle of four roses appeared inside her network dressing room, even her viewers had noticed her jumpiness on air.

The police had nodded sympathetically when she finally went to them. But without evidence of a threat, there wasn't much they could do.

“Flowers aren’t a crime, Ms. Montgomery,” the detective had said, scribbling notes she suspected would never be read again.

Then the two roses appeared on her car.

The single rose appeared on her nightstand. In her locked apartment.

It came with a note: Finally.

Now she was here.

Each day, the door to her prison would creak open, and The Admirer would enter carrying fresh roses. Always roses.

Olivia never saw his face. Only the porcelain Casanova mask he wore—white and expressionless with hollow eyes that revealed nothing of the man behind it.

She remembered him sitting across from her, trimming roses with silver shears that caught the light from the single bulb overhead. His voice was distorted when he spoke, almost sounding mechanical.

“I’ve admired watching you on TV for years. The way you connect with celebrities, draw out their secrets. You have a gift.” The mask tilted slightly. “I’ve been watching The Inside Scoop since the first episode. I knew you were special when you interviewed Preston James. You asked him about his divorce with such compassion. You understood his pain.”

“Please,” she whispered, her voice cracking. “Please, don’t turn off the light when you leave.”

The mask regarded her silently, head cocked like a curious bird. “The darkness

frightens you.” It wasn’t a question. “Yet you face the harsh lights of television studios daily. You navigate the shadowy world of celebrity with such confidence.”

“Please,” Olivia repeated, hating the weakness in her voice. “Stay. Talk to me.”

“You want me to stay?” The mask couldn’t smile, but she heard it in his voice—pleasure, triumph. “They never want me to stay.”

By “they,” he meant the other women. The ones who hadn’t survived. There were at least six she knew of. Each had died after being in captivity, their throats slit . . . as if they’d been roses being pruned.

Her blood went colder.

After that, he came daily, always with roses. Always wearing the mask. Always sharing stories of his “admiration.”

He told Olivia how he’d tracked her career from back when she’d started as a local reporter in Baton Rouge to her breakthrough hosting the People’s Choice Awards two years ago.

He told her how proud he’d been when *The Inside Scoop* became the highest-rated entertainment show in its time slot. How he’d collected every magazine that featured her. Every interview she’d given.

“People think roses are delicate,” he told her on the fifth day, arranging a fresh bouquet in a vase he placed just beyond her reach. “But they’re survivors. They endure through winter, through drought. They protect themselves with thorns.” The mask turned toward her. “You’re like that too, Olivia. Your life hasn’t been easy. Your father leaving to cook for the ‘admiring masses’ instead of his family. Your struggles in those early reporting jobs. But you survived. You thrived. That’s why I

chose you.”

Brian Elliot—she would learn his name only after her escape—had the lean build of someone who spent hours tending gardens somewhere aboveground. His hands bore the calluses and small scars of his work.

Olivia never saw his face, but she memorized those hands. The way they moved when he spoke about her. The way they tightened on the shears when he grew excited.

On day six, he brought his scrapbook—newspaper clippings about the other women who’d died.

“These women . . . they weren’t right,” he’d explained as he turned the pages. “They didn’t appreciate beauty the way you do. The way we do.”

The smell of roses had become unbearable by then. Each time he visited, he brought fresh ones. Each time he left, Olivia was plunged into darkness with only the flowers’ cloying scent for company.

By the evening of the ninth day, she’d memorized his routine—the precise times he’d visit, the exact moment he’d turn his back to arrange the latest roses he’d brought.

By day ten, Olivia had worked one hand free from the restraints.

When he bent to position a bloom in the vase, she’d brought the handle of the garden shears down hard against the back of his skull. Not enough to kill—she couldn’t bring herself to do that—but enough to run.

She’d used the shears to free her other wrist. Then she’d staggered three miles through dense woods. Even though he’d brought her sandwiches to eat, she was still

weak. But adrenaline propelled her onward.

Finally, she'd found a highway. Her feet had become bloodied and her wrists raw.

A trucker had spotted her and called 911.

By the time police reached Elliot's property, he'd barricaded himself in. He'd claimed it was all a mistake, a misunderstanding.

The standoff lasted four hours. When the FBI had finally breached Elliot's home, he'd pulled out a gun. The police had no choice but to shoot.

Even now, two months after Olivia had escaped, she still couldn't look at flowers without smelling the damp earth of that cellar. Without hearing his voice behind that blank mask explaining patiently: "Do you know what makes roses bloom so beautifully, Olivia? It's the pruning. Cutting away makes them stronger."

Now, Olivia sat in her therapist Lyle Strassel's office and stared at the New York skyline. People hurried past on the sidewalks below. Traffic crawled by.

Life continued just like it always had. Normal people living normal lives.

"How do you feel?" Lyle, a man in his mid-fifties with thinning brown hair and thick glasses, leaned forward to look Olivia in the eye.

Olivia slid up from her position on the couch and reached for her forehead. Her vision was fuzzy and her head heavy from recounting the story with Lyle.

"Like I'm trapped in a past I can't escape from." The view from Lyle's office normally helped ground her, but not today. Today, Olivia felt as if she were about to tumble from the edge.

“The Admirer can’t hurt you anymore.” Lyle’s voice was soft but confident.

“It doesn’t matter. He already did enough damage to last a lifetime.” Olivia’s words sounded dry and forced.

She swallowed, trying to hold back tears. She’d already shed too many over what had happened. The man who’d done this to her didn’t deserve any more of her thoughts or energy.

Of course, he was dead now. His suffering had been short and sweet.

Olivia, on the other hand, had to live with hers for the rest of her life.

“You can get through this,” Lyle said. “You just have to be prepared.”

“How?”

“When you know night is falling soon, what do you do? You prepare. You turn on lights to see your path. You start a fire to keep warm. It’s the same with our emotional darkness.”

“So I need a plan.”

“Yes, I’m giving you the tools you need.”

She nodded slowly.

“Remember you’re not alone,” Lyle said. “I can help you heal from your wounds. It just takes time.”

Two months of therapy so far, and the nightmares hadn’t gotten any better. In her

dreams, the mask was still watching. Still counting down with roses.

How much time would it take to feel safe again? What if she never regained that feeling?

Olivia picked up her purse from beside the leather couch.

“Remember your assignment for the week?”

“Face my fears,” Olivia repeated, her voice void of emotion, making her sound like a recording. “Don’t pretend like I’m okay if I’m not. Open up more about my feelings with people I trust.”

But facades are what I do best, she wanted to argue. After all, who would ever believe she’d given her life to Christ if they knew the fear she lived in?

If anyone found out how tortured she felt, they’d expose her for being a fraud. She was supposed to live with a peace that passed all understanding. Instead, she existed in a state of anxiety that defied all logic.

Turning back to Lyle, Olivia put on a cheery expression and pretended like things were fine. Like the incident that had destroyed her life hadn’t affected her long-term.

Wasn’t that what everyone wanted to believe anyway? That her life was back to normal? People were comfortable with that thought—but very uncomfortable with the idea that her trauma still lurked inside her.

Besides, even if she divulged the truth, would anyone really understand?

Lyle was the only one who knew about Olivia’s nightmares.

“You’re spunky, Olivia. You’re a fighter. Everyone who watches you on TV admires your strength.” Lyle laid a hand on Olivia’s arm. “Be kind to yourself and give yourself a chance to heal.”

Olivia smiled briefly, but even that didn’t feel genuine.

Would she ever feel normal again?

Most days, the answer felt like a resounding no.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:55 am

CHAPTER ONE

ONE YEAR LATER

“You can’t be serious.” Olivia waited for her producer, Deb Stok, to grin and say, “Just kidding.”

She didn’t.

“This story will be great for your show.” Deb continued to shuffle through some papers on her desk. “Besides,” she looked up at Olivia with a twinkle in her eyes, “do you know how many other women would love the opportunity to work with Tyson Stone for forty days?”

Tyson Stone was the latest fitness guru to take the nation by storm.

The former psychologist had started a fitness frenzy after he released his book *Forty Days to a Healthy Life*. He had a face for TV, so reporters ate him up. He’d done all the talk show rounds.

That success had led to him launching a line of exercise equipment. Then a line of online exercise videos, followed by a line of protein bars and vitamin waters.

His second book had sealed his place in the exercise and fitness world.

The man was practically an enterprise now and quickly on his way to becoming a household name.

Somehow, his publicist and Deb had connected at a networking event. They'd decided it would be great to have a media personality follow Tyson's program for forty days.

Then they'd decided Tyson should be personally involved—he'd stay in his home with the participant to ensure they followed the eating and exercise program as instructed.

They'd decided that Olivia would be a perfect fit.

Only they were wrong.

“Deb, I've been working in this industry long enough not to be impressed by status.” Olivia had interviewed enough celebrities to realize they were only human like everyone else. Most had their own issues to deal with, only under an unforgiving spotlight.

“Status? Who's talking about status? I'm talking about his looks.” Deb—whose favorite topic of conversation as of late was menopause—dramatically fanned herself. “Word on the street is that Tyson is single again. If I weren't so busy, I might give myself this assignment.”

Deb came out of her drama as quickly as she entered it and began shuffling papers again.

Olivia had done many stories in her career with Static Entertainment. Mostly interviews, but she also covered events. Her favorite had always been the features. Stories highlighting the opioid epidemic in Hollywood. Stories exposing the power hungry who trampled anyone who got in their way.

This assignment was a little much—mostly because it lasted forty days.

That also meant forty days without seeing Lyle.

Those twice-weekly therapy sessions helped Olivia keep her sanity.

A year and a couple of months after her abduction and escape, Olivia's fears still overwhelmed her at times. Sometimes, she had to force herself to leave her house. She could only sleep with a nightlight—two, just in case one failed.

But the nightmares were the worst. Even though The Admirer was dead, it seemed her fear would never go away. On occasion, she felt as if someone was watching her when no one was there. Whenever she saw roses, her blood went cold. And being in the dark? It sent her into a panic.

Olivia had to get through to Deb and make her point.

Walking closer to her boss's desk, she laid a firm hand over the pile of papers Deb was working on.

Deb raised her eyes in surprise at fun-loving Olivia's unusual show of aggression.

"I hate exercising," Olivia articulated slowly and clearly. "I love foods that are bad for me. I'm not the person you want for this story."

Deb looked at her with a steady gaze, and Olivia really thought her boss was reconsidering.

Then Deb shook her head. "Face it, Olivia, you're a perfect fit. You're young and single. You're not tied down. You don't even have pets to worry about. It will be good for you to get out of the city, breathe some fresh air, and learn about fitness and nutrition."

“But—”

“I’m not changing my mind.” Deb turned toward her filing cabinet.

Olivia crossed to the other side of the desk and followed her. “It’s not that I don’t appreciate the opportunity. I do. But I don’t want to be a liability to this story. I have klutzy tendencies, Deb. Trust me. Me exercising on camera? It won’t be pretty.”

Deb turned and looked her in the eye. “You’re going. End of discussion. Your plane leaves for North Carolina tomorrow at nine a.m. Chandler and Wes are going with you.”

Chandler Cain was a producer, and Wes Marks her cameraman. She knew Wes better than Chandler, but she enjoyed working with both men. They all had a good relationship and had gone out for pizza together many nights after work.

Olivia raised an eyebrow. “Do Chandler and Wes know they’re going with me?”

“Of course.” Deb practically snorted. “They’ve known since last week. Now, stop procrastinating. Go home, and pack. And before you ask, I waited to tell you so you wouldn’t have time to come up with any valid arguments.”

Olivia swallowed back her rebuttal. Deb knew her too well.

However, once Deb got something in her mind, it was useless to try to talk her out of the idea.

“Well, if I’m going to be tortured with healthy food for weeks on end . . .” Olivia plucked a chocolate bar from the candy dish on Deb’s desk. “I’d better eat this while I still can.”

“Olivia,” Deb called as Olivia turned to leave.

She looked back over her shoulder as she ripped open the wrapper.

“You’ll do great.”

In response, Olivia bit off a huge chunk of the candy bar.

Unfortunately, the small act of defiance only made her feel marginally better.

Maybe getting away from New York would be good for her. She had so many bad memories here. Everywhere she turned, she saw reminders of The Admirer.

But how could she be around someone for forty days without letting them see her PTSD? She tried to keep it carefully hidden. Being around people for only short periods of time allowed her to do that.

But being around people nonstop for forty days?

It was out of her comfort zone. She couldn’t keep up her facade for that long . . . could she?

Like it or not, she was about to find out.

* * *

Tyson Stone glanced at the blueprints on his desk and frowned.

He still had a lot of work to do if he wanted to get the school he was building up and running.

He'd vowed not to allow himself any distractions. But when the opportunity presented itself to have a media personality try his Forty Days to a Healthy Life program, it had seemed too good of an opportunity to pass up.

The more publicity his program got, the more sales he received.

That meant he had more money to put into his nonprofit . . . and to fulfill his promise he had made to his dying grandmother.

He'd been so focused on keeping his promise lately that he'd hardly done anything other than work. It was already June, and he really wanted the school to open in just over a year—next September.

Every hour had been taken up with his work lately, despite the fact that his mom often scolded him about his workaholic habits. He preferred to think of it as being driven and focused. He was single and not tied down, so he wasn't neglecting anyone.

However, if he were honest, he'd admit that his obsession with this project had affected everything.

His social life.

His level of exhaustion.

His relationship with Claire.

The two of them had broken up a few months ago when she gave him the ultimatum: It was her or the school.

Tyson had chosen the school.

That wasn't to say the decision hadn't been hard—it had been. Claire was a wonderful woman. But being single was the best way to accomplish what Tyson needed to accomplish right now.

He sighed and glanced at his watch. At any minute, Olivia Montgomery and her crew should be arriving.

He'd seen her clips on TV, and he knew that his life was about to get very interesting.

However, he had his boundaries in place. Even though Olivia and her crew were staying at his house, he wouldn't let that interfere with his plans. He'd make sure to do the workouts and interviews with her. To fulfill all his obligations.

Then he'd focus the rest of his time on his work.

He couldn't afford to waste even a moment.

Olivia was certainly interesting. He'd done some quick research on the woman. He knew that she was fun-loving. The kind of woman who drew attention whenever she walked into a room—not just because of her porcelain skin and dark hair, but because of her smile and beguiling personality.

She was the type of person you wanted to have at a party because she brought the fun with her.

But Tyson also knew about her past. Knew about her abduction and escape from a serial killer.

As a former psychologist, he couldn't even imagine how that trauma had affected her. But on TV, she still seemed bubbly, like she'd bounced back with even more pizzazz.

When his publicist had suggested that Tyson work with her on this project, he'd known Olivia would be the right fit. She had the charisma needed to make this story interesting.

For Tyson, his health program was more than just about money. He truly did want to see people transform their lives.

He only prayed that none of his own enemies made this more complicated.

There were people who didn't want him to build this school. They'd sabotaged his building. Made threats.

He prayed those threats were empty and didn't escalate.

Hobbes, his assistant, appeared in his office doorway. "Sir, your guests are here."

Tyson closed the blueprints and nodded. "Thank you."

Then he braced himself for the next forty days, praying he wouldn't regret saying yes to this project . . . for more than one reason.

CHAPTER TWO

Olivia straightened her outfit, running her hand over her olive-green skirt and creamy beige blouse. Though her initial meeting with Tyson was meant to look natural, it was actually a carefully cultivated skit of sorts.

The fish-out-of-water storyline would hook viewers, and Deb wanted Olivia to play it up.

So she would.

Olivia and her two-man crew had already established when they'd be arriving and how the scene should play out. In show business, everything needed to be entertaining. As much as she hated staging things, sometimes it was necessary to tell the best story possible.

"Do I look okay? This humidity is wreaking havoc on my hair." She turned to her crew and tucked a wayward strand behind her ear.

Wes pulled away from the camera for long enough to say, "Darling, you look beautiful, as always."

His Texas drawl made others instantly feel he was their best friend.

Chandler hefted another camera onto his shoulder. "I know you're not excited about this assignment, but you'll do great."

Not excited would be an understatement.

Wes was thirty-years old with a Matthew McConaughey vibe. His obsession with sports and wearing baseball caps made him feel like a brother to her.

Chandler, on the other hand, was older—in his early forties—and he'd always reminded Olivia of Ben Stiller. He was married to a woman named Shelly, and the couple had two beautiful elementary-aged daughters.

If Olivia had to do this assignment, at least it was with Wes and Chandler.

She pivoted toward the sprawling estate in front of her, knowing there was no turning back now.

Tyson's home stood as an unexpected vision of the Southwest on the outskirts of Charlotte, its adobe-inspired stucco walls glowing a warm sand color against the lush Carolina greenery.

Terracotta roof tiles, deep red and weather-worn, crowned the residence, extending over generous eaves that cast dramatic shadows across the facade. The home's silhouette was an artistic composition of staggered levels and jutting wings that seemed to grow organically from the gently rolling landscape.

Massive wooden beams extended beyond the roofline, supporting covered walkways that connected various sections of the property, while wrought-iron details adorned windows framed by rustic wooden shutters.

A grand entrance courtyard, enclosed by curved stucco walls and anchored by a bubbling fountain, welcomed visitors through an impressive arched doorway flanked by blue ceramic pots overflowing with native plants—a slice of Santa Fe luxury nestled incongruously among the Southern pines.

It was a nice place to spend the next forty days. At least there was that.

Olivia paused by the front door and mumbled, “Here goes nothing.”

* * *

The moments dragged past as Olivia waited, camera behind her poised to film.

Finally, a balding man answered the door. His eyebrows twitched up when he spotted her.

“Olivia Montgomery.” He nodded at her before stepping back and extending his arm behind him to welcome her inside. “Welcome. We’ve been expecting you.”

She stepped inside. “And you are . . . ?”

“Hobbes Evans, Mr. Stone’s assistant.” He shook her hand, a vague British accent tilting his words. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“You as well.”

Olivia’s gaze drifted behind Hobbes to a man striding toward them.

Tyson Stone—just the man she was looking for.

“If it’s not Olivia Montgomery.” His deep tones resonated across the marble floor.

“The one and only.” She forced the words out of her suddenly dry throat.

The pictures hadn’t done Tyson justice. No wonder the cameras loved him.

He had an easy grin, perfect teeth, and dark-brown hair cropped close to his head. His brown eyes twinkled, his five o'clock shadow looked natural yet purposeful, and the angles of his face were pure perfection.

The man's bulging biceps didn't make him appear overproportioned, but they showed strength and self-discipline.

He observed her a moment before asking, "Did you have a nice flight?"

She pulled her gaze away from his biceps and nodded. "Decent."

"Well, I'm happy you're here. I've been getting things together so we can jump right into the program." The smile on his face was nothing but friendly. "You ready to get started?"

She hooked her arm through the air with fake enthusiasm. "I can't wait . . ."

Come on, Olivia. Sound like you mean it. Millions of viewers are counting on you.

"Especially now that you stuffed down all that Chinese food on the way here." Wes winked at her from behind the camera. Even though he was a cameraman, he was a regular on her features. Viewers liked their banter.

"And the fries," Chandler added.

"Don't forget the ice cream afterward." Wes grinned.

Olivia glanced at Tyson and saw the surprise in his eyes. She mustered even more fake enthusiasm as she said, "I am so ready for this program!"

With a chuckle, Tyson motioned for her to follow him. "I'm glad to hear that. Let's

get started.”

Three steps later, Chandler yelled, “Cut.”

Everyone relaxed as the cameras turned off.

Olivia shared a smile with Tyson. She was known for putting people at ease, making them feel comfortable. She needed to do that now also.

To put on a show.

It was what she did best.

“We spoke on the phone, but only for a few minutes,” she started. “It’s great to meet you in person.”

“Same here. I can’t wait to get you started on this program. I really think it could change your life.”

She raised her eyebrows. “I guess we’ll see about that.”

“How about you change, and we’ll jump in with our first segment in thirty?” Chandler said. “Tyson’s schedule is going to be hectic each day, so we should get as much done now as possible.”

“We don’t get a tour of this fantastic house first?” Olivia’s gaze swept the place.

“Of course.” Tyson nodded at his assistant. “I’ll let Hobbes show you around. I have a couple more things to do before we film.”

“Sounds good.”

They would all work on other things while filming. Tyson had his enterprise to run. Deb had assigned Olivia and the gang to several other stories as well.

They'd stay busy, doing workouts in the morning, eating together on occasion, and debriefing about the program.

The first segment would air next week, and Olivia would do updates via social media on how things were going in the meantime.

"If you'll follow me." Hobbes motioned toward them. "We'll bring your things in, and then I'll give you a tour."

Olivia plastered on her trademark smile.

But inside, she couldn't help but feel unsettled.

It was silly, really.

However, this morning before she'd left her apartment, she'd found a single rose petal outside her door.

It was most likely an accident. Someone had probably brought someone else flowers, and a petal had fallen off. That explanation made the most sense.

But roses were The Admirer's signature. It was how he started his reign of terror.

Now Olivia couldn't get the petal out of her mind.

Because even though Brian Elliot was dead . . . sometimes she still felt as if he haunted her from the grave.

CHAPTER THREE

Tyson went to get ready for the interview.

Just as he'd envisioned, Olivia had that wide Julia Roberts' smile. When she laughed, the motion overtook her whole body, making everyone around her want to laugh also. She was known for her banter with her cameraman and crew. It made her relatable.

But that wasn't what stayed on his mind right now.

No, he was thinking about the van he'd seen pass the street in front of his house as they spoke.

His home was located in the country, and not many people used his road. But that wasn't what had made him concerned.

It was how slowly the vehicle had driven by.

Tyson knew he was probably just being paranoid.

But lately, he'd sensed someone was keeping an eye on him.

He'd gotten threatening messages. Phone calls, texts, emails.

He hadn't expected so much resistance for this new school. But, despite his good intentions, some people were adamantly against it.

The tribal council was split.

Traditional elders had expressed concern that Tyson's modern educational vision might not adequately preserve cultural teachings and language instruction. Despite his heritage, they saw him as somewhat of an outsider.

There was also lingering skepticism from previous failed projects where outside funding disappeared midway, leaving the community with unfinished buildings and broken promises.

The proposed location itself created controversy, as it bordered land some families claimed ancestral rights to, adding a complex layer of internal politics to the situation.

Even Tyson's success had become a point of contention, with whispers that he was using the project to enhance his brand rather than genuinely serving the community. This gossip had created an emotional hurdle he had to overcome in order to gain full support.

However, perhaps his biggest hurdle was Frontier Resorts. They wanted to open another casino—on the very land where the school was being built. Another empty promise of prosperity that would leave most of the community behind.

Now, he was on edge.

He didn't necessarily worry about himself. But he worried about everyone who worked for him.

He'd never want to do anything to put them in danger.

That made having Olivia and her crew here even more complicated.

He'd considered on more than one occasion whether or not he should cancel this extended interview.

But he hadn't. Instead, he'd just upped his security measures.

He prayed that was enough.

Because this school was important to him. But people's lives were even more important, and the school would help to improve those lives.

The tension his decisions created clashed inside him.

Tyson prayed again that he didn't regret any of his choices.

* * *

After getting a tour of the house, Olivia dressed in black yoga pants and a matching tank top as she prepared for her first session with Tyson. After pulling her dark, straight hair into a neat ponytail, she was ready to go with five minutes to spare.

But first . . . she dug the nightlights out of her bag and plugged them in.

She hadn't been able to handle the dark ever since . . . ever since her experience with The Admirer.

Even in his death, he still haunted her.

She'd found out after her escape that Brian Elliot had been forty-three. His eyes—the only part of his face Olivia had seen—were cold and assessing. They never seemed to blink enough.

More than a year later, Olivia still couldn't look at flowers without seeing his eyes. Without hearing his voice explaining patiently: "Do you know what makes roses bloom so beautifully, Olivia? It's the pruning. Cutting away makes them stronger."

Sometimes, in her nightmares, he was still cutting, still counting down.

She shoved those thoughts aside.

Thinking about those things would do her no good.

She had to move on with her life, and she couldn't let that single rose petal derail the progress she'd made.

Besides, this assignment would take all her energy.

Only her newfound faith would get her through.

"Olivia, you coming?" Wes yelled from outside her room.

"I'll be right there." She tied her shoes and stood.

A moment later, she began a half-jog, half-walk down the hallway.

But she stopped short as something caught her eye before she reached the stairs.

It was a rose petal.

Another one.

On the floor.

Suddenly, everything around her began to spin.

CHAPTER FOUR

Olivia stared at the pink petal.

Her head throbbed as memories rushed back.

Though she'd tried to forget the nightmare, memories still haunted her, the smallest thing setting off panic.

Take a deep breath, she reminded herself. Lyle's voice echoed in her head.

Breathe in. Hold it. Count to five. Breathe out.

"You ready?" a deep voice said behind her.

She jumped and spun around.

Tyson stood there wearing navy-blue exercise shorts and a white T-shirt.

He studied her face and frowned. "Sorry, didn't mean to scare you."

Olivia put a hand over her heart. "Oh, I'm . . . I'm—fine. I'm fine."

"You don't sound fine."

She pointed at the petal, trying to keep the tremble from her voice. "Someone have flowers delivered recently?"

Tyson squinted before reaching down to pick up the object. “Flowers? No, I think that’s some ribbon my housekeeper used to wrap a gift for me. One of my assistants at the office had a birthday yesterday.”

Olivia let out a feeble laugh. Ribbon? Of course.

Yet she’d seen a rose petal.

Her cheeks heated when she realized her foolish overreaction.

Control your thoughts, she reminded herself. Tyson would think she’d really lost it if she didn’t let this go. She had to remain professional at all costs. The last thing she needed was people feeling sorry for her.

She cleared her throat. “That’s nice of you to get gifts for your assistants.”

He shrugged nonchalantly. “I try.”

She jabbed his shoulder. “But don’t be too much of a nice guy. I might talk you out of doing this program with me if you are.”

“Believe me—that won’t be happening.” He crossed his arms as if showing how utterly unmovable he was.

Balling her hands into fists, Olivia boxed them in front of her, ready for a fight. “I’m ready for you, Tyson Stone.”

Tyson’s smile remained. “We’re about to see what you’re made of . . .”

“Hold on.” She raised her hand. “Let’s not get carried away.”

“But that’s the fun part. Pushing our limits and finding that strength deep down inside us.”

“For you, maybe. I’m a weenie. A wimp. A physical fitness failure. A junk food junkie. I don’t think you realize what you’ve gotten yourself into.” The light-hearted banter began to relax her as she followed Tyson downstairs.

“I believe in you.” His voice sounded steady and confident—almost believable.

“You might change your mind after we get started.”

He chuckled. “I won’t. I’ve worked with all types. The key is in the desire to become fit and healthy.”

Olivia bit her tongue, deciding not to announce her disdain at this assignment. Besides, Tyson seemed so convincing . . . maybe he’d change her mind.

If nothing else, he’d taken her thoughts off that rose petal.

She was more than six hundred miles away from her home in New York.

Six hundred miles away from the grave of the monster who still haunted her even in death.

She was determined to move forward, despite what The Admirer had done to her.

* * *

Tyson tried to get the odd interaction out of his mind.

Why had Olivia looked so freaked out over that piece of ribbon? Did this have

something to do with her abduction and escape?

Probably. But he had to admit he was surprised.

The woman always seemed so collected on TV. But Tyson knew all about trauma and the various mechanisms people used to cope with it—mechanisms like putting up fronts.

Right now, he was with the crew in his gym as they set up their equipment to film.

His phone had dinged eight times already. No doubt various people who worked under him were following up about his fitness equipment, protein shakes, interviews, and other scheduled appearances. Could be his publicist checking on how things were going or his editor asking about his next book.

It was a lot to juggle.

He needed to simply turn his phone off for a while. Having technology as a constant companion could be both amazing and feel like a prison of its own.

As he reached for his cell, he skimmed the messages on his screen.

His breath caught at one of them.

Despite his resolve to ignore the messages, he clicked on that one.

His heart thrummed in his ears as he looked at it.

It was a picture of his house, possibly taken by someone in that van he'd seen driving past.

The words beneath it made his blood go cold.

Which building should we destroy? This one or the school? Your pick.

His jaw tightened.

He needed to report this to his contact at the police station.

Tyson had to take these threats seriously.

But he didn't like how they were escalating . . . especially not now that he had guests.

* * *

"I'm here in the home of Tyson Stone, fitness guru and nutritionist extraordinaire." Olivia walked across the floor of Tyson's state-of-the-art weight room, talking with ease to the camera.

The basement gym sprawled across 2,500 square feet of meticulously designed space, with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the backyard and flooding the area with natural light. The state-of-the-art equipment ranged from custom machine weights in signature colors to a comprehensive collection of specialty bars mounted on the walls like functional art.

"For the next forty days, I'm giving up my right to eat whatever I want," Olivia continued. "I'm abandoning my dislike for exercise, and I'm placing myself in this man's capable hands."

Tyson couldn't help but be impressed by Olivia. She had a real talent in front of the camera—a smooth grace and confident demeanor.

But he also couldn't get that text out of his head.

He'd already slipped away to let the detective know about it. He'd been reporting these threats to local police so he could have them on record.

"I'll be giving everyone weekly updates and showing my progress on the Forty Days to a Healthy Life program," Olivia continued. "Meanwhile, millions of viewers at home have pledged to try this program alongside me. We'll support each other throughout the process by sharing our progress on social media along with tips and daily motivational quotes. We'll share success stories, exercises, and recipes." She leaned in close to the camera. "Are you ready for this adventure? To be honest, I'm not sure I am."

She pulled out a candy bar, seemingly from thin air, and took a huge bite.

Wes snatched it from her, muttering something about accountability as Olivia made a pouty expression.

TV gold.

Olivia's comedic timing was impeccable and her demeanor friendly. She was quick to laugh—mostly at herself—and she didn't seem to take herself too seriously.

This woman would definitely add some excitement to his life—excitement he hadn't known he'd been missing. She could also be a huge distraction if he wasn't careful.

"I think we should sit down for an interview segment." Olivia's voice pulled Tyson from his thoughts. "Does that sound okay, Chandler?"

Chandler pulled his gaze away from the screen where he monitored their shots and nodded. "Sounds great. Let's keep the exercise equipment in the background."

Wes readjusted his gear to capture the new scene.

A few minutes later, Olivia sat on an exercise ball while Tyson sat on the edge of a weight bench. Olivia gave Wes a thumbs-up, and the camera light came back on.

Olivia turned to him. “Tyson, this world is full of get rich quick schemes. It seems as if more and more ‘get skinny quick’ schemes are popping up also. Can you tell us why your program doesn’t fall into that category? What sets it apart from the rest?”

“Experts say if you do something for forty days then it becomes a habit. That’s exactly what I’m aiming for with my program. I’m not emphasizing just a diet. This is about a lifestyle change. That is what makes weight loss sustainable in the long run.” Tyson watched Olivia’s expression and could have been certain he saw admiration. “Plus, this isn’t about getting skinny. It’s about getting healthy. There’s a difference.”

“And how did you develop this innovative weight loss plan?”

“When I was a practicing psychologist, I loved studying the human mind. The ties between our physical well-being and our mental state are amazing. When I figured out that normal psychology practices weren’t always effective, I searched for a better method. That’s when I came up with my plan.”

Olivia went through a few more questions. Tyson explained how the program worked and what was expected of participants.

She kept her expression animated and made snide remarks to the camera several times. She did it in a heartwarming way, a welcome relief from the stiff reporters who usually graced the TV screen.

After Wes cut the camera off, Olivia had a suggestion. “It would be funny to show a

clip of Tyson scouring my room and finding my hidden stashes of junk food in various places.”

Chandler nodded, his brows raised. “I like that idea.”

“Yeah, I can see it working for us.” Wes looked at Tyson. “You game?”

“Wait . . .” Tyson glanced at Olivia, a teasing expression on his face. “You smuggled in contraband?”

“What? You didn’t think all six of my suitcases were filled with clothes, did you?” She winked.

Tyson couldn’t help but laugh. “I should have known.”

His phone buzzed again. He’d decided not to turn it off after all just in case the detective called back.

He’d check it in a moment, but he hoped Detective Scarborough had been able to narrow down a list of suspects.

Because Tyson didn’t want to keep living like this, especially with so much on the line.

CHAPTER FIVE

Back in Olivia's room, Tyson had enjoyed playing the part of Junk Food Cop. He waved his finger when he found the potato chips, put his hands on his hips at the package of cookies, shook his head at the candy bars.

Olivia hammed it up by looking as if she hadn't known any of the snacks were there.

They were all laughing by the time the segment was over.

"Thanks, Tyson. That was fun." Olivia reached for the food in his hands. "I'll take these back now."

He raised an eyebrow and stepped back, gathering the taboo food close to his chest. "I don't think so."

Olivia's mouth dropped open. "Don't you trust me?"

The horrified expression on her face was priceless. Too bad that wasn't caught on camera.

"It's not about trust. It's about making good decisions."

After staring at him in silence a moment, she finally said, "Fine, take it."

Wes and Chandler glanced at each other.

“Olivia Montgomery, you mean to tell me you done gave up your comfort food just like that? Well, bless your heart.” Wes tilted his head in shock, his Texas accent stronger than ever.

She shrugged a little too innocently. “What can I say? If I’m going to do this program, I’m going to do it right.”

Wes and Chandler stared at her with raised eyebrows.

She glanced over at Tyson. “Technically, the program starts tomorrow. I can have one candy bar before bed tonight, right?”

Tyson shook his head. “Not a good idea. The high amount of sugar will lead to a spike and then a crash in your blood sugar levels. It will make it harder to sleep and can even cause nightmares, among other things.”

Olivia pursed her lips. “You just had to burst my bubble, didn’t you?”

“It’s what I get paid to do.”

“Burst bubbles?”

He let out a laugh. “Keep people accountable.”

“What if I get hungry?”

Her sparkling green eyes made him smile. She really was beautiful in a very natural way. Too many people on TV had so much work done. Tyson preferred people who were comfortable with themselves.

“You can grab something healthy from the kitchen,” he finally told her. “I have faith

you'll be okay, Kiddo."

Olivia blinked as if offended.

He supposed it was too late to take the word back.

After a few seconds, a grin spread across Olivia's face, and she jabbed his arm.
"Okay, if you say so, Muscle Man ."

Muscle Man? He supposed he deserved that.

His time with Olivia would be very interesting, he realized. Very interesting.

* * *

Kiddo? Had Tyson really just called her that?

Olivia bit back a frown.

His opinion of her was clear.

But that was okay. She didn't care what the man thought of her.

It wasn't as if she was looking for a potential relationship.

No, Olivia knew she needed to deal with her trauma before she let anyone else into her life emotionally. Lyle had told her that was only wise.

She couldn't have a healthy relationship until she conquered more of her demons.
Until she was healthy and healed.

It made sense. If forty days could reset her habits and health, could it reset her trauma also? The idea intrigued her.

However, what was with Tyson checking his phone so many times? Afterward, he'd looked so concerned.

He seemed to have a picture-perfect life. But Olivia knew what that was like.

Very few people lived the ideal lives they presented—herself included.

She was interested in digging a little deeper into him, however. Her viewers deserved to know the real man behind this program. But she had a feeling that getting deeper would be a challenge.

It was a good thing she always liked challenges.

Besides, maybe this program would be a good distraction for her—and she could use one of those.

Maybe it would help her stop questioning things.

Questioning the feeling she had of being watched.

Questioning how she mysteriously smelled roses when none were around.

Questioning whether or not Brian Elliot was truly the man who'd abducted her—or if he'd been set up and the police had killed the wrong man.

Tension stretched taut across her chest at the thought.

Yes, a distraction was just what she needed.

CHAPTER SIX

Even though it was close to midnight, Olivia was wide awake.

She'd been pacing her room for the past twenty minutes, waiting for exhaustion to hit. It hadn't yet.

Everyone else was probably in bed. Instead, she felt wired.

Finally, she put some shorts and a T-shirt on and wandered downstairs.

A TV blared in the distance.

Following the sound, she found Wes in the family room. It appeared he had the same idea.

"What are you watching?" She plopped on the couch beside him.

"The news." He turned the volume down.

"Anything exciting?"

"Only that ratchet stuff from our competition." Wes shifted toward her. "What are you still doing up?"

"Can't sleep." Olivia watched the newscaster on the screen without really listening.

“Nightmares again?”

Wes was one of the few people she’d spoken to about what had happened. He’d been a shoulder to cry on, and she appreciated him for that.

But she wasn’t ready to tell him her fears. She knew she’d most likely sound paranoid.

She shook her head. “Too much on my mind.”

“You still worried about this assignment?”

“I wouldn’t say I’m worried. Reluctant, perhaps.”

“Tyson seems pretty cool.”

Olivia had to agree. “Yeah, he does. Surprisingly down-to-earth.”

Maybe there was more to Tyson Stone than his muscles and good looks. His answers during their interview today had been intelligent enough.

She smiled as she remembered Tyson searching her room for junk food. He’d even had a sense of humor.

Olivia felt Wes watching her.

She met his gaze and drew her eyebrows together. “What?”

“You’re grinning. You’re crushing on Tyson Stone, aren’t you?”

She scowled at him. “No, I’m not crushing on him. I’m not a teenager! Besides, it’s

obvious what he thinks of me.”

Wes sent her a questioning look.

“I mean, I know I can be silly, but he actually called me Kiddo.” She popped her head to the side. “Was that really necessary?”

Wes snickered. “Maybe it was a term of endearment. Bless his heart, right?”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “Right.”

“I personally think dating again would be good for you.”

“Lyle disagrees—not that I want to date anyway.”

“Lyle, Lyle, Lyle.” Wes rolled his eyes.

For some reason, her therapist got on Wes’ nerves with all his “psychological mumbo jumbo,” as Wes called it.

Wes loved teasing her.

He knew, however, how hard it had been on her when her last boyfriend had broken her heart. He’d cheated on her, and Olivia hadn’t seen it coming.

The hurt she’d felt afterward had thrown her off-kilter.

“My love life isn’t that important. Let’s talk about your dating history, Wes,” Olivia countered. “Starting with your flavors of the week. First, there was Amanda. Then Molly, and then Amiee—with two Es. That’s just in the last month.”

“You caught me.” Wes held his hands up in surrender. “When there’s something I want, I go after it. It’s the Texas way. Nothing wrong with that.”

She gave him a look.

Then her exhaustion hit her, and she stood.

“This conversation has been fun.” She took a step away. “But, alas, all good things must come to an end. I’m tired and need to go to bed.”

“Olivia.”

She paused and looked over her shoulder. “Yes?”

“You know I’m just giving you a hard time, right?”

“I do.” Olivia tilted her head at her friend, thankful for the levity he brought to her life. “Goodnight, Wes.”

She started back to her room.

Nighttime was what she dreaded the most.

The darkness reminded her too much of her time in captivity.

But she was a big girl and could handle this.

That didn’t stop the shiver from raking through her body, however.

When she walked into her room, she froze.

It was dark. Strangely dark.

Her nightlights were gone, she realized as dread pooled in her stomach.

Her heart pounded in her ears, hard and rapid.

What could have happened to them?

* * *

Tyson heard the gasp in the distance. It sounded sharp, panicked.

He was in the kitchen grabbing a late-night protein shake when the sound made him pause mid-pour.

That had come from Olivia, hadn't it?

Setting down his glass, he moved quickly up the stairs and down the hallway. Three long strides, and he was at her door.

He knocked once, gently. "Olivia? Everything okay in there?"

Silence.

"Olivia?"

"I'm—" Her voice caught. "I'm fine."

She wasn't fine.

Tyson had been watching her carefully since she'd arrived. He'd watched the way her

eyes constantly scanned rooms. The way she startled at sudden movements.

And then there were those nightlights she'd plugged in everywhere. Two in her bedroom. One in the bathroom. Another in the hallway.

That wasn't normal.

"May I come in?" he asked.

More silence. Then: "Yes."

Tyson slowly pushed her door open.

Olivia stood in the center of the room, the lights on overhead and her arms wrapped around herself. "They're gone."

Tyson froze, suddenly understanding. "The nightlights . . ."

"I'm sorry." She straightened her shoulders, visibly trying to pull herself together. "It's stupid. I just?—"

"No, it's not stupid. And it's probably my fault. Mrs. Castillo—my housekeeper—must have taken them. My cousin brought her kids here to stay last month. They're afraid of the dark, so she always brings nightlights. Mrs. Castillo probably thought they left them behind."

Olivia nodded, but her hands still trembled. The famous television host, known for her razor-sharp interviews and unflappable composure, looked terrified of something as simple as darkness.

"I have another one," he said quickly. "In the storage closet. Give me two minutes."

He returned with not just one but three nightlights and a small lamp.

“I like to be prepared.” He set the items down on the dresser. “My mom always said you can never have too many sources of light.”

He plugged in the nightlights, one near the bed, one by the bathroom door, and kept the third as a backup.

“Thank you.” The relief was palpable in her voice. “I know it seems childish.”

Tyson studied her a moment. The Olivia Montgomery he’d seen on television was confident, bold, and fearless.

This woman before him was clearly carrying invisible wounds. He knew about her abduction and escape. He could only imagine how that event had changed her.

“It’s not childish to be afraid of something,” he said carefully. “Especially when you have a good reason.”

Their eyes met, and for a moment, it seemed like Olivia might say something. Explain the fear etched into the tight lines around her mouth and the shadows beneath her eyes.

Instead, she simply offered him a small smile. “I didn’t think Tyson Stone would be so understanding about something like this.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me.” He shrugged. “That’s supposed to be your job, right? Digging deep, finding the story beneath the surface?”

“Yes, well,” she gestured around the room, “looks like you’re the one finding out my secrets instead.”

“We all have things we’d rather keep to ourselves. Get some rest, okay? I’m just down the hall if you need anything.” He moved toward the door, then paused. “And Olivia? The darkness . . . it doesn’t get to decide who you are. You do.”

As he closed the door behind him, Tyson knew he’d just seen the first crack in the carefully constructed facade of Olivia Montgomery. Despite himself, despite the fact that getting involved with a reporter was probably the worst idea he’d had in years, he wanted to know more.

Not for the cameras. Not for her show.

Just for her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Olivia followed her usual routine and woke up at six a.m. to start the day.

She couldn't get last night out of her mind, however.

First, finding the nightlights missing. Then Tyson coming to reassure her.

He'd surprised her—in the very best of ways. Something about his demeanor was so calming. And something about his strength made her feel strangely safe.

She pulled her hair into a ponytail and threw on some maroon shorts and a black tank top. Then she grabbed her Bible and went outside.

Thirty acres of North Carolina splendor stretched beyond the doors of Tyson's estate. It was a private kingdom carved from the rolling Piedmont countryside outside Charlotte.

The centerpiece was an Olympic-sized swimming pool. Its sapphire waters glimmered beneath the early morning sun, bordered by travertine tile that Olivia would bet remained cool even in the summer's oppressive heat.

Olivia sat on a lounge to enjoy the solitude.

Though she now lived in New York City, she'd never enjoyed the bustling city. She preferred open spaces, and Tyson's patio was the essence of that. It was big and wide with different layers. The best part was that it looked out over miles of nothing.

Even though she was out here alone, it didn't scare her.

Only small, enclosed spaces did.

Being out here was a breath of fresh air.

She opened her Bible to Proverbs and read a new chapter, absorbing the words.

She'd only become a Christian a little more than a year ago, and she already found Christianity to be a solitary place in life.

There was no place for it in Hollywood or the entertainment industry. When she told people in the business that she was a Christ-follower, the news was always met with ridicule.

In many ways, she'd never felt so alone. Plus, after her ordeal she'd felt like there was no one who understood what she'd been through and how terrible it had been.

It was generally just Olivia and her Bible. Every day she tried to find meaning in what she read. Every day she wished she were close to someone who shared her faith. And sure enough, every day there was no one. Even though she went to church, her schedule didn't allow her to make very many connections.

Just then, a footstep sounded behind her, and she froze.

Someone else was out here with her, she realized.

Immediately, her mind went into panic mode.

What if The Admirer had a minion finishing what he'd started?

As the question echoed in her head, she waited to smell the fragrance of roses.

She waited for her terror to begin again.

* * *

Body still in fight or flight mode, Olivia looked over her shoulder.

Tyson stepped out the back door, holding his cell phone to his ear.

Relief swept through her.

It was just Tyson.

Of course .

Who had she expected? Brian Elliot to return from the dead and follow her here?

The thought was ridiculous.

She let out another breath and glanced at Tyson again. He hadn't seen her yet.

She smiled at the confident air with which he walked. His presence seemed to command attention, and his large frame made it hard for anyone not to notice him.

Breezing past her shadowed chair, he strode to the other side of the patio and continued his conversation.

Olivia squirmed, feeling like she was intruding. She'd assumed he would see her.

But he clearly hadn't anticipated anyone being out here.

“Why don’t you move out here with me?” His hand went to his hip. “I know I keep asking, but it makes sense. I have plenty of room at the house.” He paused. “You wouldn’t be imposing.” He paused again. “At least promise me you’ll come visit.”

Did Tyson have a secret girlfriend? Olivia’s interest perked.

The man was supposedly single. However, there were rumors linking him with a reality show actress. They’d been spotted together at a restaurant and a football game.

Part of Olivia hoped he was dating someone. That would make him less intriguing to her. Then he’d be totally off-limits.

A few moments passed as Tyson leaned against the railing and scanned the nature surrounding him.

Then he spoke again. “I’ll call this morning and buy a plane ticket for you.”

Although Olivia knew she shouldn’t, she leaned in.

Tyson’s voice lowered. “I know. I miss you too.”

Guilt suddenly jarred her, and Olivia sat back, determined to mind her own business.

What was she thinking?

Tyson was having a personal conversation and thought he was alone out here. She shouldn’t be listening.

Olivia was about to clear her throat when she heard his next words.

“I love you too, Mom. I’ll see you soon.” He then said goodbye and disconnected the

call.

Olivia almost laughed.

Not a girlfriend. His mom.

Hearing how tender he was with his mother was touching.

So, he had muscles, brains, and a heart. Impressive.

Tyson pocketed his cell phone and looked out over the land.

He obviously still had no idea Olivia was there.

Her guilt pounded harder.

“Good morning,” she called, waving her hand.

He turned to her, his eyebrows flicking up in surprise. Then recognition crossed his features, and his shoulders relaxed.

“Olivia . . . good morning. I didn’t see you out here.” He paced toward her.

There was that signature walk again—the stride of a man comfortable with himself.

Or maybe Olivia had read too many romance novels when she was younger. However, she didn’t think she’d ever actually seen a man who’d stepped off those pages and into real life.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you up so early.” He paused near her chair. “Did you sleep okay?”

“I slept fine after I got settled down. I’m an early riser, so I thought I’d come out here and enjoy the morning. I didn’t mean to intrude on your conversation.”

He waved her off. “There was no intrusion. Just talking with my mother.” His eyes wandered to the Bible in her lap, and approval stretched through his gaze.

Approval? Had she misread that?

She wasn’t sure.

Certainly a man like Tyson Stone felt pretty self-sufficient.

“Doing some reading?” he asked.

She nodded unapologetically. “Just trying to get my day started right.”

It was a risky admission to make in her line of work. At first, she’d tried not to tell people about the changes in her beliefs. Then she’d realized she couldn’t stay quiet—nor should she have to.

If people asked about her faith, she’d tell them. She wouldn’t hide the only hope she’d found. And she’d tried everything to fill those voids in her life. Nothing else had worked.

Until she’d found Jesus.

Tyson slowly nodded his approval. “Sounds wise.”

She smiled. “Are you always an early riser?”

“I’m up at 5:30 every morning.” He glanced back down at her Bible and nodded

toward it. “I didn’t mean to interrupt you. I’ll let you get back to your reading. But I’ll see you inside for breakfast soon?”

“I’ll be there in a few minutes.” Olivia nodded to him as he walked away.

Warm but distant, she mused. Pleasant yet focused. Quite a combination.

She found herself wanting to know more about this man than she should.

However, Olivia desperately needed to nip those thoughts in the bud and focus on her work.

CHAPTER EIGHT

After Olivia finished her morning workout, Tyson settled at his desk.

The first thing on his to-do list was confirming the new security agency he'd hired to monitor his property was starting today.

They were. Hobbes would go over everything with them when they arrived. But Tyson wanted two men here at all times, keeping an eye on the front and back of the property—just in case.

With that taken care of, he dealt with more issues concerning the school.

Detective Scarborough hadn't made much headway with those threats against Tyson, but the detective assured him he was working on it. They just needed more concrete evidence.

After that conversation, Tyson began working on an article for a men's health magazine. Then he wrote a chapter of his next book. He reviewed his schedule for the next few weeks, noting different speaking engagements and trips he'd agreed to take.

At noon, the alarm he'd set went off, reminding him it was time for lunch. As he walked into the kitchen, he spotted Olivia looking through the refrigerator and cleared his throat.

She jerked back from the opened door, a sheepish expression on her face.

“I wasn’t looking for junk food. Honest.” She did a scout’s pledge.

Tyson nodded in playful skepticism and rounded the corner to see what she was up to. He halfway expected to find she’d had Instacart deliver her groceries and that she’d stocked his fridge with junk food.

Instead, she stood empty-handed before him.

“It’s not like you really have anything to eat.” Her eyes scanned the contents of the refrigerator. “Let me be honest. I really want a doughnut right now.”

He chuckled. “Wait for your cheat meal then.”

The program allowed for one meal once a week where participants could eat whatever they wanted.

“Fair enough.” She sighed and shut the refrigerator door. “So, what’s next on our program, Muscle Man?”

He deserved that term after slipping and calling her Kiddo last night. He shouldn’t have used that word to address her. It wasn’t professional, and the woman deserved more respect than that.

He remembered her question. What’s next? “Lunch. Why don’t you have a seat while I prepare something?”

“A man who’s comfortable in the kitchen.” She raised her eyebrows. “I like it. Is there anything you’re not good at?”

“Quite a few things actually.”

She tilted her head skeptically. “Name one.”

“Well, I tried singing karaoke, and it was disastrous.”

Olivia laughed. “That I would like to hear.”

“Not today. Time to eat.” He placed a sandwich in front of Olivia.

* * *

Olivia left the kitchen when Wes and Chandler came home with fast food burgers and fries. They’d offered her some. Before temptation got the best of her, she’d exited.

She had to remind herself she wasn’t on this program for herself. She cared about the viewers who were counting on her to do this program with them. She couldn’t let them down.

She’d already gotten emails from people who were eagerly participating with her and counting on her to set a good example.

Flipping up the screen to her laptop, she decided to check her email and update her social media. It took a few minutes for everything to load.

She smiled at some of the comments her viewers had made. Generally, the feedback she received was positive. Occasionally, she got a critical message from someone who didn’t think fun and reporting went together.

Olivia begged to differ. Above all, it had to be fun. If not, what was the point?

One message was from , and the subject read, “Remember me?”

Clicking on the email, she read the message.

And you thought it was all over.

Olivia frowned and read it again. Was the sender talking about a segment she'd done in the past? It was the only thing that came to mind.

Still, the message seemed odd. Then again, dealing with the public opened her up to a wide range of personalities.

Shrugging, she shut down her email and closed her laptop with a click.

She didn't have any more time to waste. She and Chandler had a meeting to start editing some footage.

But something about the message bugged her.

Those words combined with that rose petal she'd found tried to set her back and erase months of progress.

Olivia couldn't let that happen.

* * *

That night, Olivia woke with a start, her heart pounding.

The digital clock on her nightstand read 2:17 a.m. She'd heard something—a creaking floorboard perhaps or a door closing softly.

She sat up, straining to hear over the sound of her own breathing.

There it was again—the unmistakable sound of footsteps moving down the hallway past her room.

Carefully, she slipped out of bed and moved to the door, pressing her ear against it.

The footsteps stopped.

She waited a full minute before cracking the door open just enough to peer through.

A shadow moved at the end of the hallway—tall, masculine.

In the dim nightlight, she could make out Hobbes' distinctive profile as he paused outside Tyson's office.

Olivia watched as he glanced around. A second later, he produced a key and quietly unlocked the door.

Her pulse quickened.

What would Hobbes be doing in Tyson's office at this hour?

She watched as he slipped inside, leaving the door slightly ajar. A faint light flickered on—not the overhead, but something smaller. A flashlight, perhaps.

She debated whether to wake Tyson.

If Hobbes was up to something sinister, confronting him alone would be dangerous.

But what if she was overreacting? The man worked here, after all.

Before she could decide, Hobbes emerged from the office, carefully locking the door

behind him. He carried something in his hands—a folder of some kind.

He tucked it under his arm and moved toward the stairs with purpose.

Olivia quickly closed her door, leaving just a crack to watch him descend. Once he was gone, she counted to thirty and then followed, keeping to the shadows.

At the bottom of the stairs, she saw the kitchen light was on. She crept closer, careful to avoid the creaky floorboard near the entryway.

Through the arched opening into the kitchen, she saw Hobbes standing at the counter. The folder lay open before him. He was . . . writing something?

No, not writing—signing documents.

Olivia leaned closer, trying to see what the papers were.

As she did, her foot brushed against a decorative vase, making it wobble.

She held her breath before springing into action.

Moving quickly, she caught the vase before it fell—but not before it made a soft sound against the wooden floor.

CHAPTER NINE

Hobbes' head snapped up.

“Who's there?” He reached for something beside him.

Olivia froze, heart hammering in her chest.

As Hobbes moved toward the entry, Olivia pressed herself against the wall, praying the shadows would hide her.

He appeared in the doorway. But he didn't hold a weapon as she'd feared.

He held a fountain pen.

He looked past her as he scanned the darkness.

After what felt like an eternity, he shrugged and returned to the kitchen.

This time, Olivia could see what he was doing.

He was signing payroll checks—dozens of them—for what appeared to be the staff at Tyson's house.

Relief flooded through her. An innocent explanation.

She retreated silently to her room, chiding herself for being suspicious.

* * *

The rest of the week flew by, the same routine every day.

The gang started with a healthy breakfast and then Tyson went through Olivia's workout with her. Afterward, he disappeared either into his home office or he went to work at his downtown office. He'd taken her there once to show her around and for Wes to film some B roll.

Olivia spent a few hours each day posting photos of her journey on several of Static Entertainment's social media accounts. They'd gained hundreds of thousands of new followers already, and they were just getting started.

Those numbers seemed to cement the success of this assignment and assure viewers and participants that Olivia would see it through to completion.

Meanwhile, Chandler and Wes constantly tempted Olivia with fattening foods that weren't on her plan, and she'd resisted every time. It was their schtick, and viewers were going to eat it up.

It was Sunday now, her day of rest from exercising and the day she could eat one cheat meal.

All week Olivia had thought about what she'd eat today. Tyson had warned her not to overindulge—for more than one reason.

But first things first. She got dressed for church, figuring she'd find a nearby place of worship. She didn't especially like going to church alone, but going alone was better than not going at all.

Grabbing her purse and Bible, she headed downstairs. Wes and Chandler had told her

she could use their rental car today.

Tyson was sipping on a mug of coffee when she walked into the kitchen. She stopped when she spotted him.

He looked stunning in a teal-colored polo shirt and khakis.

He glanced up from reading something on his laptop, looking equally surprised to see her dressed and ready. “Don’t you look nice.”

“As do you.” She carefully lowered herself into the chair across from him. “Where are you headed? A seminar? A book signing?”

He smiled as if amused by the question. “Church.”

She raised her eyebrows before consciously relaxing her expression. Her surprise was rude, and she regretted that. But she’d had no idea Tyson was a believer—though he hadn’t done anything to indicate otherwise.

“Not what you expected?” More amusement danced in his gaze.

“I’m sorry. I just . . .”

“No explanation is needed.” He turned his laptop around and pushed it toward her. “You’ll want to read this.”

She couldn’t imagine what he could be talking about. She braced herself, expecting the worst . . . expecting an update claiming The Admirer had struck again.

CHAPTER TEN

Olivia held her breath as she glanced at the screen.

It wasn't about The Admirer.

No, it was an article topped with a photo of Tyson and her together, taken when they'd gone on a tour of his downtown office. They walked side by side on the sidewalk out front, laughing at something now forgotten.

Then she read the headline: "Fitness Guru and Entertainment Sweetheart an Item."

She jerked her gaze up to meet his. "What?"

"Apparently, we're dating now." He shrugged.

Olivia's eyes widened. "Is that right?"

"Just read the article." He pointed to the laptop again. "If it was published, it must be true."

Olivia shook her head as she scrolled through the heavily elaborated story. She and Tyson had met while filming and hit it off. The two had an opposites-attract romance going on. Those who'd seen the couple around together said they were trying to keep the romance under wraps until the story finished filming.

"You learn something new every day," she murmured. "It's funny how they know

things about us we don't even know."

"Isn't it, though?"

Olivia studied the picture another minute before glancing back at Tyson. She was glad he didn't seem bothered. Some people might let things like this make them uncomfortable. Tyson seemed to take it in stride.

She slid the laptop back to Tyson. "Apparently, my dating life is so interesting that even I need to read about it in a digital magazine to find out who I'm seeing."

He chuckled. "Love your humor, Olivia."

"I'm glad someone does."

"I'm sure a lot of people do." He paused. "Do you need a ride to church?"

"Sure, but we might be setting ourselves up for more town gossip."

"I can think of worse things." A surprising calmness permeated his eyes as he stood from his seat and waited for her response.

Olivia could think of worse things too. She'd lived through them.

Before her past could rush back and ruin this moment, she cleared her throat and stood also. "I'd love a ride. Thank you."

* * *

Olivia and Tyson climbed into Tyson's F-350 a few minutes later.

He put the truck into Drive and headed toward church. His truck, like the rest of his life, was impeccably clean and organized. The only thing that seemed out of place was a Native American dream catcher hanging from the rearview mirror.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Tyson followed her gaze.

“It is.” Olivia studied its intricacies.

Its willow hoop formed a perfect circle with intricate thread webbing stretched across the interior. If Olivia remembered correctly, Native Americans said it was a sacred net designed to trap nightmares while allowing pleasant dreams to slip through the center hole.

Small, colorful beads adorned strategic points in the webbing, and delicate owl feathers dangled from the bottom edge.

“A friend made it for me.” Tyson touched it lightly with his free hand.

“You have a talented friend.”

“She is.”

Olivia stared out the window at the rolling hillside dotted with farms. Red clay occasionally peeked through the greenery. Weathered barns with rusted tin roofs scattered the countryside alongside white-steepled country churches.

In the distance, the silhouette of the Blue Ridge Mountains emerged as a shadowy blue-gray line on the western horizon, growing more distinct with each mile traveled.

This area really was beautiful.

“So, tell me about your church,” Olivia started.

“It’s called Rising Son Community Church. It’s small and a little rough around the edges, but the people have good hearts.”

Olivia’s eyebrows flew up in surprise. She’d expected a perfect church with perfect people who were as successful as Tyson. Not small and “rough around the edges.”

“What was that look for?” Tyson did a double take at her, his eyes lit with curiosity.

Olivia shrugged. “I don’t know. There’s nothing rough around the edges about you. It struck me as odd that you’d attend a church you described that way.”

“I happen to like people who are rough around the edges.” His eyes hinted at a sparkle.

“And why is that?”

“Because I think anyone who’s honest with themselves will admit they fall into that category.”

His words were unexpected.

She wanted to know more about this man than she wanted to admit.

And that thought terrified her.

* * *

Tyson was curious about Olivia and her questions.

She hadn't ceased to surprise him.

But beneath her cheerful exterior, he sensed someone who was broken.

He didn't judge her for that. He was also broken in his own way.

But her jumpiness concerned him.

He hadn't mentioned to her the fact that someone was threatening him. His home was gated, and there hadn't been any real danger.

But still . . . the facts were unnerving.

He feared that by telling her, she'd only become more uptight. Instead, he'd asked Hobbes to be extra vigilant.

Tyson didn't want to concern her.

Before they could talk more, he pulled up to a small, simple church building outside of Charlotte.

Being here was exactly what he needed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Olivia soaked in the preacher's words, hungry to hear what he had to say. Appropriately, his sermon was about not living in fear. That was a lesson she had to put into practice over and over again each day.

After the service ended, Tyson put his hand on her back to lead her outside. They didn't get away without a few people stopping Tyson to chat about their week. He talked to everyone as if he were one of them and not a successful multi-millionaire.

When they climbed inside Tyson's truck, Olivia realized just how refreshing the service had been.

"What a great church," she told him. "Thanks for letting me come with you."

"Of course. Any time."

The truth of the matter was that even though she'd become a Christian, she often felt like someone who didn't know how to swim yet but was thrown into the deep water anyway.

For the moment, she didn't feel quite as alone.

"Want to grab a bite to eat on the way home?" Tyson's voice pulled her from her thoughts.

"I thought you'd never ask." She sighed. "I've fantasized about what I want to eat on

my cheat day all week.”

“In that case, where would you like to go?”

“Wherever I can get a burger. With cheese. And bacon.” She was already salivating.

“As you wish.”

If only food would solve her problems . . .

But if she could conquer her bad eating habits, maybe she could conquer her trauma also.

Thankfully, this meal was allowed.

* * *

A few minutes later, Tyson pulled up to a fast-food restaurant. Olivia couldn’t wait to get her meal.

Inside, he ordered a grilled chicken sandwich on a multi-grain bun, no mayo with a baked potato on the side and water to drink. Olivia ordered the Burger Blast, the biggest one on the menu, along with a large fry and soda.

Tyson didn’t say anything, but she would guess he didn’t approve.

They sat down across from each other at a corner booth. Olivia didn’t waste any time after they prayed over their food. She dug into her burger, savoring every bite as if it were her last. In reality, it would be her last—for a week.

As they ate, they made general conversation about the area, what there was to do,

even the weather. She found out Tyson had moved to Charlotte four years ago. On a whim, he decided to write a book about the connection he'd found between the body, soul, and mind. He never thought it would take off like it did.

She listened, marveling at how down-to-earth he was.

When she finished her burger, she looked at Tyson and grinned.

"See, I feel fine," she said. "A little overstuffed, but fine."

"If you say so." Tyson raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Ready to go? I should get you home before the effects of that meal kick in."

"Sure." Olivia finished every remaining drop of her soda before Tyson could grab the cup along with the other trash and toss it away.

As they stepped out the door and into the parking lot, a loud screech cut through the air.

Olivia looked up.

A beat-up blue sedan accelerated around the corner.

She froze as she realized the vehicle was headed straight toward her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Before Olivia could react, Tyson grabbed her and pulled her against the rough brick wall of the building.

The car sped past and out of sight before the danger even registered with Olivia. Her heart raced as she processed what had just happened.

“Are you alright?” Tyson turned her to face him, his eyes scanning her for any sign of injury.

“I’m fine.” Olivia brushed herself off and ran a shaky hand through her hair. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think that driver was aiming for me.”

Tyson didn’t say anything, but his expression remained tight. “Is there anyone you know of that might want to hurt you?”

Olivia started to deny it but hesitated as she remembered the words in that email.

Remember me? And you thought it was all over.

She shivered but quickly shoved aside the thought and forced out a laugh, trying to break the tension. “I’m sure it was just coincidence.”

“Maybe, but I still don’t like this.” He put a protective arm around her as they walked to the truck.

Though the gesture was purely polite, Tyson's attention warmed Olivia's heart. She liked feeling protected and safe.

As Olivia settled into her seat and Tyson walked to the driver's side, she spotted a flyer tucked under the windshield wiper in front of her. She opened her door and wrapped herself around the windshield to reach the white paper. With a plop, she landed back in her seat and slammed the door shut.

"What are they advertising now?" Tyson asked as he cranked the engine.

"Let's see." Olivia buckled her seatbelt and settled back.

She unfolded the flyer, expecting an advertisement for a local fundraising barbecue or carwash. As she saw the words, the blood rushed from her face.

No. It couldn't be.

Before Tyson could see the flyer, she crumbled it and held it in a white-knuckled fist.

* * *

"Must be some advertisement." Tyson raised his eyebrows.

"Just junk. Nothing important." Please don't ask any more questions, she silently pleaded.

"Do junk flyers always make you as pale as a ghost?"

Olivia laughed weakly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Tyson glanced at her and held out his hand. "Can I see it?"

Olivia's throat went dry. "I told you—it's nothing."

"If it's nothing then why can't I see it?"

"Tyson—" She felt herself becoming flustered and stopped to take a deep breath. "It's a joke someone is playing on me. Please, don't embarrass me by making me show you."

Tyson remained quiet, and Olivia sensed he was considering her words.

Finally, he backed out of the parking spot, put the truck into Drive, and began the trip home.

Though she felt a touch of relief, her heart still raced.

Someone had copied an article about The Admirer that covered when he was shot and killed by the police. As part of the article, there was a black-and-white photo of Olivia, and beside it was a picture of Brian Elliot.

Brian Elliot with his unkempt dark hair and blue eyes. His prematurely saggy jowls. The circles beneath his eyes.

He'd worked at a landscaping center, but he also gardened at home. On weekends, he ran a vegetable stand near his house.

Olivia closed her eyes and tried to shut away the memories. Why would someone leave this photocopied article on Tyson's truck?

The thought haunted her as Tyson drove back to his house.

Did this flyer have anything to do with the car nearly hitting her? But who would

want to do that?

Olivia's stomach churned.

Maybe she shouldn't have eaten that hamburger and fries . . . but for reasons far different than what Tyson had implied.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

By the time they arrived at Tyson's house, Olivia was fighting a full-blown panic attack. Anxiety welled inside her like a sneeze she tried to hold back.

The panic couldn't take over. It was too consuming. The emotion would cripple her from doing her job and make her look weak.

Thankfully, Tyson went out to run some errands, and Wes and Chandler had left for a baseball game. That left Olivia with the entire house to herself—other than Hobbes, of course. According to Tyson, he was in his room reading a book. Despite seeing him go into Tyson's office that night, she thought she could trust him.

She sat in her room, laptop in front of her in case she wanted to work. But her thoughts continued to grip her.

The sick feeling remained in her stomach. At first, she'd blamed it on the greasy meal. Now she wasn't sure. She had a feeling it had more to do with the flyer she'd found on Tyson's truck.

Someone knew she was in North Carolina and was familiar with what had happened to her. For some reason, this person wanted to remind her of the trauma she'd experienced.

That's all it is, Olivia told herself. A reminder, not a threat. Just a mean prank.

But why would someone go through all that trouble?

Brian Elliot was dead now, she reminded herself again. Gone. She didn't have to worry about him. He was no longer a threat.

Regardless, she needed some fresh air.

She stepped outside to the patio and lowered herself into a padded chair. Even though she was outside, she felt safe here.

Taking deep breaths, she pulled out her laptop.

She'd thought about doing this many times before, but she'd never allowed herself to actually follow through with the idea.

Now, she would.

She hesitated before typing in the words to her search engine.

She needed to look for any other murders that had occurred in the past year . . . murders that followed the same pattern as The Admirer.

* * *

Olivia had scoured news article after news article.

She'd started by searching the New York area, where The Admirer had originally struck terror into the hearts of locals. But she didn't think he'd strike again in the same vicinity. It would be too obvious.

She wasn't surprised when she didn't find any murders in that area that fit the right pattern.

However, three news articles caught her attention.

One was in Maine. A woman in her twenties had been abducted and found dead in the woods a week later. The dirt under her nails didn't match the dirt in her shallow grave, leading authorities to believe she'd been kept underground somewhere before her murder.

The next case was in Virginia. Another woman the same basic age had also been found in a shallow grave. Pinpricks in her neck indicated she'd been drugged.

The third had taken place in Ohio. Same basic MO as far as how the body was found and the length of time the woman had been missing.

The killer—or killers—hadn't been found.

There was no mention of roses either.

Maybe these murders weren't connected at all.

Olivia couldn't know for sure. But the thought weighed heavily on her mind.

She needed to find out more information. First thing in the morning she planned on calling some of her contacts to see if they knew anything. She'd made a few connections in her job as a reporter. FBI consultants. Other reporters across the country.

She could even call the FBI special agent who'd handled her case—even though things between the two of them hadn't ended well.

Because if this monster was somehow still alive . . . that would be her worst nightmare.

And it would mean Olivia was still in danger.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Olivia hadn't been able to sleep for hours. After tossing and turning until the digital clock on her nightstand showed 1:47 a.m., she finally gave up.

Maybe a cup of herbal tea would help. She slid from beneath the covers and pulled on her robe, cinching it around her waist. As she stepped into the hallway, she noticed a thin line of light beneath Tyson's office door.

She wasn't the only one battling insomnia tonight.

She hesitated, then knocked softly.

"Come in," he called, his voice gravelly with exhaustion.

She pushed open the door and found Tyson surrounded by blueprints spread across his desk, a calculator beside him, and spreadsheets on his computer screen.

Dark circles shadowed his eyes, but they still brightened when he saw her.

"Can't sleep?" He straightened in his chair.

"I was about to ask you the same thing." She moved closer, examining the detailed drawings. "What are these?"

He hesitated, as if deciding how much to share. "Plans for a project I've been working on."

The blueprints showed a beautiful modern building with unique architectural elements she couldn't name. There were classrooms, a community gathering space, a library, and what looked like a cultural center.

"A school?" she asked, studying the papers more closely.

Tyson nodded before pushing his hands through his hair. "Yes, and unfortunately, the contractor called today. Material costs have gone up again."

Olivia's eyes widened as she took in the scope of the project. "This looks significant. Personal project?"

His eyes took on a faraway look. "I'm trying to get a school built in an impoverished area about an hour from here. My grandmother used to say that education was the only gift no one could take away." He touched the blueprint gently. "She made me promise, Olivia. On her deathbed."

"And you always keep your promises. I had no idea you were involved in something like this." Olivia settled into a chair across from him. "Where exactly is this school going to be built?"

"On the Cherokee reservation in western North Carolina," he said. "My grandmother was full-blooded Cherokee, so I'm a quarter Cherokee myself."

This was a side of Tyson she hadn't expected. "I had no idea."

"It's not something I publicize. Not because I'm not proud of my heritage, but because I don't want it to seem like I'm using it as a marketing angle for my fitness brand."

So he was humble also. She liked that.

“Tell me about your grandmother,” Olivia said, sincerely interested. “She sounds like an amazing woman.”

A genuine smile warmed Tyson’s face. “She was. Anna Stone—though she always kept her Cherokee name, Ama Agiyahi, which means ‘Water Woman.’ She lived on the reservation until she was eighteen, then she left to get her teaching degree. She was the first in her family to go to college.”

“That couldn’t have been easy back then.”

“It wasn’t. She faced discrimination at every turn, but she never gave up.” Pride filled his voice. “She taught on the reservation for forty years. Every summer when school was out, my mom would send me to stay with her.”

“So that’s where you learned about your heritage?”

He nodded. “The summers I spent with her were the best of my life. She taught me everything—the language, the traditions, the stories. But what she talked about most was her dream.”

“The school,” Olivia said softly.

“The community school there is over fifty years old. It has a leaky roof, inadequate heating, outdated everything. She watched generation after generation of kids struggle because they didn’t have the resources other schools had.” Tyson tapped the blueprint. “She used to say, ‘One day, our children will have a school worthy of their potential.’”

“And you’re making that happen.”

“I’m trying.” He sighed, rubbing his eyes. “We’re so close, but with these new cost

increases . . . I only have another eight days until I need to have all the paperwork in place and the funding lined up.”

“What happens if you don’t meet the deadline?”

“The tribal council will reallocate the land they’ve set aside for the project. There’s a developer who wants to build a resort and casino—they’re offering big money.” His jaw tightened.

Olivia thought of the determination in Tyson’s eyes whenever he spoke about his fitness programs, his unwavering dedication to helping people transform their lives.

Now she understood where that drive came from—it ran much deeper than just physical fitness.

“How much do you need to raise?” she asked.

Tyson hesitated, as if reluctant to share the burden. “The project costs over a hundred million.”

Olivia’s eyes widened. “A hundred million? That’s a lot.”

“I’ve been blessed beyond what I could have imagined. But I don’t have that much money lying around. So I’ve been trying to raise it. I’m still twenty million dollars short, however.”

“Do you have a plan for how you might get that in eight days?”

“I have some ideas. New product lines, speaking engagements, maybe another book.” His voice was determined but weary. “I’ll find a way. I have to.”

On impulse, Olivia reached across the desk and touched his hand. “You don’t have to do this alone, you know. I could help. I have some connections?—”

Something flickered in his eyes—vulnerability, perhaps even longing—before he carefully withdrew his hand. “That’s kind of you to say, but?—”

“I mean it. I could help you. I know people in media who?—”

“I appreciate the offer, Olivia. Really.” His tone was gentle but firm. “But this is my responsibility.”

“Because of your promise?”

“Yes.” He looked at her with an intensity that made her breath catch. “Some commitments have to come first. No matter what else I might want.”

Olivia felt the weight of his words, sensing they were about more than just the school. This was why he was so focused. He’d dedicated his life to keeping this promise.

“I’d like to see it someday,” she said softly. “The reservation. The place where they’ll build this school.”

Something like hope flashed across his face. “Maybe I could take you there. There are some amazing people you should meet.”

“I’d like that.” She rose from the chair. “I should let you work. And I need to try to get some sleep myself.”

“Probably wise.” His smile was tinged with regret. “Good night, Olivia.”

“Good night, Tyson.”

As she closed the door behind her, she couldn't help wondering what it would be like to be loved by a man who took his promises so seriously.

Then she wondered whether she'd ever have the chance to find out.

* * *

Tyson watched the door close behind Olivia, her vanilla scent lingering in the air.

The concern in her eyes, the gentle touch of her hand on his . . . if he wasn't careful, those small notions would breach the careful walls he'd built. He couldn't let that happen.

Too much was on the line.

He turned back to the blueprints, trying to focus. The numbers blurred before his eyes.

This was doable. It had to be.

He opened the bottom drawer of his desk and pulled out a framed photograph. His grandmother stood in front of the old school, surrounded by smiling children. Her silver hair was pulled back in a traditional bun, and the lines around her eyes spoke of decades of laughter and determination.

"I won't let you down, Grandmother," he whispered to the photo.

The phone call from the contractor today had been a hard blow. The costs kept rising, and time was running short. The tribal council had been generous with extensions, but they were facing pressure too.

If he missed this deadline, the whole project could be permanently shelved.

Claire hadn't understood his obsession with the project. She'd tried initially. Had even visited the reservation with him a few times. But eventually, his constant work, the fundraising events, the speaking tours—they'd taken their toll.

"It's always the school first, then your fitness empire, then maybe me if there's time left over," she'd said the night she walked out. "I can't be an afterthought in your life, Tyson."

He couldn't blame her. Claire deserved someone who could put her first. Everyone did.

Including Olivia.

Not that she was interested in him. But Tyson reminded himself of that fact so he could put on brakes before he let his own interest in the woman develop any further.

He rubbed his eyes, exhaustion finally catching up with him. The way Olivia had looked at the blueprints, the genuine interest in her voice when she asked about his grandmother—it had touched something deep inside him.

She wasn't just being polite. She cared.

That made her all the more dangerous to his carefully ordered life.

He'd felt the chemistry spark between them. In another time, another place, maybe he could explore what was growing between them.

But not now.

Not with the deadline looming.

Falling for Olivia would be selfish. Unfair to her. He couldn't divide his attention, couldn't be the partner she deserved. He'd already failed at that once.

Tyson carefully returned the photograph to the drawer.

His eyes drifted to the seat where Olivia had sat. For a brief moment, he allowed himself to imagine a different life—one where he could follow his heart without betraying his promises.

But that wasn't the life he had. He had obligations, commitments. His personal desires had to come second.

Even if that meant continuing to keep Olivia at arm's distance.

With a deep sigh, Tyson turned back to the spreadsheets. The numbers weren't going to solve themselves.

And neither would the growing conflict in his heart.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Tyson stretched as he stood from his desk the next day. He split his time between his home office and his space downtown.

He preferred to work at home, however.

Since doing his morning workout, he'd been on the phone trying to work out a marketing issue with his fitness equipment company.

His stomach grumbled, reminding him it was time for lunch.

Walking from his office, he passed the living room and spotted Olivia. He glanced at her, curious as to what she was up to.

Yesterday had shaken her up. He still wanted to know what was on that flyer.

But she hadn't wanted to talk about it, and he hadn't wanted to push. If she wanted to tell him, she would.

Instead, he nodded at the legal pad full of notes in Olivia's lap. "Writing a book?"

She sat cross-legged on the couch, hair pulled back in a ponytail and glasses on. It was a studious side of Olivia that Tyson hadn't seen before.

"Actually, I am. It's called Death by Potatoes . It's all my favorite recipes with potatoes—potato salad, fries, baked potatoes, mashed potatoes. Your diet plan has

driven me to this point.”

Tyson chuckled as he leaned against the doorway with his arms crossed over his chest. Her response was typical Olivia. “Sounds like quite the concept.”

She grinned. “Not only that, but I’m also developing a diet plan of my own.”

Tyson raised his eyebrows. “And does that plan include potatoes?”

“Oh, does it . . . it’s called the Junk Food Diet.”

“And?”

“And . . . you can eat any junk food you want—in limited quantities, of course—and eat nothing healthy and still lose weight. I can’t believe no one has thought of it yet.” She tilted her head his way. “I’m going to give you a run for your money.”

Tyson couldn’t stop the grin from stretching across his lips. She was clever. He’d give her credit for that.

He chuckled. “You’re something else, Olivia. You know that? No wonder so many people watching you on TV adore you.”

She shrugged. “They adore a version of me, I suppose.”

Tyson noticed her gaze stop on him, and her eyes turned serious.

“What?” He tilted his head. “Is my hair sticking up or something?”

“I was just thinking . . .” Her expression remained solemn a moment before a soft smile tugged at her lips. “I was thinking about how you’re a deserving role model for

people, Tyson. I don't say that to just anyone. I really mean it."

Surprise washed through him. Olivia could be so teasing one moment and so sincere the next. It made it hard to know what to expect from her . . . and he liked that quality about her.

"That's kind of you. I appreciate it, Olivia." Tyson's voice lowered to an almost intimate tone.

Olivia blushed and looked away, clearing her throat. "Isn't it time to eat?"

"That's why I came to get you."

"Let's go then."

* * *

"So, what's on the menu for today?" Olivia asked as she and Tyson walked toward the kitchen.

Tyson shrugged. "I'm actually not sure yet."

"You're not?" Her voice lilted in exaggerated surprise. "That's a first."

"Sometimes I like to wing it. What are you in the mood for?"

"Let me make something for us." Her eyes danced. As if she could read his next thought she added, "It will fit the diet plan. I promise."

"My diet plan . . . or yours?"

“You’ll just have to wait and see.” She flashed a grin.

“All right. I’m game. Go for it.”

She looked pleased with herself. Maybe even surprised.

After he showed her where he kept everything, she moved with ease around the kitchen.

Tyson settled at the breakfast bar to watch, wondering what kind of adventure she would turn this into.

She chopped up red onions and tomatoes, all with flair and confidence. Her eyes caught his as she worked, and she must have seen he was impressed.

“In full disclosure, my dad is a professional chef.” She continued dicing the tomatoes.

“Is he really?”

Olivia nodded, transferring the vegetables into a pot of chicken broth. “You may have heard of him. Drake Culpepper.”

“Drake Culpepper is your father?” Tyson couldn’t hide the surprise from his voice. “He’s the highest rated chef on television. I watch his weekly show and even have a few of his cooking products.”

Tyson never would have suspected they were related. Their relationship seemed like something that would have been mentioned at some point while they talked.

“Don’t get too excited. He really wasn’t much of a father. He and my mother divorced when I was five. A string of girlfriends followed. As he rose to fame, he

didn't have time for me. Instead, he sent me gifts and money."

Tyson heard the hurt in her voice. "How did that make you feel?"

"Sadly enough, it actually felt pretty normal. I didn't know any different. When you grow up surrounded by something, even if it's twisted, it can become a standard."

"That's absolutely true. But I can say your mom did a great job with you. You turned out well."

Her gaze fluttered to his. "Thank you."

She turned away to stir the soup she was making, adding a dash of salt and some herbs. "You mind setting the table? I guess it will be just the two of us."

Tyson wasn't sure why, but he liked the idea of it just being the two of them. He tried not to think about why that was as he pulled out some bowls, spoons, and napkins. He set them on the table, along with two glasses of water.

"What are Chandler and Wes up to?" Tyson asked.

"They're interviewing Lake Blair, the singer. She's in town for a concert tonight." Olivia set the pot back on the stove, covered it, and turned the burner to simmer. Then she sat across from Tyson.

"How are you feeling today?" Tyson's eyes focused on hers.

He didn't miss how her gaze fluttered to the tabletop before she answered. "Great."

"You just seemed a little shaken up yesterday after?"

“It was no big deal.” She waved her hand in dismissal. “Just a bad driver and a practical jokester. That’s no reason to freak out.”

Tyson suspected Olivia didn’t believe her own words. He didn’t know her well yet, but he did know the face of someone who was scared. Reading people was a skill he’d learned to utilize.

“This soup is smelling good.” Olivia returned to the stove and gave the dish a good stir.

Tyson didn’t miss the subject change. Olivia didn’t want to talk about this anymore, and he had to respect her wishes. His curiosity was piqued, however.

“So, tell me about Hobbes,” Olivia said. “I’ve never met anyone who has a butler.”

“He’s officially my assistant.”

“Okay, an assistant who seems like a butler.”

Tyson chuckled. “He’s one of a kind. Archibald ‘Hobbes’ Evans. He actually trained as a chef at Le Cordon Bleu in London before being recruited by British Airways to develop their first-class dining service.”

“Really?” She raised her eyebrows. “Tell me more.”

“From what he tells me, for more than a decade, he’d traveled the world, refining menus and training staff in more than thirty countries. His perfectionism and attention to detail became legendary among the airline’s elite clientele. When the airline downsized in 2008, Hobbes pivoted and began to do catering.”

“Interesting . . .”

“I met him when I hosted a charity dinner at my house. I was impressed by his efficiency. When I mentioned I was looking for someone to manage my newly acquired estate, Hobbes asked if I would consider him. With the recommendation of a friend, I offered him the job. A year ago, he accepted the position.”

“I love it. Where was he living before he came here?”

“He was in your neck of the woods. New York.”

Something flashed in Olivia’s gaze before quickly disappearing.

The next moment, she plastered on a smile and returned to the table with two bowls of soup. “I present to you the best vegetable soup you’ve ever eaten.”

“I hope it lives up to the hype.”

“Oh, it will.”

They said grace together, and then Tyson looked at the soup before him. It looked tasty with its vegetables and broth.

“It smells delicious.” Dipping the spoon into the liquid, he brought it to his lips. The dish, with its tangy and savory flavor, exceeded his expectations. “And it tastes delicious.”

“Thanks. I added a secret ingredient.”

“Can you share?”

She grinned. “Coffee.”

“Coffee? I wasn’t expecting that.”

“My dad says it adds a deeper, more complex flavor.”

“I’d have to agree.”

“Whatever you do, don’t tell anyone I can cook.” She winked. “They might start asking me to prep meals, and that’s the last thing I want.”

Tyson laughed and ate another spoonful.

The front door opened.

A moment later, Chandler yelled across the house, “Olivia, you’ve got a package.”

He and Wes must have just returned.

She squinted at his words, however. “What do you mean a package?”

“I mean a package. As in, a box. Has your Amazon habit started up here also? I know you’re on a first name basis with all those drivers at home.”

Olivia raised her eyebrows. “Ha ha. Very funny. But no, I haven’t ordered anything, and no one should know I’m staying here.”

“Anyone who follows social media might know,” Tyson reminded her quietly. “Remember, we’re dating?”

“Right.” She bit her lower lip and shoved her bowl away, suddenly looking uneasy.

She twisted around in her seat as Chandler entered the room carrying a standard

brown box. He set it on the table in front of Olivia.

Tyson watched, expecting her unease to transform into a look of pleasure.

But instead of looking pleased Olivia's face turned ghostly white.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Olivia carefully opened the package and peered inside.

Everything around her began to spin.

It was just as she'd feared.

Flowers were nestled inside the cardboard.

Olivia pushed herself away from the table, away from the roses, and stood. "Throw them away."

"Don't you want to even see who they're from?" A puzzled expression captured Tyson's face.

Olivia shook her head, averting her gaze from the box. "Just get rid of them."

Tyson bristled as he lifted the box from the table and handed it back to Chandler. "Take these out of here."

Chandler glanced inside and sucked in a breath.

Just then, Wes walked into the room. He stopped in his tracks when he noticed the tension in the air.

Then his gaze traveled to the box. "What's going on?"

Chandler headed for the trashcan without responding.

Wes grabbed his arm and peered inside.

Then he glanced at Olivia. “No . . .”

She said nothing, unable to contain the tremble that captured her muscles.

“We should call the police,” Wes said. “This could be evidence. Is there a card?”

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t matter.” Olivia adamantly shook her head. “Even if there is evidence, it won’t do any good. The best thing to do is put them in the trash and try to forget we ever saw them. Someone is just trying to shake me up.”

Silence filled the room. No one seemed to know how to respond.

“If you’ll excuse me, I think I need to lie down.” Then Olivia fled the room.

* * *

Tyson watched Olivia leave.

He wanted to go after her, but he didn’t.

Maybe she needed space.

He glanced at Wes and Chandler, seeking answers. “You think someone is messing with her?”

Wes shrugged. “Brian Elliot is dead. Maybe someone is just playing some kind of sick joke.”

“Or it’s a copycat,” Chandler added, no delight in his voice.

“A copycat?” Tyson repeated.

Chandler shrugged. “They happen. In my opinion, this is either a joke or a copycat. I hope it’s just a sick joke.”

“Someone would have to be pretty twisted to do something like this,” Tyson muttered.

He wasn’t a stranger to the human mind. He knew sick people were out there—sick people with twisted minds and evil intentions.

But he hated seeing someone with such a sick personality hurting people he cared about.

Yes, cared about.

He cared about Olivia—as much as he could after knowing her only a week.

But he also had another possibility to consider.

What if the person threatening him was trying to get to Olivia also?

What if this had nothing to do with The Admirer?

What if this had to do with that casino Damon Kudlow wanted to build? What if Damon had seen that article claiming Tyson and Olivia were dating? What if he’d seen Olivia as an easy target and a good way to distract Tyson from building that school?

The possibility made him feel nauseous.

“What should we do?” Tyson asked. “You two know her the best.”

“Give her time,” Wes said. “She . . . well, she hasn’t been the same since everything happened. That man stole something from her . . . and I don’t think we’ll ever get that carefree Olivia back again. She pretends to be carefree, like she’s healed. But . . . she’s not. Maybe she never will be.”

Tyson’s heart panged with grief at the finality of his words. More than anything, he wanted to make sure Wes’ assessment wasn’t true. Olivia could heal.

But she needed to believe that first.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Olivia escaped to her room, trying also to flee the memories.

It didn't work.

They hit her at full force. Visions of finding roses at her doorstep just over a year ago. Memories of the terror that followed.

Her breath came out in labored spasms as she fought to remain in control.

"Olivia," Wes called from outside her door. "Can I come in?"

"I guess." She hugged her legs to her chest as she sat on her bed leaning against the headboard.

Wes came inside and gently lowered himself beside her. "I looked through the box."

She figured he would. Wes was protective of her and wouldn't just let this slide, as much as she wished otherwise.

"And?" Her voice caught. Did she want to know?

"It was a dozen red roses, no note."

Olivia hugged her legs more tightly. She desperately wanted to wake up and realize that this was just another one of her nightmares.

Only she knew it wasn't.

This was real.

Wes' eyes met hers. "I think we should call the police."

Olivia shook her head. "What would I say to them? Officer, I got a dozen roses. Please arrest whoever sent them to me."

His expression remained stony. "Based on what happened . . ."

"It's probably a joke."

"Then tell the FBI. They know your story."

She frowned. "I'd rather not."

"What if you get more flowers?"

She pressed her eyes closed. "I don't want to think about it."

Wes held her gaze until finally saying, "I understand that. But you may have to."

"I'll be careful." She couldn't overreact—not until she knew something for sure. "I'll wait to see if I get more roses first. If I do, I'll tell the police."

Wes appeared skeptical but finally nodded and leaned back. "Is there anyone who's been giving you a hard time? Anyone you can think of who might have done this?"

Olivia blew out a breath. "Not really. I mean, who would hate me this much? I take that back. Being a media personality has made plenty of people hate me."

“But to do this?” He pressed his lips together and grimaced.

“I know . . .”

“What can I do for you?”

“Tell everyone I don’t want to be disturbed for the rest of the day, please. I’ve already recorded the footage we need, and I have a million emails, texts, and messages to catch up on. Seems like a good day to do that.”

Wes squeezed her knee. “I’m here if you need me, darling.”

A smile touched her lips. “I know. Thanks, Wes.”

* * *

Olivia held true to her word and stayed in her room the rest of the day.

She tried to keep herself busy with work. But her thoughts stayed on those flowers.

Should she report them to the police? They’d only think she was crazy. What was so threatening about receiving roses? The words sounded ludicrous to her own ears.

The roses had to be either a joke or from someone determined to be a copycat of The Admirer, she concluded. Nothing else made sense.

The man who’d terrorized her was dead.

He had been for more than a year.

Her doubts all returned again. She’d been trying to push them away.

Maybe that was the wrong choice, however.

When she'd seen a picture of Brian Elliot, nothing about him had seemed familiar. She'd even watched a video of him that had been taken at his worksite for a promo video—a video that had quickly been taken down.

But as she'd watched his mannerisms, she'd realized his movements didn't seem familiar.

Wouldn't she recognize his motions?

She wasn't sure.

But the possibility that the police had somehow gotten the wrong man was something she couldn't deny—and one that had lingered in her mind for a long time.

* * *

Olivia looked at the digital clock beside the bed and saw it was 1:14 a.m. She closed her eyes, wishing for sleep to come, but it wouldn't.

Finally, she threw the covers off and got out of bed. She still wore her exercise outfit from earlier. Throwing a sweatshirt over her clothes, she opened the door to the room.

She needed some fresh air.

She slipped down the hallway and out the back door.

Maybe going outside at this hour wasn't smart. She didn't know.

But she'd felt safe out here. Plus, she knew Tyson had security.

She wasn't sure if he'd always had so many precautions in place or if it was only since she'd arrived. Either way, she wasn't complaining.

Besides, looking at the miles and miles of trees and hills around her felt refreshing. And the patio she most enjoyed was nestled in a corner with two walls on either side of her.

Just to be safe, she brought her pepper spray and her phone.

She prayed she wouldn't have to use either. Prayed that this jokester who'd sent the flowers had gotten his laughs and would now back off.

Olivia walked to a cushioned patio chair and was about to sit down when she realized someone else was already out here.

She could feel it.

Drawing in a quick breath, she grasped the edge of the chair, her knuckles white with intensity.

She'd thought this would be harmless.

She was wrong.

Coming out here was a terrible idea.

She gripped her pepper spray as she prepared herself to act.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“It’s me,” a deep voice said from the shadows. “Tyson. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

As Tyson stepped into the outdoor lighting, relief flooded Olivia.

She glanced at his shadowed figure and sighed. “What are you doing up at this hour?”

He stepped closer, his voice deep but calming. “I might ask you the same question.”

“I needed some fresh air. Besides, I feel safe out here.”

Tyson closed the distance between them, and they both took a seat in the chairs. His hair was tousled as if he’d tried to sleep but couldn’t. Wearing a sweatshirt and jeans, he looked down-to-earth and entirely too handsome.

“This is one of my favorite places also,” he admitted.

Silence fell between them. But it wasn’t awkward as Olivia feared. Instead, it was a comfortable “it’s-okay-to-be-quiet-sometimes” kind of silence.

After listening to the sounds of tree frogs and crickets for several minutes, Olivia asked, “Do you have trouble sleeping often?”

“Only when I have a lot on my mind.” Tyson’s gaze lingered on her as if he was trying to get a message across. “How are you doing? I mean it, Olivia. I want to know how you’re really doing.”

She swallowed hard. “I’m not losing it, if that’s what you think.”

“I never thought that.”

This would be a good time to share her story if she was going to at all.

However, she didn’t like to talk about her ordeal. She’d rather pretend it didn’t happen. But maybe Tyson deserved an explanation.

Despite her reasoning, the words wouldn’t leave her lips. Not yet.

Instead, she held her gaze steady on his. “You deserve an explanation for what happened yesterday. But I just can’t bring myself to talk about it yet.”

If she talked about it, she’d break down into tears. She didn’t want Tyson to see her in that state. She needed to keep things professional. But staying at his house and spending so much time together blurred lines.

Maybe staying here with Tyson had been a mistake. But leaving now would only raise questions. She just needed to be stronger.

“You don’t have to tell me anything.” His voice was gentle and compassionate. “I’ll be here if you ever want to talk. I just wanted to let you know that.”

Relief flooded her.

Tyson was such a patient person. How could someone not admire that quality?

“There is something I need to tell you, however,” he said.

Olivia’s breath caught. She didn’t like that tone.

But now she had to know what he needed to say.

* * *

Tyson shifted uncomfortably, hating that he had to bring up this subject.

“Listen, it didn’t seem relevant to share this information with you at first,” he finally started. “But now it could be.”

“What is it, Tyson?” Fear tinged her voice.

Tyson hated that he’d made her sound that way.

“The truth is . . . that school I’m trying to have built . . . there are people who are opposed to it.”

“You mean from the casino?”

“There are others as well.”

She squinted in confusion. “Why would anyone else be opposed to a new school?”

“Political reasons. Tribal reasons. Greed reasons. Any and all of the above.”

“Okay . . .” Olivia continued to stare at him in confusion. “But I still don’t understand.”

He frowned and gazed into the distance. “I’ve gotten some threats. Mostly empty threats from someone most likely associated with the casino. But that’s not a guarantee. I haven’t taken the intimidation tactics too seriously because nothing has come of them.”

She remained quiet, her gaze quivering. “And?”

“And . . . I’m afraid someone sent you those flowers as a way of targeting me.”

She blinked. “What?”

Tyson nodded slowly. “It must sound crazy. But someone has been trying to get to me using whatever means possible. There’s a chance this person heard you were here and decided to capitalize on your past trauma. Maybe as a way of distracting me. I’m not sure.”

She blinked several times again. “Oh . . . I—I don’t know what to say.”

“That’s why I’ve hired extra security. I just want to be safe.”

“Sounds wise.”

“As long as you’re here . . . I’m not going to let anything happen to you, Olivia. Especially not on my watch.” Conviction hardened in his stomach as he said the words.

Tyson meant them now more than ever.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

After her workout the next day, Olivia drove into Charlotte to pick up a few things.

While she was out, she decided to stop by Tyson's office.

She wanted to personally thank him for being a listening ear—without worrying if Wes or Chandler were around reading too much into her words.

If she was truthful with herself, she might admit that she was stopping by because she just wanted to see him again. The man was intriguing, and she wanted to know more—despite Lyle's advice that she should remain unattached.

She took the elevator to the sixth floor and smiled at Sheri, Tyson's administrative assistant, as she approached. Olivia had met Sheri when Tyson brought her by for a tour last week.

"Hi, Sheri." Olivia paused at the woman's desk. "Is Tyson in?"

"I'm sorry, he's not." The perky, twentysomething blonde smiled brightly up at Olivia. "But he should be back any minute now. You can wait in his office if you'd like."

"If you don't think he'll mind . . ."

"Not at all."

Olivia nodded and opened the door. She sat in a chair across from his desk and waited. As she did, her eyes roamed the room.

Just like his home and truck, the office fit Tyson: practical and immaculate. There weren't any papers left in stacks around his desk or on his filing cabinet, unlike Olivia's desk at the station. Everything here was in its place.

She waited for five minutes before realizing she had too much energy to sit.

Standing, she began wandering around the office.

She smiled as she looked at a picture on his desk. It was of Tyson and an older woman Olivia assumed was his mother. They smiled at each other in the photo, and it was easy to see the affection between them.

Continuing around the space, Olivia slid her finger across the back of his leather chair. Impulsively, she pulled it out and sat down at the desk, grinning as she sat upright in imitation.

She imagined Tyson sitting here running his business. She wondered if he was as patient with his employees as he was with her. She couldn't imagine him being any other way.

A phone rang nearby, jolting her from her thoughts.

She laughed at herself for being so jumpy.

But that antsiness was just a part of who she was now.

Pushing back the chair, she started to stand when her eye caught something tucked underneath the desk. She leaned down to take a closer look.

As her gaze hit the objects, she gasped.

Was that . . . ?

It couldn't be.

But it was.

Reaching beneath his desk, she pulled out a bundle of red roses.

Her throat went dry as she counted . . .

Ten.

There were exactly ten roses.

Shakes overtook her.

Was Tyson the one doing this to her? Was this some kind of scheme to boost his ratings? Or was he truly evil?

She had no idea.

But her blood turned to ice at the thought.

* * *

Olivia sprinted from the office, ignoring Sheri's questions as she hurried past.

She had to get away. She had to process what she'd found. Decide what to do next.

Reaching the elevator, she pressed the down button over and over again as if that would make it come faster.

She couldn't wait any longer. Instead, she rushed to the stairs and pushed open the door.

She'd only taken two steps before she ran into an immovable, living and breathing brick wall.

"Olivia?" Tyson grasped her arms. "Where's the fire?"

She snapped her gaze up to him. "It was you?"

"What was me?" His forehead scrunched.

"How could you?" she snapped. "I trusted you. Was offering a listening ear just to cover up the fact that you were the one?"

Tyson's gaze fluttered behind her. Olivia was sure an audience of his employees were listening, but she didn't care.

Apparently, Tyson did care. He pulled her into the stairwell, and the door snapped closed behind them.

At once, her lungs tightened.

She should have waited for the elevator.

She hadn't been thinking. Only reacting.

But she hated confined spaces.

Of course, she hadn't expected to run into Tyson in the stairwell.

But she had. What were the odds?

Fear coursed through her, and she tried to control her breathing.

Tyson stared at her, concern showing in his gaze, in his wrinkled forehead. "What are you talking about, Olivia? What do you mean about me being the one?"

"I found the roses under your desk." Her voice sounded hoarse. "I might have dismissed them if there had been twelve or eighteen or any other number. But ten? How could you?"

Tyson squinted as if confused. "Olivia, I have no idea what you're talking about."

He sounded convincing, but she'd seen the evidence.

"The roses." Tears threatened to stream down her face. "There are ten roses under your desk."

"I haven't bought any roses since . . ." He looked into space. "Since I saw my mother six months ago. I wasn't aware there were any roses in my office."

Olivia searched his eyes, looking for the truth.

This was Tyson Stone. Not only a fitness guru and entrepreneur.

But he was a good person.

If he'd wanted to hurt her, he could have already done so . . . right?

For those reasons, she believed him. He couldn't have known she would come here.

Except . . . she had asked Hobbes if Tyson was in the office today. If he had any meetings.

Could Hobbes have surmised she was coming?

Was he behind this?

After all, Tyson had said Hobbes worked in New York a year ago before coming to work for Tyson.

She tried to ignore the connection.

But maybe that was a mistake.

Maybe coming here was a mistake . . . one that might cost Olivia her life.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Alarm rushed through Tyson as he watched Olivia's reaction.

Whatever had happened, it had shaken her.

She'd mentioned finding roses in his office. But he had no idea what she was talking about. He certainly hadn't bought any roses—not after the other incident at his house.

He leaned closer so he could look her in the eye. "What's going on, Olivia?"

Tears ran down her cheeks. "I'm sorry. I . . . I guess I just panicked."

Tyson reached for her. Hesitated to gauge her reaction.

When she didn't back away, he pulled her into his arms. "It's okay."

She melted in his embrace.

He let her stay there for as long as she needed. He tried not to note how perfectly she fit in his arms, how her head tucked beneath his chin like a puzzle piece.

Several minutes later, she pulled away. "No, it's not okay. You've been nothing but kind to me, and I . . ."

"You've been through a lot." He placed an arm around her shoulders. "Come on. I'm going to take you to get some coffee. Afterward, I'm going to talk to Sheri and see

what she knows about those flowers.”

Olivia didn’t argue.

Tyson led her down the stairs and into the small deli on the first floor of the building. He ordered while Olivia sat at a table by the window, staring outside at the passersby.

A moment later, he sat down with two cups of warm coffee.

“I feel so paranoid.” Olivia turned her gaze from the window to Tyson.

“Do you want to tell me about the roses?” He took a sip of his coffee.

He knew enough to know roses had somehow been a part of her abduction. But he didn’t know any details.

He waited to see if she’d share.

He wouldn’t push her. She didn’t need that pressure.

But more than anything, Tyson wanted to be there for her . . . if only Olivia would let him.

* * *

Olivia drew in a deep breath and let it slowly escape before answering. “The roses are a countdown.”

“A countdown to what?”

“It’s . . . it’s complicated.”

Tyson drew his eyebrows together in confusion. Instead of asking, he took another sip of coffee and waited for her to continue.

She gathered her thoughts as she drank her coffee. She wasn't sure how much to tell him. But she had to start somewhere.

"He always begins with the dozen roses."

"Who does?"

"The Admirer. He's a serial killer, and roses were his MO. He's supposedly dead, but . . ." She cleared her throat. "After he sends the initial dozen roses, he'll then send ten—like the ten today in your office. Next, I'll get eight, then six, four, and two. Finally, when I'm given the final rose, the person who bought them will reveal himself to me."

Tyson blinked as he stared at her. "Like you said—it's a countdown . . . a really sick countdown."

She nodded somberly.

"But who . . . ?"

Olivia shrugged. "I have no idea. Was the wrong person killed? Did he have an accomplice? Or is there a copycat? Or is this a horrible joke? I have no idea."

"That's terrible."

"I . . . I really hate talking about it. I can't afford to send my mind reeling back in time. It will cripple me, and I have a job to do."

Tyson lowered his voice compassionately. “I understand. But I’m here to listen if you need me, Olivia.”

“I appreciate that.” She took the last swallow of coffee and crumpled her cup. Standing, she looked at Tyson. “Thanks for listening, and I apologize for the misunderstanding. I’ll let you get back to work now.”

She started to walk away, but Tyson grabbed her hand.

She paused and looked back at him.

His expression was surprisingly gentle and kind—enough that her heart softened.

“You don’t have to talk about it anymore. But don’t run away from me because you’re afraid you’ll have to. I’m not going to pressure you into saying anything you don’t want to share.”

A knot formed in her throat. “Thank you.”

“Let’s go back up to my office together and see if we can figure out where these roses came from.” He stood beside her. “We need to get to the bottom of this before this situation escalates any further.”

If only that were possible, she mused. If only.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Curious glances flew between the employees when Tyson and Olivia walked back into the reception area.

The stares didn't seem to bother Tyson, who kept his head high as he led Olivia toward his office.

He stopped just short of his door and turned to his assistant. "Sheri, has anyone been in my office today besides Ms. Montgomery and myself?"

Sheri shook her head. "No one I can remember, Mr. Stone."

"Have you left your desk for any amount of time?"

"I've been to the bathroom once, and I went to lunch for about forty-five minutes." A look of confusion crossed her face. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Not at all. Thank you, Sheri."

Tyson opened his office door and ushered Olivia inside before shutting the door again. "Let's take a look at those roses."

He walked to the other side of his desk, reached down, and grabbed them.

Olivia cringed at the sight of them. The bad memories that came with them were nearly unbearable.

“How would someone know that you were going to come here today?” Tyson asked.
“Did you mention it to anyone?”

Olivia shook her head, having already thought of that question herself. “I have no idea how someone found out. It was a last-minute decision to stop by. I only mentioned it to . . . Hobbes.”

“Hobbes? He wouldn’t have done this.”

She wanted to mention he’d lived in New York. But she didn’t. She knew she’d only sound paranoid.

“And why would someone leave these roses under my desk?” Tyson continued, appearing truly perplexed.

“I don’t know that either. It’s . . . weird.”

Olivia had so many questions, so many things that didn’t make sense.

But was it even possible to make sense of this situation?

She didn’t think so.

* * *

Tyson frowned and picked up his phone. He called the building receptionist, putting her on speaker.

“Erma, did I have any deliveries today—for flowers in particular?”

“No, sir.”

“Any unusual visitors?”

She thought about it a moment. “No one out of the ordinary. UPS came. One of your reps from California stopped by.”

“That’s it?”

“The custodian was here, but he wasn’t a visitor,” Erma said.

Tyson bristled. “The cleaning crew usually comes at night.”

“He said you called and requested a daytime cleaning today.”

His spine tightened even more. “Gerald said that specifically?”

“No, it wasn’t Gerald. It was another man from his company. I didn’t recognize him, but he was wearing the same uniform. But, yes, he did say that.” Erma paused. “Is something wrong?”

Tyson and Olivia looked at each other.

Olivia leaned closer to the phone. “What did he look like?”

“Medium height, dirty-blond hair. He walked with a limp.”

Tyson glanced at Olivia, but she shook her head, letting him know that didn’t ring any bells.

“What time did he come?” Tyson asked.

“Around lunchtime. A lot of people were gone, so I thought it wouldn’t be a problem

for him to get some things done.”

He thanked Erma and ended the call.

Then he stared at Olivia, trying to choose his words carefully. “I know I already mentioned this, but I think you should call the police.”

Olivia visibly tensed. “It won’t do any good.”

“Olivia—”

“Tyson, I’ve been through this before. It won’t do any good.” Her words sounded firm, unmoving.

He thought through the situation again.

“Okay then.” He tapped his fingers together. “Then the only thing that makes sense to me is . . .”

He hesitated, not wanting to sound crazy.

“Is what?”

Finally, he decided just to spill his thoughts. “I think this guy wanted to leave the flowers here for me, knowing what they would eventually do to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it. He had no way of knowing you’d come here today. So someone set up this elaborate scheme, pretended to be a custodian, and left ten roses. He had to know this news would eventually get back to you. Maybe he even thought I’d take

the flowers home with me. It's all part of the game he's playing."

Her face went paler, but she nodded. "I think you're right."

"You have no idea who this is?" He narrowed his eyes as he studied her face.

She shook her head. "No, I don't."

Silence fell between them.

Olivia stood and nodded toward the door, suddenly seeming anxious to get out of there.

He couldn't blame her.

"I should go."

"I'm coming with you." Tyson stood.

She placed her hand on his chest. "No . . . I'll be okay."

His jaw tightened. He didn't want to be too forceful. But if someone was threatening her . . .

"Let me walk you to your car, at least," he finally said.

Her expression relaxed, and she nodded. "I'll let you do that."

Relief filled him.

It was something. A small step—but Tyson would take it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The elevator doors closed with a soft ping, sealing them inside the metal box. Olivia's reflection stared back at her from the polished doors.

Her pale skin. Her tense jaw. Her eyes as they darted around the space.

She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, painfully aware of Tyson's proximity in the confined space. Painfully aware that, for some reason, she ached to be closer to him. To soak up his strength.

"You okay?" Tyson's voice was low, meant only for her.

She nodded quickly. Too quickly.

The elevator hummed as it descended, each floor making her heart rate climb. Every stranger who might step in. Every camera that might be watching. Every opportunity for someone to find her.

When the door opened to the parking garage, the shadows seemed to stretch toward her. The concrete cavern amplified every sound—distant car doors, footsteps, the drip of water from somewhere unseen.

Olivia stepped out, her eyes scanning the dimly lit space.

Tyson placed his hand on the small of her back, warm and steady. The gentle pressure should have been comforting, but it only heightened her awareness of

everything else around them—the row of pillars where someone could hide, the flickering fluorescent light in the far corner, the way their footsteps echoed in perfect rhythm.

“I don’t see anyone.” Tyson’s eyes methodically swept the garage.

“That doesn’t mean he’s not here,” Olivia whispered.

She clenched her keys until the metal bit into her palm.

A car engine started somewhere in the distance. The sound bounced off concrete walls, making it impossible to locate the source.

Olivia froze.

Tyson’s hand pressed more firmly against her back, drawing her subtly closer to him.

“Keep walking,” he said, voice casual but eyes alert. “I see your car just ahead.”

The distance to her sedan stretched like a gauntlet. Twenty steps. Fifteen.

Her skin prickled with the sensation of unseen eyes tracking their movement.

A sudden scraping sound from behind a nearby column sent Olivia’s pulse racing.

Tyson stepped slightly in front of her, angling his body between her and the noise.

A moment later, a homeless woman emerged, pushing a shopping cart.

The woman nodded at them and continued on her way, but the tension didn’t leave Tyson’s shoulders.

They reached her car, and Olivia fumbled with her keys, dropping them once before managing to hit the unlock button. The beep and flash of headlights seemed obscenely loud in the garage.

Tyson checked her back seat, then scanned the area once more while she opened her door.

“I’ll see you later back at the house,” he said, his voice controlled but his eyes communicating so much more. “And please be careful.”

The space between them crackled with unspoken words.

His hand hovered near her arm, not quite touching, as if he wanted to do more than just see her off.

She caught the subtle flex of his jaw, the slight lean of his body toward hers, quickly checked.

Olivia nodded, wishing she could voice the tangle of emotions in her chest—the apology sitting on her tongue, the gratitude that made her throat tight, the fear that made her want to ask him to stay with her.

Instead, she slipped into the driver’s seat and closed her door, watching through the window as Tyson stepped back, his eyes still scanning the garage.

As she turned the key, a single thought eclipsed all others: What if being careful wasn’t enough?

* * *

When Tyson arrived home, he found Wes sprawled on the couch.

He'd been thinking about Olivia since she left the office.

He'd checked the security footage for his building. He'd seen nothing.

Sheri had confirmed the custodian stopped by.

He couldn't help but wonder if the incident was connected with the casino.

Was it his fault Olivia was being tormented like she was?

He paused in the doorway. "Anything good on TV?"

Wes sat up and changed it to another channel. "Not really. Just wasting time mostly."

He paused. "Olivia told me about the roses."

That didn't surprise Tyson. He knew Olivia and Wes were close. "It was quite the shock."

"I can imagine."

He glanced around. "Speaking of Olivia, where is she?"

Wes nodded. "She went upstairs to answer more emails. It's like a never-ending job, especially when you're as popular as she is."

Tyson didn't hide his grin. "I bet she was the homecoming queen, wasn't she?"

"Just as sure as a rodeo girl wears cowboy boots." Wes chuckled.

Tyson shifted, his eyes narrowing. "I'm curious, Wes. How long have you known Olivia? You two seem close."

“We started working together back when she was a news reporter in Louisiana.” Wes flipped the TV off and gave Tyson his full attention. “I was the one who told her she should take the job with Static Entertainment.”

“It sounds like she went through a horrible ordeal.”

“She did. I know I’ve mentioned it before, but Olivia hasn’t been the same since.”

A frown tugged at his lips. “That’s to be expected.”

“She says she found religion during those days underground. We all thought her faith would wear off, that it was just a reaction from her trauma. But it stuck. Olivia changed from a materialistic party girl to a fun-loving, girl-next-door type.”

Tyson let those details settle in his mind. “I can’t imagine what she went through.”

“She hates talking about it. I can’t say I blame her.”

“I can’t either.” Tyson let the information sink in. It really did explain a lot.

Wes’ words remained heavy on Tyson’s mind for the rest of the day. The thought of someone hurting her . . . it made anger rush through his veins.

Anger like he hadn’t felt in a long time.

Suddenly, all he wanted to do was protect her. But would Olivia let him?

And if she did, would Tyson be crossing a boundary he shouldn’t?

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Olivia eased out of her room, planning to slip outside—avoiding detection by anyone.

Instead, she ran into Tyson on the stairs.

Her heart skipped a beat. “Tyson . . .”

Something washed through his gaze as he nodded at her. “Going somewhere?”

“Just outside.”

“I was going to take a walk—just around the backyard. Want to join me?”

Though part of her wanted to avoid him, she knew she couldn’t do that for long. She might as well pull off the Band-Aid. “I’d love to.”

They stepped outside together and walked along the fence until they reached a gate in the back.

“The property extends all the way to those pine trees.” Tyson pointed toward the horizon. “About thirty acres total.”

Olivia nodded. The setting sun felt good on her skin—warm, safe. Different from the artificial lights of her studio. Different from darkness.

“Every time I’m out here, I can’t help but think how beautiful it is,” she said.

“It’s one of my favorite places—my oasis, I suppose. Everyone needs a place where they can breathe.”

Something fluttered in Olivia’s chest when she saw the gentle smile on Tyson’s face—a feeling she quickly quenched.

“Mind if we walk a bit farther?” Tyson asked. “There’s an old stone cottage nestled back here between the pines that dates back to the 1800s. Great visual for your segment.”

“Lead the way.”

They followed a winding path through the pine trees. In the distance, birds called to each other, their songs punctuating the quiet. For a moment, Olivia felt peace wash over her.

Until she saw it.

Half-hidden by wild rosebushes, two small wooden doors lay flat against the hillside. Two weathered and gray wooden slabs with rusted iron hinges and a heavy padlock.

Her steps faltered. Her lungs seized.

Darkness. The smell of damp earth. The sound of footsteps approaching. The mask.

Always the mask.

“Olivia?”

She realized she’d stopped walking. Her hands were trembling.

“What is that?” Her voice sounded strange to her own ears, thin and fragile.

Tyson followed her gaze. “Oh, just an old root cellar. Been here since before I bought the place. I don’t use it. The main house has better storage.”

Root cellar. The words echoed in her mind, bringing with them the scent of roses. She could almost feel the cold concrete against her skin, the weight of thick ropes fastened around her wrists.

“Are you okay?” Tyson peered at her with concern.

“I—” She swallowed hard. “I’m sorry. I just remembered I need to make a call. For the show. My executive producer needs . . . something.”

She was already backing away, moving toward the house, needing distance.

Her heart hammered against her ribs. Her throat constricted.

Get away. Get to the light. Get away from the roses.

“Olivia, wait?—”

But she was already running, feet carrying her back toward the safety of the house, away from those wooden doors and what they represented. Away from the darkness waiting to swallow her whole.

* * *

Something was wrong.

One moment, they’d been walking comfortably side by side. The next, Olivia had

gone pale, frozen in place like she'd seen a ghost.

Maybe she had.

Tyson watched her sprint back toward the main house.

He looked back at the old root cellar, half-buried in the hillside. It was nothing special—just an old farm feature, probably built a century ago. The rosebushes surrounding it had grown wild, untamed. He'd been meaning to clear them out, maybe convert the space into a wine cellar someday.

But Olivia's reaction . . .

The nightlights. The way she startled at sudden noises. The shadows under her eyes that spoke of sleepless nights.

And now this.

The way she looked at that root cellar told him more than any interview could.

She was terrified of it.

He tried to remember the details of her abduction. That was when it hit him.

She'd been kept underground, in a similar space, hadn't she?

He hadn't meant to upset her. He hadn't even thought about the root cellar causing a reaction. He should have known better.

He started back toward the house.

Tyson thought about the missing nightlights again, about her panic when they'd disappeared. About the news that her captor had been killed in a police standoff. About the countdown of roses.

The wild roses by the cellar . . . had she noticed them too?

He quickened his pace. He wouldn't press her for details—that wasn't his style. But maybe tomorrow those rose bushes would mysteriously disappear.

As he approached the house, Tyson saw her through the window, pacing in the living room, phone pressed to her ear. Her other hand was wrapped around herself, protective.

Vulnerable.

Tyson had talked to hundreds of patients during his career as a psychologist, learning to read their body language, their micro expressions.

What he saw in Olivia now was pure, unfiltered fear.

He would give her space. He wouldn't ask questions. But he would make sure that for as long as she stayed on his property, nothing—not even a hint of darkness—would touch her again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Olivia was quiet over the next couple of days.

She tried to keep a smile in place as she filmed her segments. But she found herself escaping often in order to maintain her composure. And she'd talked to Lyle on several occasions.

The roses loomed over her head.

Would she get more? Was this a bad joke?

Or was there more to it?

She didn't know—and since she didn't know, she had to act as if this was the worst-case scenario.

That meant this wasn't over yet. No, it was just beginning.

Then there was the root cellar. Tyson couldn't have known how it would make her feel. He'd already apologized more than once.

But the image still haunted her.

She'd learned in therapy how people like this unhinged guy worked. Whoever was behind these new threats wouldn't stop until he got what he wanted.

Olivia couldn't let him win. But acting like she was fine, that this was all a misunderstanding, wasn't the same thing as believing it.

Life continued on. She tried to keep up, to forget about the dreaded future.

Her fears made her feel guilty. After all, God didn't give her a spirit of fear but of power. The verse ran through her head, and the more she prayed her fear would evaporate and the longer it stayed, the worse she felt.

Maybe her faith was like her smile—a facade.

“Olivia, are you ready?” Wes called down the hallway. “We’re all waiting for you.”

“I’m on my way.” Olivia checked herself in the mirror again before leaving her room. It was time to film a new segment.

She could pull herself together and do this.

She met the crew by the pool, putting aside her heavy thoughts in order to be professional.

* * *

Olivia had fun filming today. Tyson had been in an especially playful mood.

He'd actually bench-pressed her. The segment had been Wes' idea. Then afterward, Tyson had thrown her in the pool before jumping in himself.

Wes and Chandler had joined them, and they'd all blown off steam for a while.

The break had been nice, and every time Olivia remembered it now, it brought a

smile to her lips.

This smile was the real thing—not a forced one to make people think she was okay. This one was natural.

That evening she sat outside, working on some other stories she wanted to feature on her show. She needed to keep her mind occupied.

Just as she closed her computer, her cell phone rang. Though she didn't recognize the number, she answered. She was waiting for calls back from several people for her job.

“This is Olivia.”

“Did you like the roses?” a distorted voice asked.

Olivia's heart skipped a beat. “Who is this?”

She was answered with a choppy, menacing laugh. “Wouldn't you like to know?”

The line went dead.

Her hand shook as she held the phone.

How did this guy get her cell number? If someone was trying to mess with her, this person had carried it too far.

You can do this, Olivia. He's just playing with you. This doesn't mean anything.

Your abductor is dead.

She practiced her breathing, just like Lyle had taught her.

Finally, she realized she couldn't stay outside any longer.

She would go crazy if she sat alone with her thoughts for too long.

Drawing in another deep breath, Olivia stood and gathered her things.

When she pushed her bedroom door open, she started to step inside, but stopped in her tracks.

Another set of roses rested on her bed.

She didn't have to count them to know there were eight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Olivia dropped her phone as a scream escaped.

This couldn't be happening. How had someone gotten into her room?

Multiple heavy footsteps sounded behind her.

Then, "What happened? Are you okay?"

Tyson, Wes, and Chandler flew into the room.

Tyson grasped her arm, turning her, and searched her face for answers.

"I . . . there are—" she started, unable to find the words.

"What happened?" Wes asked. "What's going on?"

"My bed," she whispered.

Their gazes jerked toward the mattress.

No one said anything until Wes finally asked, "How did those roses get there?"

"He's been in the house," Olivia murmured.

"Who's been in the house?" Tyson asked.

“Whoever left those roses. Unless it was one of you—which I know isn’t the case.”

Wes turned to Tyson. “Do you have security cameras?”

“Of course.”

“We need to see that footage.”

“I assure you, no one has gotten into the house,” Tyson said. “My guess is that Hobbes left these here. Let me talk to him.”

He grabbed his phone and made a call. A moment later, he turned back to them.

“Hobbes said they were delivered with a note asking they be placed in your room, Olivia,” Tyson said. “I didn’t tell him anything about the roses, so he didn’t know your history.”

More silence stretched.

“It’s time to call the police,” Wes said quietly. “You’ve gotten three sets now—if you include the ones at Tyson’s office.”

She pulled her arms tight across her chest. “They’ll think I’m crazy.”

“No, they won’t,” Chandler added. “I’ll call them for you.”

She started to argue but stopped.

There was no use.

When Chandler stepped away to make the call, Tyson moved closer, his studious

gaze on her. “You’re shaking.”

“I’ll be okay. It’s nothing I haven’t been through before.” Her voice sounded dull as she said the words.

Tyson rubbed her back with one hand, soothing her nerves. She felt safe with him near, as if nothing and no one could hurt her.

If only that were true.

“The police are on their way.” Chandler joined them again.

Olivia picked up her cell phone—she didn’t see any reason to leave it on the floor. “Whoever left these called me.”

Wes’ eyes widened. “What? How’d he get your number?”

Olivia shrugged. “I have no idea.”

“What did he say?” Tyson asked.

“He asked me if I liked the roses he sent.”

Wes muttered something under his breath before pacing away from her. “He’s sick. It’s gotta be a copycat or someone who wants to mess with your head. Olivia, have you thought about wrapping up this show early and heading back to New York? Maybe your best bet is to get away from all this.”

“Going back to New York might not be a bad idea, Olivia.” Tyson’s voice sounded grim as he said the words.

She considered leaving for another moment.

But fear had dictated far too many of her actions already.

No more.

“It’s my call, and I’m staying. I’m finishing this assignment. I’m finishing this nutrition plan, even if it kills me.” As soon as the word kill left her lips, Olivia regretted saying it.

But her statement very well could be the truth.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

When the police arrived, Detective Scarborough introduced himself.

The man was in his fifties with a nearly bald head, shaggy eyebrows, and an equally shaggy brown mustache.

Olivia sat down with him in Tyson's office. She explained the situation—including what had happened in her past.

Tyson had already checked the security camera footage and, sure enough, a delivery guy had left the flowers, and Hobbes had picked them up.

Tracking who had bought them would be tricky, but Olivia felt confident the detective would call various flower shops in the area to see if the roses had been purchased there. The Admirer, however, had grown his own roses.

What if these were homegrown also?

She swallowed hard. She didn't want to think about it.

Scarborough squinted at her after she finished her story. "Ms. Montgomery, let's say the police got the wrong guy when they killed The Admirer. Let's say the real guy is still out there. How would he know where to find you? And why was he silent for a year?"

"My picture was in a news article with Tyson last week," Olivia said. "That's how he

may have found out I was here.”

“If it’s the same guy, he could have gone after you in New York. Why here?”

“Why does this guy do anything he does? His actions are unexplainable. Maybe he doesn’t like that I’m so far away. Maybe this seems like a good place to strike. Maybe . . .” She shrugged, sounding exasperated. “Maybe he’s just simply unpredictable.”

“I get it.”

“There’s one other thing . . .” She hesitated.

Then she told him about the other murders she’d discovered. The unsolved ones in Maine, Virginia, and Ohio.

His gaze narrowed. “You really think this could be the same guy?”

“I don’t really know anything anymore.”

Scarborough was silent as he processed everything. He studied his notes and then looked up. “You said you worked with FBI Special Agent Harris up in New York?”

“Correct.”

Scarborough nodded slowly. “I’ll give him a call and see what he knows.”

She released the breath she’d been holding. At least that was something .

“Am I free to join my friends now?” Olivia asked.

He nodded. “If I think of any more questions?—”

“You know where to find me,” she finished for him.

She wandered into the living room and found Tyson. She knew what she had to do.

“I’m going to stay at a hotel instead of here,” she started. “You don’t need this kind of stress on you, and I certainly don’t want to pull you any deeper into my problems.”

“You’re my guest.” Tyson’s words were unwavering. “I want you to stay.”

“I can’t ignore what’s happening, Tyson.” Her voice sounded hoarse with emotion.

“Olivia, I don’t know everything that’s happening.” He lowered his tone to just above a whisper. “But I want nothing more than to ensure your safety. God has blessed me with more money than I deserve, and I want to use what He’s given me to help you out. Besides, I’ve been meaning to get an upgraded security system for a long time.”

Olivia took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. She wasn’t going to change his mind. But she was still on the fence about leaving.

She didn’t want to leave. She felt safer here. But was she putting people she cared about in danger?

Tyson gently touched her arm. “Let me fix you some tea. My mom insists everything is better with warm tea.”

She didn’t argue.

They walked into the kitchen, where Tyson filled a silver kettle with water and placed it on the burner. He then pulled out two mugs and placed tea bags inside.

“Maybe this guy made a mistake and left a clue,” Tyson said after a moment of silence.

“Somehow, I doubt it.” Olivia leaned forward. “I thought this nightmare was over. I should have known better.”

Even Mr. Positivity didn’t have a response to her statement.

That meant her situation truly was dire.

* * *

The kettle whistled, and Tyson poured the hot liquid into the mugs. He set one in front of Olivia, along with a bottle of honey and a spoon.

She and Tyson drank a few minutes in silence.

A question had been floating around in Olivia’s mind. She contemplated whether or not to voice it. With hesitation, she finally spoke.

“Tyson, I thought when you became a Christian that God would bless you, that life would be easier because He was watching out for you. Am I doing something wrong? Because I don’t feel any blessings.”

Tyson put down his tea, his full attention on her. “I think the blessings He gives us are things like peace and joy. He never promises to protect us from the hard times in life. He just promises to be there with us when they happen.”

Olivia stared at the remaining orange tea in her mug. “I have so much to learn.”

He smiled. “We all do. Our relationship with God is a journey. We’ll never arrive at

the place where we have all the answers.”

“How’d you get so smart?” Olivia tried to break the serious mood she’d created.

It wasn’t easy for her to open up about spiritual issues. She was too afraid people would judge her. The quicker she could change the subject again, the better.

“It’s like a baby, Olivia. When they’re first born, they can’t eat solid food. It takes time to build up to that. As a baby, they have to be nurtured and loved and taught. As they get older, they take with them what they’ve learned and gradually mature enough to be able to discern things.”

“So our Christian walk is like that, because when we’re new Christians we haven’t had time to mature in Christ yet?” she clarified.

“Exactly. The important thing is that you want to grow.”

Detective Scarborough stuck his head in the kitchen. “Ms. Montgomery, we have a few more questions for you.”

Olivia downed the last sip of her tea and stood. She turned toward Tyson when she reached the doorway. “Thanks for the talk. You have a way of making me feel better.”

His eyes were warm. “Anytime, Olivia. Anytime.”

If only his words could somehow make this situation better instead of just her feelings.

But that wasn’t possible.

This nightmare was just beginning . . . and it would only get worse unless the police stopped this guy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Nightmares assaulted Olivia all night.

Nightmares about being back in that root cellar. Of seeing the man in the Casanova mask. Of being certain she would die in that underground prison.

Even the scent had been strong in her dream—earth, sweat, and roses.

When she awoke, bags hung beneath her eyes. Anyone who saw her would know she'd had trouble sleeping.

She repressed a sigh.

Keeping up appearances was exhausting.

But so was being vulnerable.

Before beginning her morning routine, she reached for her cell phone and called Lyle. She needed to talk to him now more than ever, and he'd told Olivia she could call whenever she needed.

Lyle picked up on the second ring, his voice hoarse as if he'd been sleeping. "Olivia? I wasn't expecting to hear from you this morning."

"I know. I'm sorry if I woke you." Olivia's voice came out thin, reedy. "But it's happening again."

A brief silence. “What’s happening again, exactly?”

“The feeling of being watched. And I’ve received three sets of roses—twelve at first, then ten, then eight. And I got a phone call.” Olivia swallowed hard. “The roses are his signature, Lyle. You know that.”

“Take a deep breath for me.” Lyle’s voice shifted into the calm, measured tone Olivia recognized from their worst sessions. “In through your nose, out through your mouth.”

Olivia obeyed, feeling the oxygen hit her bloodstream.

“Good. Now, let’s think this through logically. Brian Elliot is dead.”

“What if the police were wrong?” Olivia whispered. “Or what if he had a partner?”

“The investigation was thorough,” Lyle reminded her. “But I understand why you’re frightened. Our bodies remember trauma even when we try to forget.”

“So you think I’m imagining things?”

“No,” Lyle said firmly. “I’m saying that someone could be taking advantage of your history. The Admirer case made national news. The details were public. The rose signature was mentioned in every article.”

A chill crawled up Olivia’s spine. “You think someone’s deliberately triggering me.”

“It’s a possibility we need to consider. Have you contacted Special Agent Harris?”

“No. I was afraid he’d think I was being hysterical.”

“Call him after we finish talking. I also want you to document everything. Take photos. Keep a log of unusual occurrences with times and dates.” Lyle paused. “And Olivia? Don’t isolate yourself. That’s exactly what predators want.”

“But what if?—”

“You survived once by keeping your wits about you,” Lyle interrupted gently. “You can do it again. But this time, you’re not alone. You have support. You have tools.”

Yet Olivia knew nothing could prepare her for the horror she might be facing if this was the same guy as before.

“I want you to activate your safety plan,” Lyle continued. “Use your grounding techniques when the anxiety spikes. Pray. Meditate.”

“And if it really is happening again? If someone really is after me?”

“Then we face it head-on.” Lyle’s voice hardened with resolve. “But remember what we’ve talked about. Fear makes the danger feel closer, bigger. Right now, distinguish between what you know and what you fear.”

Olivia closed her eyes. “I know someone called me about the roses. I know there were roses in my room. I fear it’s connected to The Admirer.”

“Good. Keep separating those things. And Olivia?”

“Yes?”

“You’re not the same person you were a year ago. You’re stronger now. Whatever this is, we’ll handle it. Together.”

Olivia stared at her reflection in the mirror across from her bed.

Lyle was right about one thing: She wasn't the same frightened woman from a year ago. She was damaged—but she was stronger.

Now, she had to keep moving forward.

An occasional setback was to be expected. However, Olivia never would have guessed her next setback would include a repeat of the terror she'd been trying so hard to overcome.

* * *

When Olivia finished her call with Lyle, she left a message for Special Agent Harris to call her back. Then she checked in with Deb. She mostly kept the conversation professional. There was no need to stir up unnecessary drama.

Before they got off the phone Deb's voice morphed from serious to playful.

“Not to change the subject or be insensitive, but on a lighter note, you and Tyson Stone have some great chemistry together.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Everyone at the office has watched the raw video footage. We have our own little soap opera playing out before our eyes. You guys would be great together. We're rooting for you.”

Olivia rolled her eyes as she pictured the scene. “Which parts are you talking about anyway?”

“The one where he throws you into the pool, for starters.”

“Chandler and Wes sent that to you?” Olivia would have to talk to them about that later. “I’ll admit Tyson has surprised me. He’s actually really impressive. But there’s nothing going on between us. Tyson has his life, and I have mine.”

“Okay, sure. If you say so . . . I also saw that article that came out about you two. That’s great publicity for your series. The public loves possible romances between celebrities.”

“Well, I’m afraid our ‘possible romance’ will disappoint them.” Tyson was entirely too focused on his career to date, and Olivia had no interest either. She had too much baggage.

Not to mention a possible serial killer coming back to haunt her.

She ended the call, still shaking her head at the strange clash of emotions going on inside her.

Fear of what was happening. Intrigue over Tyson.

Both things left her feeling off-balance.

She had to get a grip and keep her guard up. Leaving herself vulnerable right now would be the worst thing she could do.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The next day, Tyson glanced at his watch, noting it was almost time for the interviews to begin.

He'd invited three of his most successful clients to come showcase their results for Olivia's segment. Their transformations weren't just physical—they represented the holistic approach to health he always emphasized in his program.

As he finished setting up the outdoor area for the post-interview cookout, he spotted Olivia coming down the stairs. His heart skipped a beat.

But when he noticed that she seemed pale, he sobered.

She'd been through so much.

"The crew's all set up in the living room," he told her as she drew near. "Heather, William, and Tonya should be here any minute."

"Perfect. I'm actually looking forward to this."

Tyson smiled at the admission. "You sound surprised."

"Let's just say I didn't expect to become a convert to healthy living quite so quickly."

The doorbell rang before he could respond, and the day was set into motion.

The interviews went smoothly—each guest sharing their journey with honesty and enthusiasm that Tyson knew would resonate with viewers.

He found himself watching Olivia as much as his clients, noting how skillfully she drew out their stories, making connections that even he hadn't considered before. Olivia's earlier trauma seemed to be forgotten—but he knew it was never that easy.

After filming wrapped, Tyson fired up the grill, arranging salmon steaks and vegetable kabobs. The mood lightened as they moved from formal interviews to casual conversation. Laughter drifted across the patio as Heather recounted her first disastrous attempt at making one of Tyson's protein smoothies.

"I nearly broke my blender," she admitted. "And my dog wouldn't even eat it!"

Tyson caught Olivia's eye across the table, pleased to see genuine enjoyment replacing the tension that had shadowed her face for days.

For a few hours, at least, she seemed to have forgotten about the roses and the calls.

After dinner, everyone gathered around the kitchen table to play cards. William proved surprisingly competitive, while Tonya kept them laughing with stories from her job as a kindergarten teacher.

Soon after, Wes and Chandler had to leave. They were both going back to New York for the weekend—Chandler to see his family, and Wes because he had Yankees tickets and a date with his latest love interest.

Just as everyone left, Tyson's landline rang—unusual, since most people called his cell. When he answered, the caller asked for Olivia without identifying himself.

Something in the caller's tone made the hair on Tyson's neck stand up.

He paced into the living room, and he extended the cordless phone toward her.

“Olivia, you have a phone call.” He kept his expression neutral despite his concern.

“Didn’t give me a name.”

“That’s odd.” She looked puzzled as she took the phone, her brow furrowing in confusion. “Hello?”

Tyson watched as her entire body tensed at whatever the caller said.

“Paul?” she whispered, her knuckles whitening around the phone.

Tyson moved to give her privacy but couldn’t help wondering who this Paul was and why his call had such an immediate effect on her.

Was this a social call? Tyson found himself surprisingly bothered by the possibility that it might be.

He lingered in the doorway, telling himself he was just concerned for her safety, but knowing there was more to it than that. Much more.

* * *

Out of the corner of her eye, Olivia saw Tyson lingering in the kitchen, collecting the dirty dishes and placing them in the sink. He wasn’t in a hurry, and she had a feeling he was hanging around with intent.

“Special Agent Harris, thanks for calling me back. Though I’m not sure why you chose this number instead of my cell.”

“I tried your cell, and you didn’t answer. That’s when I did some research and called

this number instead. What's with the formality?"

For some reason, his words grated on her nerves. "Just keeping things professional."

He paused before saying, "I see. How are you holding up?"

His voice sounded low and husky, just as she remembered. It was one of the qualities that first made her heart race.

"I'm hanging in." She glanced over at Tyson.

He wiped down the kitchen table and counter, his muscles rippling beneath his T-shirt as he worked.

Olivia tried not to stare.

"About the message you left me . . . I'm sorry this is happening. I've been in touch with Scarborough, and we're trying to figure out if there's some kind of connection between New York and North Carolina."

Only two people really knew everything she went through with the stalker—Paul and Lyle. Paul had been the lead FBI agent on the case, so he knew all the details.

He'd offered a shoulder to cry on.

She'd trusted him with her heart, and he'd broken it when he'd cheated on her after only two months of dating.

"Have you found out anything?" she asked. "A connection?"

He let out a breath, signaling a conversation shift. "I've reviewed the new evidence.

There could be something there, Olivia.”

Her heart pounded harder. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“I’m going to keep investigating until I find out what’s going on.”

“Thank you.”

Silence stretched a moment.

“Listen, I’m sorry about what happened between us,” Paul finally said. “I know my apology is coming too late, but I had to try things out with Danielle. Otherwise, I’d always wonder what if . . . you know?”

No, Olivia didn’t know. Part of her wanted to confront him again. Another part knew it would be a waste of time. “It’s water under the bridge.”

He paused as if he wanted to say more.

Before he could, she rushed, “Thanks for calling me back. Keep me updated if you hear anything.”

Then she ended the call.

Although she respected Paul’s skills as an FBI agent, his betrayal instantly dissolved any other respect she’d once had for him.

Olivia stood where she was, letting the conversation sink in. She hadn’t heard Paul’s voice in a long time.

And she didn’t even mourn the end of their relationship. Not anymore.

In hindsight, she could see where their relationship had been doomed from the start.

“You okay?” Tyson asked from behind her.

Olivia had almost forgotten he was still in the kitchen. Her cheeks flushed when she remembered he’d heard everything.

She turned to face him, leaning against the counter. “Just an old . . . the FBI agent from New York.”

Tyson’s face showed that he picked up on the conversation enough to know he was more.

Olivia chuckled self-consciously. “Okay, and an old boyfriend. I guess dating the FBI agent on the case seemed like the thing to do. Isn’t that what happens in all the movies? The helpless female falls in love with the only man who can protect her—the dashing FBI agent who’s determined to get to the bottom of things.”

“Except you’re not helpless.” Tyson smiled.

“I’ve learned that.” Her eyes widened to drive home her point. “Believe me, I’ve learned to keep my wits about me.”

Some lessons she never wanted to repeat.

Falling for a man in an adrenaline-fueled situation was one of them.

Never again, she mused. Never again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Tyson had watched Olivia's face as she listened to the person on the other end of the line. Every muscle in her body had tensed at the caller's first words, and the color had drained from her face.

He'd guessed there was some type of romantic tension between Olivia and the person she'd spoken with even before she'd admitted as much.

So this Paul was both an ex and the lead FBI agent on her abduction case.

Tyson's professional curiosity mingled with a more personal interest he wasn't ready to acknowledge. Yet he felt a strange mixture of sympathy and relief.

"If it makes you feel better, some people can't separate the trauma from the person."

"Is that your professional diagnosis, Dr. Stone?" Her attempt at levity fell flat.

"Just an observation." He paused and lowered his voice. "For what it's worth, I've never seen you as a victim."

Her eyes met his, surprise evident. "No?"

"I see someone who survived something unimaginable. Someone who still has nightmares but gets up every morning anyway." Tyson held her gaze. "That's not a victim, Olivia. That's a warrior."

Her breath caught and, for a moment, Tyson thought she might cry. Instead, she smiled—a small, genuine smile that reached her eyes.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “I needed to hear that today.”

The air between them shifted, charged with something neither was ready to name. Tyson found himself wanting to reach for her hand but resisted. He had his promise to keep, his school to build. Getting involved with someone—especially someone as complicated as Olivia Montgomery—wasn’t part of the plan.

But plans changed. He knew that better than most. Still, he needed to be careful and not make any rash decisions.

“I should finish cleaning up,” he said finally, breaking the moment.

“Of course.” Olivia nodded, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “I need to review tomorrow’s segment anyway.”

As he stood to leave, she called his name. When he turned, the vulnerability in her expression nearly undid him.

“I’m glad I’m here, Tyson. Even with everything that’s happening.”

“So am I,” he admitted.

And despite all the reasons it was a terrible idea, he meant it.

* * *

Olivia watched Tyson leave, her emotions in turmoil.

Paul's call had surprised her. She hadn't expected him to return her call so quickly, or to call on Tyson's landline.

With a sigh, Olivia wandered through Tyson's living room, needing to move, to think.

She found herself drawn to the display cabinet in the dining room, one filled with trinkets and souvenirs.

A small, carved wooden box caught her eye. It seemed out of place among the modern pieces, its dark wood weathered with age.

Curiosity piqued, she opened it.

Her heart stopped.

Nestled inside on red velvet lay a white porcelain mask—the elegant, expressionless face of Casanova.

Identical to the one The Admirer had worn.

The room tilted. Her vision narrowed to the mask's hollow eyes, empty and soulless.

She stumbled backward, knocking into the table, unable to tear her gaze from the nightmarish object.

"No," she whispered. "No, no, no."

The crash brought Tyson running from the kitchen. He found her pressed against the wall, eyes fixed on the open box.

“Olivia?” Alarm filled his voice as he approached. “What’s wrong?”

She pointed a trembling finger at the mask. “Where did you get that?”

Tyson looked confused. “Get what?”

“The mask!” Her voice rose in panic. “The Casanova mask!”

He stepped forward to look inside the box.

Then he turned back to her, concern etched across his features. “I don’t know where that came from.”

He led her to the couch and lowered her there. Then he called for Hobbes.

His assistant rushed into the room. “Yes?”

“Do you know where that mask came from?”

Hobbes glanced in the direction Tyson pointed. His face went still, and then he shook his head. “I’ve never seen it before.”

“How would someone get inside to leave it there?”

“I have no idea,” Hobbes admitted.

“Call security and look at the footage. I want answers.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tyson turned back to Olivia. “I didn’t know it was there. I promise.”

Olivia nodded, believing him.

But how had someone gotten inside to leave that mask? To send her that reminder of what had happened? And, most likely, of what was going to happen?

“I’m sorry, Olivia,” Tyson murmured.

The tenderness in his tone nearly broke her. She wanted to tell him everything—about the mask, about Paul’s call, about her fears that Brian Elliot hadn’t been The Admirer after all.

But she couldn’t form the words. Not yet.

Instead, she straightened her shoulders and stood. “I feel like I should lie down.”

“Olivia.” Tyson took a step toward her, then stopped himself. The restraint was visible in every line of his body. “You’re not facing this alone. Not anymore.”

For one wild moment, she wanted to cross the space between them, to feel his arms around her, to believe that safety was possible again.

But she knew better.

Getting close to Tyson would only complicate things—for both of them.

“Thank you.” Her voice cracked. “For understanding.”

“Always.” The word felt like a promise neither of them was ready to make.

As she headed upstairs, Olivia couldn’t shake the image of the mask from her mind.

The roses were counting down. Six would be next.

And after that, four. Then two.

And finally, one.

Then this guy—or this imitator—would grab her.

But this time, would she survive?

CHAPTER THIRTY

Tyson, Hobbes, and Mike—his head of security—reviewed all the security footage from the past twenty-four hours.

At approximately three a.m. last night, the footage went black for thirty minutes.

That must have been when someone left that mask.

But how they had gotten inside was still a mystery.

Tyson supposed someone skilled enough could have scaled the fence and gotten to the house without being noticed.

Had someone accidentally left a door unlocked?

With so many people in and out, it was a possibility.

Mike promised to be even more vigilant, but Tyson was liking this less and less all the time.

After their discussion, Tyson went into his office and called Detective Scarborough to give him the update. The detective said he'd send an officer over to check for prints. Tyson doubted they would find anything.

“Any leads as to who left those flowers?” Tyson started.

Normally, he'd inquire about the threats against the school. But now those were practically forgotten—Olivia's safety was more important.

“Unfortunately, we haven't found anything yet,” the detective said. “We'll let you know when we do.”

“Have you talked to the FBI Special Agent up in New York?” Tyson assumed he had, and that was why Special Agent Harris had called Olivia. But he figured he'd ask to confirm.

“We did. We're both digging deeper into this.”

“Thanks, Detective. I appreciate all you've done.”

“I wish we could do more. Make sure you let us know if Ms. Montgomery gets more flowers. This isn't something she should ignore.”

Tyson shifted in his desk chair. “Have you figured out anything about the flowers?”

“Based on the bloom structure, they appear to be homegrown.”

“Bloom structure?”

“Garden roses tend to have more ruffled, rounded petals.”

“Learn something new every day . . .” Tyson murmured.

“I checked in with all the local shops, just in case. I didn't find any links.”

Tyson bit back his disappointment. “Of course.”

After agreeing to keep each other informed, they ended the call.

Glancing across his desk he spotted his Bible and opened it. It was time to take everything to God in prayer.

He couldn't carry this burden alone any longer.

* * *

That evening, Olivia closed her bedroom door, double-checking that it was locked before moving to the window.

Outside, security lights illuminated Tyson's property, the silhouettes of guards visible at strategic points around the perimeter.

The clock read 9:14 p.m.—not too late to make calls.

She settled at the small desk in the corner, opening her laptop and pulling out her notebook. Inside were the details she'd gathered on the three unsolved murders that had caught her attention—women found in shallow graves around a week after disappearing. One in Maine, one in Virginia, one in Ohio.

She needed to follow up with her contacts.

She dialed the first number on her list.

"Montgomery, you do realize what time it is, right?" The voice that answered was gruff but not unfriendly.

"Hello to you too, Marcus." Despite everything, Olivia found herself smiling.

Marcus Chen had been her most reliable source during her years as a crime reporter. Now a senior investigative journalist with the Associated Press, he had connections throughout law enforcement.

“I was wondering when you’d call back. Your messages were cryptic.”

“I needed to be careful.” She switched to speaker and pulled up her notes. “Did you look into those cases I asked about?”

“I did.” The sound of typing came through the line. “And you’re right—there are similarities that should have raised flags. But the cases were spread across three states with different jurisdictions.”

Olivia’s heart quickened. “Tell me.”

“All three victims were kept somewhere underground before being killed. All three had traces of soil under their fingernails that didn’t match where their bodies were found. All three had small puncture marks on their necks and thighs—some kind of injection.”

“Like sedatives.” Olivia subconsciously touched her thigh, the place where she’d been injected by The Admirer.

“Exactly.” More typing. “There’s something else—something that wasn’t released to the public.”

She tensed. “What?”

“Rose petals. In their lungs.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Olivia's blood ran cold. "This guy made his victims breathe in rose petals?"

"According to the coroner in the Ohio case, the killer forced the petals down their throats just before death," Marcus said. "It was part of his . . . ritual."

Her vision blurred momentarily. She gripped the edge of the desk, forcing herself to breathe. "That wasn't part of The Admirer's MO. At least, not with me. Not with the cases we knew about in New York."

"This could be a copycat who's adding his own signature," Marcus suggested. "Or . . ."

"Or The Admirer was just getting started in New York," she finished. "And what happened to these women is what would have happened to me if I hadn't escaped."

The silence on the line stretched uncomfortably.

"I reached out to my contact at the FBI," Marcus finally said. "She's looking for connections between your case and these three. So far, nothing concrete—but she's interested."

"Thank you," Olivia insisted. "I'd appreciate any updates."

"Of course. But she might have questions for you. The Bureau doesn't play nice, even with victims."

“I’m not a victim,” Olivia said automatically, the response ingrained from countless therapy sessions.

“No, you’re not.” Marcus paused. “How are things down there in North Carolina? Your cryptic messages mentioned roses.”

Olivia hesitated, suddenly aware of how exposed a phone call could be. “It’s complicated. I’ll explain everything when I can.”

“Olivia—”

“I need to make another call,” she cut him off. “But thank you, Marcus. Really.”

He sighed. “Just . . . be careful, would you? And call me if you need anything else.”

After ending the call, Olivia stared at her notes. Rose petals in their lungs.

The thought made her physically ill.

Taking a deep breath, she dialed her second contact—Jenna Winters, a former classmate who now worked as a forensic anthropologist with the Virginia State Police.

“I was wondering when you’d get around to calling me,” Jenna answered, her voice edged with concern. “I’ve been looking into that Jane Doe case you mentioned.”

“And?” Olivia prompted.

“It’s disturbing, Liv. Really disturbing.” Jenna’s professional demeanor cracked slightly. “The dirt found under her nails—it contained microorganisms typically found in root cellars. Old ones. The kind used before modern refrigeration.”

Olivia closed her eyes, trying to shut out the memory of earthen walls pressing in around her. “Was there anything else? Anything that might help identify who did this to her?”

“Actually, yes. One thing the local detectives missed, but I caught during a secondary examination.” Jenna lowered her voice, though she was likely alone in her lab. “A fiber. Caught under one of her fingernails. Some kind of high-end synthetic. We haven’t been able to identify exactly where it came from yet—but at least it’s something.”

“Maybe it will lead somewhere.”

“Possibly.” A pause. “Olivia, what’s going on? These questions . . . this isn’t just professional curiosity, is it?”

Olivia glanced at her locked door, suddenly feeling the weight of isolation despite the security outside. “I think the man who abducted me is still alive, Jenna—or that he had an accomplice. And I think this guy has killed at least three women since then.”

“What?” Jenna’s shock was palpable. “Have you told the police?”

“I’m working with them. But I need more. I need something concrete that ties these cases to mine.”

“I’ll keep digging,” Jenna promised. “But you should know—I found two more cases that match the pattern. One in Pennsylvania, one in Tennessee.”

Olivia’s stomach dropped. “Two more? When?”

“The Tennessee victim was found three weeks ago. Pennsylvania, just nine days ago.”

Which meant he'd been active even while sending her the roses. The realization chilled her.

"I have to go," she said abruptly. "But send me everything you can, okay?"

After ending the call, Olivia sat motionless, processing what she'd learned. Five more women dead. Five more lives ended by the man who now had her in his sights again.

* * *

Tyson paused outside Olivia's room and softly knocked at her door.

"Olivia?" He kept his voice low with concern. "Everything alright? The security team reported hearing voices."

A moment later, she opened the door, a look of surprise across her face. "I was just making some calls. Doing some research."

She stepped back, inviting him inside. After hesitating a moment, he stepped closer.

As soon as he did, his gaze fell on her open notebook, filled with her cramped handwriting.

"The other murders you mentioned to Scarborough?" he clarified.

She nodded, suddenly appearing exhausted. "Five now. Not three. And there's evidence linking them to The Admirer's MO."

His expression darkened. "You should tell Scarborough."

"I will. Tomorrow." She sank onto the edge of the bed. "I just needed to be sure

first.”

Tyson hesitated, then sat beside her, careful to maintain a respectful distance. “What did you find out?”

As she recounted what Marcus and Jenna had told her, Tyson felt all the emotions—horror, anger, disgust. But most of all, his resolve hardened with each detail.

“We’ll find him,” Tyson told Olivia when she finished. “Whatever it takes.”

She studied his face without apology. “Why do you care so much, Tyson? Really?”

He met her gaze, feeling vulnerable enough that he should know better than to speak. “Because no one should have to face darkness alone.”

The simple answer seemed to crack something inside her, and she looked away.

He wanted to take the words back—yet he didn’t. He meant what he said.

More than anything, he wanted to be there for Olivia.

Olivia finally cleared her throat. “I should get some rest. Tomorrow’s going to be a long day.”

Tyson nodded and rose. “I’ll be down the hall if you need anything.”

“Thank you.”

He paused at the doorway. “Olivia?”

“Yes?”

“We’re going to stop him,” he promised. “He doesn’t get to break you. Not again.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The next morning, life felt heavier than usual.

Maybe Olivia just had too much on her mind. Or maybe too much had happened. She wasn't sure.

After church, Tyson turned toward her.

"I want to take you somewhere," he told her. "Get you away from this place for a while."

Olivia raised her eyebrows, hesitating a moment. Getting away might be nice. The walls of Tyson's house, once a sanctuary, had begun to feel like a beautiful prison.

"I'm game," she finally said. "Can I ask where?"

He shook his head. "It's a surprise."

"How should I dress?"

"Casually."

"You've got it," Olivia said. "Just give me a few minutes to get things ready."

Ten minutes later, they climbed into his F-350 and started down the road. The tinted windows provided some sense of security, though Olivia couldn't help glancing at the

side mirror occasionally, watching for vehicles that might be following them.

“Does this destination have anything to do with food?” Olivia raised her eyebrows hopefully.

Tyson chuckled. “You’ll get food there.”

“A hint?”

He shook his head. “You were the kid who searched all over the house at Christmastime looking for presents, weren’t you?”

“How’d you know?” she said with a laugh.

They continued to talk about trivial things as they headed down the road. Olivia discovered that Tyson liked jazz, his favorite author was C.S. Lewis, and he was considering buying a Great Dane and naming him Scooby.

Olivia admitted she’d never go skiing again because of a clumsy accident she had her first and last time doing it, that she was allergic to cats, and that she loved to travel.

In the middle of their talk, she peered into her sideview mirror again and frowned.

The same dark sedan had been behind them for the past twenty minutes, maintaining a consistent distance.

Her muscles tensed.

She wasn’t imagining things.

“Don’t worry about the blue sedan back there.” Tyson seemed to notice her change in

posture. “That’s Donald, our security detail. I wasn’t taking any chances today. I probably should have mentioned that to you earlier, however. I just didn’t want you to think I was making a big deal out of nothing.”

Olivia exhaled slowly. Was this what her life had become? Seeing threats in every shadow?

They passed through a small town with a single traffic light before Tyson turned off the main road and started down a bumpy dirt lane. Olivia didn’t have any guesses as to where they were heading.

Her phone had lost its signal miles back.

Once she was out here with Tyson, she’d have no means of contacting anyone else.

Her lungs tightened, and she felt as if the air around her was pressing in closer until she couldn’t breathe.

She closed her eyes, fighting anxiety.

She could trust Tyson. She had no reason to think she couldn’t.

* * *

Finally, Tyson made another turn. The woods cleared, and a picnic shelter appeared in front of them.

Several older model cars were parked around it, and underneath, clusters of people had gathered. Dishes and plates were placed on the tables, music played from a small speaker, and three dogs chased each other in a nearby field.

Olivia turned to Tyson as he pulled to a stop, her brow wrinkled in curiosity. “Care to explain?”

He grinned. “Just a few of my favorite people I want you to meet.”

As they approached the shelter, the aroma was enticing—savory with hints of pepper and something fried.

His stomach rumbled in response.

Everyone under the shelter was Native American. When they saw Tyson approaching, they turned and nodded toward him.

A few shyly smiled. Some of the older men appraised Olivia with curious eyes, making her feel both welcome and somehow tested at the same time.

“Danuwoa.” Tyson reached for one of the men and shook his hand. “I told you I’d make it.”

Danuwoa, an older gentleman with distinguished features, patted Tyson on the shoulder.

“Good to see you.” His eyes drifted to Olivia.

Tyson noticed the shift in his gaze and introduced them. Danuwoa nodded solemnly, his weathered face revealing little emotion, though his eyes held a spark of interest.

They sat down to enjoy the meal that had been prepared: kanuchi, a nut soup made with hickory nuts and sometimes hominy. Three Sisters stew, bean bread, and fry bread.

All of it was delicious.

Tyson hoped that by coming here, maybe Olivia could relax.

Plus, he wanted to give her insight into who he was and what made him tick.

He'd never brought anyone else here before.

Bringing her was a risk. But he didn't regret it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

As Tyson talked to different people at the shelter, Olivia felt herself drawn to a girl named Tina.

She was probably ten years old and adorable with her tanned skin and dark eyes. Unlike the adults, who maintained a certain reserve, Tina's curiosity was open and unguarded. She'd been watching Olivia seemingly since the moment she and Tyson had arrived.

"Do you work with Tyson on TV?" Tina scooted closer on the bench.

Olivia smiled. "I do—for a little while, at least. I'm learning about his fitness program."

"He teaches us too." Tina beamed. "He says strong bodies make strong minds."

"That sounds like him." Olivia smiled. "Do you live here at the reservation?"

Tina nodded. "My whole life. Sometimes I stay with Mr. Tyson too, when my mom has to travel for work. He's trying to build us a school so we can learn our language and stories. My grandmother says it's the most important thing anyone's done for us in a long time."

"Your grandmother sounds very wise."

Tina nodded. "She is."

Before Olivia could ask more, movement at the edge of the clearing caught her eye.

A figure ducked behind a tree.

Her pulse quickened.

Was it him? Had the man bent on tormenting her followed her to the reservation?

Panic began to bubble inside her.

Because if that was the man who'd sent her roses, what exactly was he planning to do here?

* * *

Olivia's pulse quickened . . . until she recognized the blue windbreaker of their security detail.

She released the breath she'd been holding.

It was just Donald, trying to keep guard while also giving them privacy.

She was always so on edge—even when she shouldn't be.

Even here, she couldn't escape the watchful eyes that had become part of her life.

As Tina chattered about her friends and the pottery her grandmother made, Olivia found herself relaxing despite everything.

There was something about this place—the mountains rising in the distance, the simplicity of the gathering, the easy laughter—that felt healing.

When Tina ran off to play with other children, an elderly woman settled next to Olivia. Her face was mapped with deep lines that spoke of decades under the sun, but her eyes were sharp and assessing.

“You are troubled,” she said, not a question but a statement of fact.

Olivia blinked, surprised. “I . . . yes, I suppose I am.”

The woman nodded as though Olivia had confirmed something important. “There are some who carry darkness with them. It follows, like shadow.”

Olivia drew in a sharp breath.

The woman’s gnarled fingers reached for Olivia’s wrist, turning it gently to examine the fading marks from the ropes that had once bound her. Most people didn’t notice them.

Most days, Olivia didn’t either.

But this woman seemed to know instinctively that they were there.

“And some who carry light, even when walking through darkness,” the woman continued.

Olivia’s pulse quickened, and she shuddered.

This woman was hitting a little too close to the truth.

Olivia withdrew her arm and muttered thank you to the woman.

Then her gaze searched the crowd for Tyson.

But even when she found him, the woman's words wouldn't leave her mind.

Which one was Olivia—did she carry darkness or light?

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

After they'd eaten and talked for a couple of hours, Tyson turned to Olivia. "Ready to get going?"

Olivia nodded. "Let me just tell Tina goodbye."

She found the girl and sat beside her.

"Will you take this to remember me by?" Tina pulled a beaded necklace from her neck, the intricate pattern of blue and white beads catching the light.

"I don't need a necklace to remember you." Olivia's heart warmed at the gesture.

"Please, take it." Tina pressed it forward insistently.

Olivia glanced at Tyson, hoping for an indication as to whether or not she should accept it. He nodded, his eyes showing pleasure.

"Thank you, Tina. It's very beautiful." Olivia gave the girl a hug. "Would it be okay if I came back to see you sometime?"

Tina's eyes widened, and a smile spread across her face. "Don't forget about me."

"Never, sweetheart. Never."

When Tina hugged her again before running back to her family, Olivia fought tears.

Tyson slipped an arm around her shoulders and led her back to his F-350. Olivia wished they didn't have to leave.

"Thanks for sharing your visit with me," Olivia said inside the truck.

Tyson started the engine and backed out, silence falling between them.

Olivia waited for Tyson to explain and knew he would in good time.

"As I told you, my grandmother was a full-blooded Cherokee," he said. "Many of the people on this reservation are without hope. Their life expectancy is only forty-five years. Alcoholism and suicide are rampant. There's also a 50 percent unemployment rate."

"That's awful. Why, though? I don't understand."

"The same opportunities aren't available here. Educational resources are limited. The closest university is almost two hours away. Most families can't afford to send their children, even if they wanted to go."

His knuckles whitened on the steering wheel, and Olivia gave him a moment to gather his thoughts.

"These people have been promised change for generations," he continued. "Every politician, every developer, every well-meaning charity comes through with plans that never seem to materialize. Just more broken promises."

Olivia could only imagine what that might be like.

They drove through winding mountain roads for another twenty minutes before pulling to a stop in front of a piece of property that had been cleared.

“This is where the new school will be built.” Tyson’s voice shifted—pride, hope, and something deeper. “It will have twelve classrooms, one for each grade.”

Excitement zinged through her. She’d wanted to know more ever since she’d seen those blueprints on Tyson’s desk.

“Want a closer look?” Tyson asked. “I mean, it’s nothing but land right now, but I still know the basic layout.”

“I’d love one.”

They climbed out of the pickup.

“Hold on a sec.” Tyson jogged behind them to speak with the security agent a moment.

Then he came back and led her onto the property.

Tyson began to show her where a cultural center would be, a place where elders could teach traditional crafts. He showed her where the library would stand, one with resources in both English and Cherokee. There would also be a community kitchen where families could gather.

The fitness empire, the books, the products . . . all of it fed into this dream.

If Olivia thought she admired him before, seeing this new side of him did her in. There was no going back now, no matter if she got hurt or not.

Tyson Stone was the most incredible man she’d ever met. Maybe one day she’d tell him that. Right now, some kind of fear held her back from speaking the words.

As they continued to walk the property, a pop in the distant woods made them both freeze.

Their peaceful moment disappeared.

Had someone followed them here?

* * *

Tyson heard the sound and tensed.

Was someone watching them?

Donald should be keeping an eye on things.

But Tyson didn't want to let down his guard.

"What was that?" Olivia whispered.

Tyson shifted, placing himself between her and the potential threat. "Probably just the wind knocking down an old branch or something."

They waited, listening.

Silence.

They heard nothing else.

But he knew Olivia was shaken. He'd shown her the property, so now they could leave.

“I think we’re okay,” he murmured.

She nodded, still not appearing completely convinced.

But there was one more thing he wanted to do.

He hoped Olivia might be up for it.

“I think you’ve seen enough here,” Tyson said. “I just wanted to show you what’s been keeping me occupied for the past few years.”

“Did you want to feature this location on the show?”

He shook his head. “No, I’m not showing you because I want attention. I don’t need my name behind this. I just want to see this school built, so the good work can start.”

He reached for her hand.

She eyed his arm a moment before slipping her fingers between his.

He led her toward his truck, keeping his eyes wide open for trouble as he did so.

He thought they were safe, but he didn’t want to take any chances.

Once he saw the security agent still guarding the area, he breathed a little easier.

He turned to Olivia. “You ready to head back?”

“Back to life? To reality?” She frowned. “Not really. It’s been really nice to get away from everything for a while. Thank you.”

“There is one more place I could show you.”

Her eyes brightened. “I’d love to see it.”

He contemplated the idea another moment, wanting to make sure the move was wise.

But they were out here alone. No one knew they were here. And they hadn’t been followed.

They should be safe.

“Perfect,” he finally said. “You’re going to love this view.”

“I can’t wait.” Olivia grinned softly.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Olivia watched as Tyson grabbed two bottles of water from the cooler in the back of his F-350. He tossed her one and then went to speak to Donald.

“He’s going to wait here and watch for any trouble,” Tyson explained when he came back.

Then he placed his hand on her back, on the spot that seemed reserved just for him.

Warmth filled her again.

He led her to a narrow trail cutting through the woods.

A hike.

It sounded like just what the doctor ordered.

Side by side, they journeyed into the woods, leaving the school property behind them.

As they walked, Olivia glanced around, looking for any signs of danger.

She saw nothing that caused alarm. But she couldn’t afford to let down her guard either.

The summer heat pressed against Olivia’s skin as she and Tyson navigated the winding trail. Shafts of golden light filtered through the dense canopy of oak,

hickory, and towering poplars, creating a dappled pattern on the russet carpet of pine needles beneath their shoes.

The rich, earthy scent of decomposing leaves mingled with the sweet perfume of mountain laurel and wild rhododendron that lined the path in sporadic bursts of pink and white blooms.

Olivia paused to catch her breath, wiping beads of sweat from her forehead as she surveyed the rolling blue haze that gave these mountains their name. The distant peaks emerged from low-hanging clouds like islands in a billowing sea. The air carried a distinctive freshness that contrasted with the humidity—a clean, resinous fragrance of pine sap warming in the sun.

“Not much farther,” Tyson assured her.

The trail steepened before them, roots creating natural steps on the incline. Olivia followed, grateful she’d been working out. The trail might be challenging otherwise.

This was freedom, she thought. Far from the danger waiting for her back in real life.

If only she could disappear into moments like this.

Finally, Tyson stopped and spread his arms. “Here it is.”

A vista of the mountains stretched before them. “It’s beautiful.”

“This has always been one of my favorite places to come when I need to think.”

“I can see why.”

Silence fell between them a moment as they both soaked in the beauty.

“I have a question for you,” Olivia asked after a few minutes. “What was your first impression of me?”

Tyson blinked. “Oh, I don’t know.”

“No, come on. I want to know.”

He hesitated. “I thought you were a flirt, a little ditzy.”

Olivia laughed. “And now?”

“There’s definitely a deeper side to you I’ve come to appreciate.”

The compliment sounded so sincere that Olivia felt herself blushing.

Instead of dwelling on it, she barged into her next question. “Want to know what I thought of you?”

Amusement danced in his eyes. “I don’t know, do I?”

“I didn’t think there was much to you besides muscle. I was wrong.”

“I guess the saying is true, you can’t judge a book by its cover.”

“No, you really can’t.”

And that could be a good or bad thing.

* * *

As they stared at the mountains, a rumble of thunder sounded in the distance, and

Tyson noticed rain clouds moving in. In what seemed like only moments, the sky darkened ominously, and the wind picked up, bending the tops of the trees.

Tension stretched across his back. “That came up fast. We need to start back. We don’t want to be caught here if it rains. If this dirt turns to mud, it will be impossible to get back up this hill.”

“Then let’s go.”

They turned around, moving more quickly now. The first fat raindrops began to hit the canopy above them, occasionally making it through to splatter against his skin.

Halfway back, the sky opened up. Rain poured down, quickly soaking through their clothes. Lightning flashed in the distance, followed by the low growl of thunder.

Tyson paused and turned to Olivia “I don’t think we’re going to make it back before this gets worse. We need to find somewhere to take cover. I know a place. I think we can get there in time.”

The hike was already becoming harder as the dirt began its transition into mud. The breeze, once mild and pleasant, now had a chill to it. They needed to move quickly.

“We’re almost there,” Tyson called over his shoulder to Olivia. He had to raise his voice to be heard over the storm.

Finally, he spotted it.

A cave.

He tugged Olivia toward it, but she didn’t move.

He glanced back at her in confusion.

Terror stretched across her face. “I can’t go in there.”

Dark, confined spaces. He understood her fear.

But they didn’t have much choice right now.

“We’ll be okay.” Tyson tugged her hand.

“I can’t do it.” Olivia shook her head, still not moving.

He saw the panic wash through her gaze, and he had to make a split-second decision .
. . especially as lightning pierced the sky and thunder shook the ground.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Olivia stared at the cave, her heart racing out of control.

All she could think of was that root cellar.

Wouldn't the cave feel the same? The earthen scent, the dark spaces, the cool depths?

She'd rather face the lightning than experience that kind of confinement again.

"Olivia, we have to get out of the rain," Tyson murmured. "It's not safe out here in the storm."

Tyson's hand was gentle but insistent as he urged her toward the cave.

Against her better judgment, she allowed Tyson to lead her to the mouth of the cave. He checked it first for any creatures and then stretched his arm out, inviting her to take his hand. "Come on."

As Olivia stood at the entrance, she felt her world slipping away.

Memories flashed back to her . . . memories of darkness and tight spaces. Of captivity. Of helplessness.

A gust of wind suddenly swept around her, sending rain into her eyes. She nearly lost her balance.

Tyson used the opportunity to pull her inside and into his arms.

“It’s okay,” he murmured. “I’ve got you.”

She stood stiffly with her back to Tyson as uncontrollable shakes overcame her. The rain burst from the sky in curtains.

Though she faced the entry, she knew the darkness was behind her . . . just waiting to grab her. To pull her in deeper. To take her captive and never let her go.

Her lungs tightened until she couldn’t breathe. She had to get out of here.

“I can’t stay here,” she whispered, pushing against Tyson.

Tyson’s arms tightened around her. She struggled to get out, but Tyson held her firmly.

“Breathe, Olivia,” Tyson said into her ear. “I’ve got you. I won’t let anything happen.”

His words didn’t stop her shakes. All she could think of was getting stuck in the cave, of the walls closing in.

Sweat broke out across her forehead.

“It’s okay.” Tyson rocked her back and forth, still holding her in his arms. “Take a deep breath.”

His words reached her this time.

She tried to suck in a deep breath and hold it. Her vision fixed on the opening of the

cave, her way of escape if needed.

This wasn't a root cellar.

And Tyson wasn't The Admirer.

She could do this, Olivia told herself. She could do this.

* * *

Tyson felt Olivia begin to relax. "Good girl."

Her shakes slowly faded as Tyson rocked her steadily back and forth.

The trembles finally ceased, and Olivia leaned into Tyson's embrace.

"Thank you, Tyson." She closed her eyes.

"Is it okay if I keep holding you?"

"Whatever you do, keep holding me. I feel safe with your arms around me."

His heart lurched into his throat. "I want you to always feel safe. Let's sit down while we wait out the storm, okay?"

Olivia agreed. They sat near the cave's entrance—out of reach of the rain but not far enough inside to cause panic to set in again—listening to the steady rhythm of the rain as it poured down. Bright flashes of lightning were followed by rumbling thunder.

The storm had become a full tempest, the wind howling outside their shelter.

Tyson had made the right call when he suggested getting away from the storm. Staying out in it would have been dangerous. But this cave represented a different kind of danger to Olivia.

“Good thing you spotted this place.” Her voice sounded soft against the percussion of raindrops striking the forest floor outside.

“I used to know these woods like the back of my hand. I loved nothing more than exploring.”

“I can picture a young Tyson doing that.” She wiped some of the moisture from her face. “Thank you again for showing me this side of your life. I feel honored.”

His heart skipped several beats at her words.

Olivia was the one who’d shown him so much.

He’d been so caught up with work that he’d neglected everything else. But Olivia had reminded him what it was like to live—to truly live.

She’d also reminded him about the uncertainties of life. How in an instant, everything could change.

Agreeing to do this project with Olivia had been one of the best decisions he’d ever made.

Olivia wasn’t like Claire. She wasn’t the jealous type.

She understood his passion for this place.

And as Olivia turned around, her gaze meeting his, he realized that all he wanted to

do was kiss her.

But was that really a risk he should take?

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

A flash of lightning illuminated the cave for a breathtaking moment. In the dimness that followed, Olivia felt Tyson's hand gently brush a damp strand of hair from her cheek.

"Olivia," he whispered.

Something in his voice made her heart quicken.

She turned fully toward him as another lightning flash brightened the cave.

Their eyes met, and everything—the assignment that led her here, the dangers she'd been facing—all faded.

Without hesitation, she leaned forward, closing the distance between them.

Tyson's lips met hers with surprising tenderness. The kiss was gentle and questioning at first. But it deepened as she responded.

The taste of mountain air and rainwater lingered on Tyson's lips.

For a perfect moment, there was only the warmth of his touch against the cool cave air. The steady drum of rain that created a private world where nothing existed beyond the two of them.

Olivia didn't want the moment to end.

They finally pulled apart, both slightly breathless.

Thunder rumbled in the distance—no longer threatening, but somehow a perfect accompaniment to the moment they'd just shared.

A goofy smile spread across her lips. "Did you plan on doing that?"

Tyson caressed her arms. "No, I didn't. But I also didn't plan on having feelings for you."

They smiled at each other again, breathing in the moment.

Eventually, the pitter-patter stopped, and the rain dripped away. Tyson loosened his hold on her and shifted his weight. His hands slid to her shoulders, and he rubbed them.

"Ready to get out of here?" he asked.

"You have to ask?"

Maybe everything would be okay, Olivia told herself. Just maybe.

* * *

Tyson and Olivia climbed out of the cave and stood on the wet ground.

With some work they managed to get on the trail. Tyson had to help pull Olivia along a couple of times.

They then trekked back to his truck.

Donald waved at them from his vehicle.

Tyson opened the door for Olivia. “Here—you can sit down and warm up.”

Though the day had started hot, the storm had brought cool air with it. That, mixed with their wet clothes, made for a bad combination.

He’d seen Olivia shivering and wished he had something to give her.

Before closing her door, he leaned toward her and planted one more kiss on her lips.

When he pulled away, she grinned.

Even with her wet hair clinging to her neck, the mud across her forehead, and her wet clothes, she’d never looked more beautiful.

He closed the door before hurrying to his side of the truck.

He reached into the back seat to grab an extra blanket he kept there. He handed it to her, hoping it would keep her warm.

As he straightened, his gaze skimmed the bed of his truck.

His breath caught.

Roses were there.

Six roses.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Olivia sensed something was wrong and craned her neck, trying to get a better look. But she couldn't see whatever it was that Tyson stared at.

“Tyson?”

Instead of answering, he stormed toward Donald.

Olivia had to know what they were saying.

Blanket still over her shoulders, she scrambled out and reached the sedan just as Donald stepped out.

“How did those roses get there?” Tyson demanded.

The breath left her lungs. Roses? Was that what Tyson had seen?

Donald's forehead wrinkled. “What are you talking about?”

“There are roses in the back of my truck. They weren't there earlier.”

Donald raised his hands. “I've been here the whole time. I didn't see anything.”

“You haven't left even once?” A touch of accusation filled Tyson's voice.

The guard ran a hand through his thick blond hair. “I mean, I walked behind a tree to

relieve myself once. I wasn't even gone for five minutes."

Tyson's gaze darkened.

Then he stalked back to his truck, his gaze on the ground.

She followed whatever it was he was looking at.

Footprints, she realized.

They came from the woods on the other side of the property.

Someone had walked to Tyson's truck, and then headed back in the same direction they'd come from.

Her lungs seemed to fill with cement.

He'd been here. Somehow this guy had followed her and Tyson out here. When he had the first opportunity, he'd left more roses.

At the thought of it, everything around Olivia began to spin.

* * *

Tyson watched Olivia's eyes widen, and then she wobbled.

In three steps, he reached her and put his hands at her waist, just in case her knees buckled.

"I've got you," he murmured.

As she collapsed in his arms, he held her.

They'd had such a good day. This wasn't how he wanted it to end.

He didn't want to think that someone had somehow managed to follow them out here.

How had this person been able to do that?

Then a realization hit him.

He turned to Donald. "Check my F-350. See if there are any tracking devices on it."

The man nodded and strode toward the truck, feeling around the wheel wells.

A moment later, he lifted a device into the air. Tyson knew exactly what it was.

A tracker.

His stomach clenched.

He should have known. He should have checked his vehicle himself before he left.

Whoever was behind these acts wasn't going to take anything for granted. This person was going to use every trick in the book.

And Tyson didn't like it.

Donald's body went stiff with tension. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to document the footprints. Then I want you to take the roses and that tracker to the police station. I need to get Olivia home."

“Understood.” He nodded stiffly. “You don’t want me to follow?”

“I’ve got this.” Tyson led Olivia back to his vehicle, tucking her inside.

Then he checked the truck himself to make sure no other surprises had been left.

He saw nothing.

But now he realized he would need to be more vigilant than ever.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Olivia's thoughts continued to race.

She couldn't believe this had happened.

That such a lovely day had been ruined by something like this.

Tyson had tried so hard to distract her from everything going on. Despite that, this guy had pushed himself into the limelight, taking away the small victories.

Quietly, Tyson started down the road, heading back to his house.

After a few minutes of silence, Olivia blew out a shaky breath. "Will you do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"I need to talk through some of my thoughts, and I might not make any sense. But I just need to say a few things aloud and get them out of my head."

"Go for it. I'd love to listen."

She drew in a shaky breath. "This guy . . . whether he's the original killer or not . . . he started by killing six women in New York. Then he abducted me, and I escaped. The police supposedly killed him."

“Correct.” Tyson gripped the steering wheel, his gaze on the road.

“But what the police in New York don’t realize is that at least five other women have been killed since then in similar manners as what I went through—except some of them had rose petals in their lungs.” Olivia still cringed at the thought of that.

“Also correct.”

“Whoever this person is, he knows I’m in Charlotte staying at your house—which wouldn’t be hard for someone to figure out considering I’m doing a story on your program.”

“That’s right.” Tyson’s voice sounded a little harder this time as he responded.

“This person knew enough about you to sneak into your office and leave roses there. He also knew how to disable the security cameras at your house. And he was smart enough to put a tracker on your vehicle so he could know wherever you—and maybe me—went.”

Tyson’s gaze darkened. “That seems to cover most of it.”

“This is someone who’s aware of the details of my life. Someone who’s able to come and go without really being spotted.”

“What are you suggesting?” Tyson asked.

She shook her head. “To be honest, I’m not really sure. I’m not really sure at all.”

* * *

Tyson reviewed Olivia’s words as he drove. He reached over and squeezed her hand,

and kept holding it, not wanting to let go.

She was right. The person behind this seemed to have some type of inside connection with them.

He thought about all the security guards who'd come and gone. There were probably six on a rotation.

Plus, there were Hobbes, Mrs. Castillo, and the two cleaning ladies who came every week. Twice a week someone came to clean his pool. The landscaping crew came once a week.

Then there were the people he worked with at his office.

Then there was . . . whoever had been threatening him. Most likely, Damon.

What if Damon had heard about what happened to Olivia and wanted to distract Tyson by making her nightmare play out again?

His chest hardened with the thought.

It was another possibility he needed to consider. But Tyson didn't want to broach the subject with Olivia. He didn't want to tell her anything that might add more stress.

He had to figure out the best choice in this situation.

CHAPTER FORTY

Olivia and Tyson reached his house. He parked, and they walked together toward his front door.

They paused before going inside and turned toward each other. As if it were as natural as breathing, they wrapped their arms around each other.

“Thank you for sharing,” she murmured. “I know the day didn’t end like you wanted.”

“I wanted to show you my passion. A lot of people think I’m all about fitness and nutrition. I would trade those things if I had to, to help these people. They’re the reason I started Body Press. All the proceeds go to this school.”

The more Olivia found out about this man, the more she began to fall for him.

Tyson kissed her again.

Olivia loved the secure feeling of his strong arms around her. It made her somehow feel like everything was going to be okay.

When they pulled away, Tyson opened the front door and led her inside.

“Don’t forget—the gala is in two days,” he reminded her. “And tomorrow, I’m headed to Atlanta for a seminar. I won’t be getting back in until late.”

He'd told her about both the gala and the trip a couple of days ago, but she'd forgotten. "Should I wait up for you to get back tomorrow night?"

A smile started at the corner of his lips, but it faded. "I love that idea. But I have to admit that I'm worried about you. I could cancel?—"

"Don't you dare." Her words sounded firm.

Tyson studied her face, his smile dimming. "I appreciate that you're thinking of me. But you need to be careful—especially until we have some answers."

"Chandler and Wes should be back tonight. They'll be here with me. Plus, I have the security you hired here at the house."

"I know."

"You won't be able to keep an eye on me forever." Why did those words leave her feeling so empty? What kind of fantasy were she and Tyson living in?

What did they plan on doing when this assignment was done?

Olivia wasn't sure.

* * *

As soon as Tyson knew that Olivia was safe in her room, he went into his office.

He made a list of everyone who worked for him.

Then he called his friend Mike, the one who owned the company doing security for him.

“What’s going on, man?”

“I need you to do me a favor,” Tyson started. “You’re the only one I trust to do this.”

“Sure thing. What do you need?”

“I need to send you a list of everyone who works for me,” Tyson said. “I know I’ve done background checks on all of them. But I need you to do another background check—a deeper one. And I need you to check their schedules.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I sketched out some dates, dates when other women in other states have been murdered using methods that are eerily similar to The Admirer.”

“What? I haven’t heard about those.”

“It’s just come to light within the past couple of days,” Tyson said. “But I need you to cross-reference those dates with the schedules of my employees. I’m not worried about money. I’ll pay you whatever it costs.”

“Of course.”

“Your guys are also on this list, just to let you know.” Tyson explained the earlier situation to him.

“I’d be more than happy to look into everyone—even my own guys.” His voice hardened with conviction. “What’s going on isn’t okay.”

“No, it’s not.” He rubbed his neck, feeling the knots that had formed there.

Tyson was tempted to cancel his trip to Atlanta. Very tempted.

But Olivia wouldn't forgive him if he did.

Just as he ended the call and leaned back, the guard stationed by the gate buzzed him.

Strange. He usually only did that if a visitor arrived or if something was wrong.

When he clicked on his phone to talk to the man face-to-face, he couldn't believe who he saw on the other side.

It was the person he least expected to show up.

And he knew this arrival would only make his life more complicated.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Olivia awoke early the next morning.

Right away, she remembered the roses in Tyson's truck yesterday, and tension spread across her chest.

Then she remembered the kisses she'd shared with Tyson, and something close to joy burst to life inside her.

Maybe there was still hope for a happy ever after.

Could fear and love co-exist? She honestly wasn't sure. Didn't perfect love cast out fear?

She have to think about that some more.

She threw on a sweatshirt and jeans before wandering into the kitchen. Tyson hadn't mentioned what time he was leaving, but she hoped to catch him for one more goodbye.

Everything was quiet in the house. There was no sign of Tyson or anyone else.

She quietly pulled out some homemade wholegrain bread—plan approved—and put a piece in the toaster. Then she grabbed the jar of all-natural peanut butter and spread a glob over her toast.

A noise at the end of the hallway caught her ear. She set down her breakfast and crept toward the sound, ready to surprise Tyson.

That was when she heard an unfamiliar female voice murmur, “You be careful.”

Olivia’s curiosity peaked. Peering around the corner, she spotted Tyson standing at his bedroom door. His luggage was beside him as if he were ready to go.

In front of him, a dark-haired woman with wet, shower-fresh hair stood, wrapped in a white terrycloth robe.

It was actress Kate Ambrose.

Olivia’s stomach sank.

She’d interviewed the woman once for a story and came away from the experience feeling an extreme dislike for the actress. Kate was stuck-up and haughty and had treated Olivia like an annoyance instead of a respected reporter.

When Olivia arrived back in New York, she’d told Deb she’d never interview Kate again.

“Thanks for letting me stay last night,” Kate told Tyson.

“My only complaint is that I don’t see you enough.”

“Move out to LA. It’s what I keep telling you. You could move in with me.”

“Yeah, that would work out well. Listen, I’ve got to go.” Tyson glanced at his watch.

“You going to get out of here before anyone sees you?”

“Of course, of course. We don’t need any nosy reporters finding out I was here.”

“I know all about you and nosy reporters . . .” He kissed her cheek goodbye.

Olivia ducked back into the kitchen. She forgot about her breakfast and hurried to her room.

What had she just seen?

Her heart pounded in her ears.

It wasn’t what she thought . . . right?

Or was it? Was Tyson seeing Kate? Even though they’d only just kissed yesterday and hadn’t even talked about their relationship, a sense of betrayal ripped through her.

The one man she’d trusted with her heart had cheated on her. The revelation had devastated her.

Was every man the same?

Even Tyson?

* * *

Olivia shut the door and leaned against it before sliding to the floor.

It couldn’t have happened again. Not another cheater.

There was definitely something wrong with her if that was the case.

But cheating was the only scenario that made sense.

A sense of betrayal tore through her. All the buried feelings and past hurts rained down on her, feeling fresh and new again.

The picture of the intimate scene between Tyson and Kate remained in her mind. She tried to erase it, but it was useless. It was stained into her memory.

Her eyes flinched shut as she pictured Tyson kissing Kate's cheek again.

She didn't want to cry. It was a sign of weakness. Regardless of that, the tears still sprang to her eyes. She let them flow, crying for herself mostly, for trusting too much, for being a fool.

At some point she migrated from the floor to her bed. Crawling under the covers, she fell asleep crying and confused.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

“Olivia? Are you in there?” Wes called from the other side of her door.

She turned over in bed and glanced at the clock. It was past two already. She groaned, rubbing her swollen eyes with her fingertips.

“Olivia?”

“I’m in here.” She tried to make her voice sound perky but failed miserably.

Throwing her legs over the side of the bed, she sat up. Immediately, she wanted only to lie back down. Pain sliced through her head.

“Can I come in?”

She cringed at the thought. The last thing she needed was Wes seeing her puffy, red eyes and asking questions. But before she could answer, he opened the door and peeked in.

“What’s going on?” He squinted at her. “Chandler and I were getting worried. We haven’t seen you all day.”

“I’m fine. Just feeling under the weather.”

He stepped into the room and paused in front of her. “You don’t look fine.”

“It’s nothing, Wes.” She waved him off, too embarrassed to tell him how humiliated she felt, to admit how she’d made another stupid mistake.

“Did you get more roses?” he pressed.

“No—I mean, yes.” She shook her head. Those roses they’d found in Tyson’s truck bed almost seemed like something she’d gotten weeks ago. “Someone left six flowers in Tyson’s truck yesterday when we were out.”

“Oh, Olivia . . . I’m sorry.”

She nodded, unsure what else to say.

Wes narrowed his eyes, still studying her face. “Did something else happen? Did Tyson hurt you? If he did?—”

“I’m okay, Wes.” She held up her hand in a stop motion to indicate he should chill.

“You didn’t answer my question.” His tone turned steely.

“How would Tyson hurt me?” Her throat burned.

“It’s not a secret that you two have it bad for each other. You did spend all day with him yesterday.”

Okay, so it was obvious . . .

“I don’t want to talk about it.” She pressed her lips together.

Wes looked at her, questions in his eyes. Finally, he accepted her words and took a step back. “Listen, why don’t you come out here with Chandler and me? We’ll help

you get your mind off of things.”

Olivia considered it a moment. Maybe being around people—her friends—was a good idea.

She finally nodded. “Okay, I’ll be out in a minute.”

When Wes left, she went into her bathroom and splashed some cold water on her face. As she looked into the mirror, she realized it would take a lot more than some cold water to fix the evidence of her pain.

Resigned, she left her room and went into the living room.

* * *

Tyson had been counting down the moments until he could return home.

His seminar had gone well, and he’d fulfilled his obligations.

But now he wanted to talk to Olivia. He’d almost called her. But he wasn’t sure their relationship was at that level yet. Instead, he got home as quickly as possible.

More than anything, he secretly hoped Olivia would be waiting up for him. However, he was probably getting ahead of himself.

He’d already checked in with security on more than one occasion to make sure everything was okay at the house.

His team assured him that it was. He wished he felt as confident.

He parked and walked in, bag slung over his shoulder.

He paused in the living room, searching for Olivia. He didn't see her. He checked the kitchen and patio also, but she wasn't there.

He did, however, run into Wes.

"Hey," Tyson started. "Have you seen Olivia?"

Wes' gaze didn't seem as friendly as usual. "She went to bed."

Disappointment pressed on Tyson, and he couldn't help but feel as if he was missing something. "Is she okay?"

Wes shrugged. "Hard to say. She's been going through a lot. No one should be hurt like she's been hurt."

Wes was talking about The Admirer, right? Or was he somehow alluding to Tyson's new relationship with Olivia?

But why would Wes say that about their relationship? Besides, Olivia didn't seem like the type to kiss and tell.

There was clearly more going on here than he realized.

He thanked Wes and kept going.

He almost knocked on Olivia's door. Instead, he texted her.

You up?

But when there was no response, he put his phone away.

Maybe she was asleep.

More disappointment pressed on him.

He'd have to wait to talk to her in the morning.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Olivia was a grown woman, she reminded herself the next day.

She knew she needed to be mature when she handled the situation with Tyson. Avoiding conversations was something teenagers might do.

However, she had looked up the latest celebrity gossip on Kate, and several sources cited she had a secret boyfriend.

Could Tyson be that secret boyfriend?

As much as she'd tried to think through what she'd seen yesterday between Tyson and Kate, nothing made sense to her. She had to find the right time and place to talk to Tyson about what she'd seen.

However, right now definitely wasn't the time.

As normal, she went through her workout with Tyson, all while Wes and Chandler filmed them.

She knew Tyson sensed something was wrong.

Unfortunately, right after they finished working out, Tyson had another meeting lined up.

Before Olivia slipped out of the gym, Tyson touched her arm. She froze, and their

gazes met.

Though no one else was around, he stepped closer and lowered his voice. “What’s wrong?”

“Not here,” she said. “Not now.”

His frown deepened. “My phone call should only last an hour. Then can we meet outside? Can we talk?”

Olivia nodded. She might as well get this over with.

Besides, tonight was supposed to be the fundraiser. She had to decide what would happen with that.

Her old hurts were playing with her emotions right now. As much as she tried to stay in control, doing so was proving to be challenging.

But maybe she and Tyson being together was never a good idea—with or without the discovery of his relationship with Kate Ambrose.

* * *

Something was definitely wrong with Olivia, and Tyson was anxious to talk with her about it. What could have derailed things between them in such a short amount of time?

Just as he’d promised, he went outside to meet her after his phone call. She sat in a patio chair, her body stiff as she stared into the distance.

“Olivia.” He lightly touched her back as he sat in the chair next to her.

When she flinched, Tyson withdrew.

“I saw you with Kate Ambrose.” Her voice trembled with the words.

“Kate Ambrose?” It hit him what had occurred, and he chuckled with relief. “Is that what this has been about? Kate?”

“What’s so funny?” Olivia snapped, her eyes betraying her hurt.

Tyson shook his head, instantly sobering. “No, it’s not like that. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have reacted in that way. It’s just that . . . your words took me by surprise.”

She stared at him, waiting for an explanation.

Taking her hand into his, he began. “Olivia, Kate Ambrose . . . is my sister.”

“What?” Olivia stiffened. “Wait. You said your sister’s name is Amy.”

“Her real name is Amy. Her stage name is Kate Ambrose. Amy Stone just didn’t have enough ring for her, I suppose.”

Realization rolled over her features.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” More pain sparked in her eyes as she stared up at him.

“Maybe for the same reason you didn’t tell me right away that Drake Culpepper was your father.” Tyson gently cupped the side of her face with his hand. “Amy—or Kate as most people know her—came in late. She was passing through town on her way to a new movie she’s shooting. She stopped by for a quick visit and had to leave first thing in the morning.”

“I see.” Olivia’s voice cracked.

“I didn’t know she was coming. She stayed in the guestroom across the hall. I kissed her cheek goodbye. That must have been what you saw.”

Olivia lowered her head and buried her face in her hands. “I’m such a fool.”

Tyson put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer. “You’re not a fool, Olivia. You’ve just been extremely hurt before. Multiple times.”

She dropped her hands from her face and turned to fully look at him. Her eyes had softened with relief. And maybe something else . . .

“I’m sorry, Tyson.”

“I should have told you. I would have. I just thought I’d have more time.”

Her gaze met his. “I thought I was beginning to heal. I really did. But, obviously, I was wrong.”

“It’s a process.”

“Lyle says I need to be right with myself before I should be in any type of relationship.”

Tyson frowned. “I can understand where he’s coming from. But?—”

“Maybe . . . maybe we should slow down. I don’t want to jump into something before I’m ready. And all of this proves that I may not be ready.”

He didn’t bother to hide the disappointment in his gaze. But understanding also

lingered there. “If you need time, then I’ll give you time. There’s no rush.”

She forced a smile. “Thank you.”

Tyson stared at her another moment, words somehow failing him. He wanted to reassure her, but he didn’t want to pressure her.

“What about the gala tonight?” he asked. “Would you like to cancel?”

“No, I’ll go,” she rushed. “I mean, we’re still friends, right?”

His throat ached as he echoed, “Friends.”

Maybe this was for the best.

Maybe he’d jumped in too quickly also.

Besides, his to-do list was a mile long. How would he ever get everything done if he added a relationship into the mix?

Maybe this had all worked out for the best.

But if that was the truth, why did Tyson feel such heaviness in his chest?

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

That evening, Olivia dressed in a simple red dress that fell straight to her ankles. She pulled her hair back into a twist and wore silver teardrop earrings that dangled from her ears. A touch of perfume at her wrists and neck completed the transformation from fitness participant to elegant attendee.

She stared at her reflection in the mirror, pleased with what she saw.

Physically, at least.

But her eyes still looked haunted.

More than anything, she wanted to relax and enjoy herself. She just wasn't sure that was truly possible.

At least she and Tyson had talked. She felt foolish for jumping to conclusions—but those conclusions had shown her something about herself.

They'd shown her just how broken she still was. It wasn't fair to Tyson to start a relationship when she still had these kinds of issues. But her time with Tyson . . . it had felt so healing.

She'd even talked to Lyle about it, and he'd agreed that she should take a step back.

She could put on a show in front of the camera. But when it came to her relationships, she needed to keep things real.

And the truth was, she was a mess. An absolute mess.

She'd be lying if she didn't admit she was disappointed. Her bliss had been so short-lived.

Despite that, she would make the most of tonight.

As she descended the stairs, she spotted Tyson waiting in the foyer.

Her breath caught.

Dressed in a black tuxedo with his hands casually tucked in the pockets, he looked like he'd stepped from the pages of a high-fashion magazine. She pushed away the rush of attraction she felt.

When he saw her, his expression shifted from distraction to quiet admiration.

"I'll be the envy of the party." He took a step closer, grabbed her hand, and twirled her around, making her feel light and graceful despite the heaviness that shadowed her.

"You know how to flatter a woman."

"Not flatter—the truth."

Her cheeks flushed.

Then she looked him up and down. "You don't appear too shabby yourself."

Their earlier differences behind them, he offered his arm. "Our chariot awaits."

Olivia looped her hand through the crook of his arm, and they walked outside. A black limousine waited in the circular drive.

“Security insisted on driving,” Tyson explained. “This event draws some of Charlotte’s most influential people.”

She glanced around the property, suddenly alert for any movement in the shadows.

She saw nothing.

Hobbes, acting as doorman tonight, waited beside the vehicle and opened the door as they approached. “You look lovely, Ms. Montgomery.”

“Thank you, Hobbes.” She slipped into the limo with Tyson behind her.

A moment later, they took off toward the gala.

As they headed down the road, Olivia wondered if Tyson felt as off-center right now as she did.

All she desperately wanted was to return to their sweet moments together from this weekend . . . before reality had crashed down on her and reminded her that The Admirer was still in control of her life.

But right now, that wasn’t possible.

* * *

As they drove, Tyson tried to keep his mind off how much he wanted to reach over and take Olivia’s hand. How much he wanted things to return to the way they were yesterday.

Though he knew this was for the best, he still wished things were different.

He tried to keep his thoughts occupied by explaining to Olivia that the event they were attending was a charity gala raising funds for children's health initiatives, hosted by Charlotte's Medical Foundation. It was also an opportunity to find potential sponsors for the school he was building.

He added that Donald would be there. He'd driven separately. Tyson had thought it was a good idea to have another set of eyes at the event.

When they arrived, camera flashes greeted them.

Olivia stepped from the limo, her media training kicking in as she smiled for the photographers.

"Ms. Montgomery! Over here!"

"Tyson! Olivia! Are you two dating?"

"How's the fitness program going, Olivia?"

She called out a few generic answers, probably to try and be polite, and rested her hand on Tyson's arm as he led her inside.

The dating rumors were really going to start spreading after this.

Inside the Grand Ballroom, chandeliers cast a warm glow over the hundreds of guests in formal attire. A stage had been erected at the front of the room where speeches would be given later. Around the perimeter sat elegantly appointed dining tables. Servers weaved through the crowd with trays of champagne and hors d'oeuvres.

Olivia should be perfectly in her element here.

Tyson? He'd rather be at home relaxing.

But this was for a good cause.

"Olivia Montgomery," a deep voice said behind them.

Tyson turned and saw a man he didn't recognize—tall with dark-blond hair and a charismatic smile—standing behind them.

Tyson instinctively moved in front of Olivia, not liking the vibe he got from this guy.

"Paul?" Olivia's voice came out as a squeak. "What are you doing here?"

Wait . . . Paul?

Was he the FBI agent who'd worked her case back in New York? The one who'd broken her heart?

Tyson was nearly certain it was.

A surge of protectiveness rose in him, and he edged himself closer to Olivia . . . wishing she would let him protect her—not just physically, but her heart as well.

* * *

Olivia still couldn't believe her eyes as she waited for Paul's answer.

What was he doing here? No one had given her any indication he was coming into town or that he was coming to the gala.

Paul offered an easy smile—one that had weakened her knees at one time. “I’m following up on your case. I thought it would be prudent to coordinate with local authorities given the . . . similarities to your previous situation.”

Paul’s eyes flickered to Tyson, assessing him.

“Tyson Stone.” Tyson extended his hand, his voice harder than usual. “You must be the agent from New York.”

“And former boyfriend.” Paul shook Tyson’s hand with perhaps more force than necessary, his eyes glimmering. “Though Olivia likes to forget that part.”

Tyson visibly stiffened.

Why did Paul have to add that last line? It was almost as if he was staking claim to his territory.

Olivia turned back to Paul, her mind still racing. “How did you know I’d be here tonight?”

“Professional courtesy from the local police.” He leaned closer. “We need to talk, Liv. About the flowers.”

The familiar nickname grated on her nerves. “It’s Olivia, and anything you need to tell me can be said in front of Tyson.”

Paul’s gaze hardened slightly as if he didn’t want Tyson nearby. “Of course. I just thought you might prefer privacy for certain details.”

“Nope. Say what you need to say.” Olivia held firm.

With one more glance at Tyson, Paul muttered, “We think there’s a distinct possibility that The Admirer either had an apprentice or a copycat has emerged. My colleague with the FBI is talking about starting a task force since these murders cross state lines. It’s only a matter of time before the media catches wind of it.”

Olivia knew what that meant. “And my name will be mentioned.”

“I thought you should know.” Paul shrugged. “Before word gets out.”

This wasn’t the attention she wanted to build her career. No, she preferred to use her professional accomplishments.

But Paul was right—it was only a matter of time before this story made headlines.

And Olivia needed to be prepared for it. But was that even possible?

* * *

Tyson sensed Olivia was done with this conversation. He excused them then he took her elbow and led her away.

“Let’s mingle.”

She seemed to force a smile. “Let’s.”

Tyson and Olivia fell into an easy rhythm, bouncing conversations back and forth, often finishing each other’s thoughts. They danced and laughed.

In the process, they received more than a few raised eyebrows and knowing smiles.

Tyson could practically hear the questions floating through the room.

Are they a couple?

Since when have Olivia Montgomery and Tyson Stone been dating?

How did those two opposites ever get together?

As dinner was announced, Tyson placed his hand on the small of her back and led her to the table where their name cards rested. Acquaintances of Tyson walked beside them, chatting about fitness as they went.

Tyson couldn't seem to escape from it. Everyone wanted his advice.

As they approached their table, Olivia frowned and wobbled.

Tyson reached for the sides of her arms to steady her.

What had stopped her in her tracks?

Olivia turned toward him, her voice quivering. "Tell me that's not what I think it is."

Tyson's gaze shot to the table, and he saw them.

Four roses.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Olivia stared at the flowers in disbelief. Not now. Not here.

“We should go,” Tyson murmured, tugging her away from the table. “If this guy left these flowers, that means he could still be here.”

Olivia glanced around, looking for any familiar faces.

Who else did she know here?

Paul? Donald?

Terror felt like ice in her veins. It spread so quickly that she shivered.

“Olivia?”

She came out of her daze when Tyson said her name.

“I can’t leave. Then he’ll win. I can’t put my life on hold because of him.” Raising her shoulders up higher, Olivia set her chin in determination. “Let’s eat.”

“Are you sure?” Tyson stared as if trying to read her.

“Positive.”

“Should you tell Special Agent Harris?”

“Probably.” She frowned. The last thing Olivia wanted was to interact with Paul.

Tyson studied her face before saying, “How about you let me talk to him? He can look at the security footage.”

Relief swept through her. “If you don’t mind . . .”

He picked up the flowers. “Not at all. But stay here. Please. I need to know where you are . . . just in case.”

Just in case . . . Olivia knew what that meant.

Just in case anything else happened.

Just in case her stalker was here, waiting for the right opportunity.

She shuddered as she sat down.

Tyson tucked her seat under the table and then strode away to find the man. She was glad the flowers were out of her sight—unfortunately, they weren’t out of her memories yet.

Tension pulled tight between Olivia’s shoulders.

She tried to focus on eating her salad.

Across the room, she caught Paul watching her as he and Tyson spoke. Then he walked away, probably to talk to security.

A moment later, Tyson returned and sat beside her. “Who knew that you were going to be here?”

“The usual. Wes, Chandler, Hobbes, and Deb. It’s not like I have that many people around here to tell. I did mention it to Lyle.” She hesitated. “And now Paul, apparently.”

“Was it like this last time?” he asked quietly. “Did this guy seem to know your schedule then as well as he does now?”

Olivia thought about it and then nodded. “Yes. But in New York City it’s easy for people to watch you. At your house . . . it’s nearly impossible to watch someone without getting caught.”

Unless it’s someone close, she mused.

But that thought made her sick to her stomach.

* * *

Tyson couldn’t stop watching everyone around them.

This guy had been here. Anger burned through him at the thought of someone diabolical being that bold.

This guy felt untouchable, didn’t he?

He hoped Special Agent Harris was able to find something on that security footage. But somehow, he knew this guy hadn’t slipped up. He was too good for that. This psycho had gone this long without being caught, which meant he knew what he was doing.

The speakers began their talks. Tyson only pretended to listen. His mind raced through possibilities.

How did someone know Olivia would be here? Someone here had to know something.

His gaze drifted to Paul again. The man appeared deeply engaged in conversation with the foundation's director. But something about his posture suggested awareness. Tyson suspected he was talking to the director about security concerns.

As an FBI agent, Paul knew The Admirer's patterns. He had access to the case files and knew every detail of how Olivia had been tormented.

And he'd definitely known she'd be here tonight.

Could Paul be behind this? Was this some twisted attempt to make her need him again?

The thought chilled Tyson.

He tore his gaze away, not liking his suspicions . . . but not willing to ignore them either.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Just as she did every day, Olivia slipped out early in the morning to have her quiet time.

The morning air held a gentle chill to it. She'd come to cherish these quiet moments before the house awakened—just her, her Bible, and the rising sun painting the Carolina hills in watercolor hues.

Last night still lingered on her mind. Olivia and Tyson had left the gala early.

Just as she'd suspected, the security cameras hadn't picked up on anyone leaving those roses for her.

That meant she was no closer to pinpointing who this guy was now than she was before.

The thought weighed heavily on her.

Olivia opened her Bible, losing herself in Psalms. The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?

She remembered the woman at the picnic on the reservation. She'd said people either brought shadows or light.

Olivia prayed she brought light to those around her. Because sometimes the darkness felt as if it was closing in. That it could swallow her whole.

She couldn't let that happen.

She prayed it wouldn't happen.

Just as she said amen, a twig snapped somewhere close.

She glanced behind her, expecting to see one of Tyson's security guards making their rounds.

The smile froze on her face.

A figure stood between some bushes behind her, in the shadows. Dressed in dark clothes, his face obscured by what looked like?—

Her heart seized.

A white porcelain mask. Expressionless. Hollow-eyed. Casanova.

Her Bible slipped from her fingers.

Run , her mind screamed.

But her limbs wouldn't respond.

As the figure stepped forward, adrenaline kicked in. Fight or flight?

She had to fight.

Olivia lunged for her phone so she could call for help. But as her fingers closed around it, a hand clamped over her mouth from behind.

The familiar sickly-sweet smell of chemicals filled her nostrils.

Not again. Please, God, not again.

But it was too late.

The drugs on the cloth took effect.

And the world blurred around her.

* * *

Tyson knew something was wrong the moment he stepped into the kitchen.

It was too quiet. Normally at this hour, he'd hear Hobbes preparing breakfast or Olivia moving about upstairs. But the house felt empty.

He glanced at his watch: 7:15.

He'd had an early morning video call with a client in England, so he hadn't been able to go outside to enjoy the sunrise as he usually did.

However, the security team should have already checked in with their morning report. Reaching for his phone, he dialed Stephen, the guard on duty.

No answer.

A chill crept up his spine. He tried the second guard's number.

It went straight to voicemail.

That wasn't normal. Tyson tried not to jump to conclusions, however. Maybe there was a good explanation.

Tyson moved through the house, calling Olivia's name. Her bedroom door stood open, bed made. But there was no sign of her in the bathroom or any of the guest rooms.

Tension continued to mount between his shoulders.

When he reached the back door, it was unlocked.

His heart beat harder. It wasn't entirely unusual. But it probably meant Olivia was out there.

Stepping out, the morning sun illuminated the patio, washing everything in golden light. A Bible lay on the ground on the patio beside Olivia's favorite chair, pages fluttering in the breeze. He paused. It almost looked as if it had been dropped and left there.

Olivia wouldn't have done that.

His pulse quickened.

Tyson took the patio steps two at a time, scanning the property as he walked.

But he didn't see Olivia anywhere.

He grabbed his phone to call her.

As he did, a ringing sound came from under a patio chair.

Olivia had left her Bible and her phone? No way.

Something was wrong.

He jogged back into the house, running into Chandler as he emerged from his bedroom.

Chandler raised an eyebrow. “Where’s the fire?”

“I can’t find Olivia, and my guards aren’t answering. I need you to help me look for her.”

Chandler’s eyes widened with alarm. “I’ll get Wes.”

Tyson sprinted toward the guardhouse.

When he reached it, his fears were confirmed.

Stephen lay face-down, a pool of blood congealing beneath him.

Tyson dropped to his knees, feeling for a pulse.

Nothing.

With shaking hands, he pulled out his phone and dialed Scarborough.

“Detective, someone’s taken Olivia.” His voice sounded distant to his own ears. “One of my security guards is dead, and the other’s missing. I need you out here. Now. Before it’s too late.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Darkness. Cold. The smell of damp earth.

Olivia awakened with a gasp, disorientation giving way to a paralyzing terror as memory returned.

The Casanova mask. The chloroform. The hands dragging her away.

She blinked hard, trying to force her eyes to adjust to the pitch black, but it was absolute. The air was stale and lifeless.

Underground.

Again.

The root cellar.

She knew it instinctively. The same wooden doors she'd glimpsed on her walk with Tyson, the ones that had triggered her panic attack—that was where she'd been taken.

A sob threatened to escape her throat, but she choked it back. Panic wouldn't save her. She needed to think. To act.

Maybe she could get out of here.

She tried to pull her arms forward, but they were tied above her. Rope dug into her

wrists.

No . . .

Breathe, Olivia. Breathe.

She gulped in a few breaths and tried to soak in her surroundings.

The floor beneath her was packed earth, cold and slightly damp. The air smelled of soil and something else—a familiar, sickly-sweet scent that made her stomach lurch.

Roses.

A faint scraping sound came from somewhere to her left.

She startled.

She wasn't alone. Nausea filled her.

“Who’s there?” Her voice emerged as a croak.

Silence, then: “You’re finally awake.”

The voice was distorted, deliberately changed by some device.

A light flicked on—a single bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. In its harsh glare stood a figure in dark clothes. His white Casanova mask gleamed with an otherworldly pallor.

Olivia forced herself to look directly at the mask, fighting the waves of terror threatening to drown her.

“You’re not him.” The steadiness of her voice surprised her. “The Admirer is dead.”

A laugh escaped from behind the mask. “Are you sure about that, Olivia? You never saw his face.”

The figure moved closer, and she caught the glint of something metallic in his hand—garden shears. Just like before.

Her throat went dry. What would he do with them this time?

“Why are you doing this?” she asked.

“To finish what was started.” The man reached for something beside him. “Only this time, there won’t be any escape.”

He placed two roses on the ground before her. “The countdown is coming to an end. Only one more remaining.”

Her blood turned to ice. Right now, this man only wanted to scare her—and it was working.

But he wouldn’t kill her down here.

He had something else planned for that.

His countdown wasn’t complete yet.

“You’re making a mistake.” Her voice still trembled. “People will realize I’m missing. They’ll come looking for me. They’ll find you.”

The figure tilted the mask, studying her. “They didn’t find me last time.”

“Last time you weren’t on Tyson Stone’s property,” she countered. “Now, there are guards on duty.”

“Or are there?” he taunted.

Her blood ran cold. What had he done to the guards?

She had to think fast. Keep him talking.

“The police are already on their way.” She gambled everything on a bluff. “Detective Scarborough has been monitoring every rose delivery.”

The masked figure stepped closer, leaning down until the expressionless face was inches from hers. “You’re lying.”

“Am I? Listen.”

In the distance—so faint she might have imagined it—came the sound of a car engine.

The figure straightened, head cocked toward the cellar doors. The shears lowered slightly.

“This isn’t over, Olivia,” the distorted voice whispered. “It was never about killing you quickly.”

He reached into his pocket and withdrew something that gleamed in the dim light—a syringe. Before she could react, he plunged it into her thigh.

“A parting gift,” he said. “Something to keep you company in the dark.”

The injection burned like ice in her veins. Almost immediately, her vision began to swim.

“What did you—” The words slurred on her tongue.

“Just a sedative. Enough to keep you quiet while I make my exit.” The mask tilted again. “I’ve waited this long. I can wait a little longer for our finale.”

Through increasingly blurry vision, Olivia watched as the figure extinguished the light, plunging the cellar back into darkness.

She heard the scrape of the wooden doors opening above, a sliver of daylight appearing and then vanishing as they closed again.

Then silence.

As consciousness began to slip away, one thought cycled through her mind: The final rose.

The final rose was coming next.

And she felt powerless to stop it.

* * *

Tyson ran as he’d never run before, lungs burning as he sprinted across his property toward the old root cellar. Detective Scarborough and his team were on their way.

But something told him there wasn’t time to wait.

The image of Stephen’s body haunted him.

How had someone taken the guard by surprise? Who would go to such lengths? And where was Donald?

The cellar doors came into view, partially hidden by the wild rosebushes Tyson had meant to clear away days ago. His heart sank when he saw the padlock lying broken on the ground.

He approached cautiously, straining to hear any sound from within. He didn't want to set this guy off. But time was of the essence right now.

He heard nothing.

Drawing a deep breath, Tyson yanked open the wooden doors.

Sunlight spilled into the darkness below, illuminating a dirt floor and stone walls.

"Olivia?" He peered into the shadows.

No response.

Turning on the flashlight on his phone, he descended the earthen steps into the cellar.

The beam cut through the darkness, finally landing on a still form at the far end of the space.

"Olivia!" His heart dropped at the sight of her motionless body.

No . . .

He rushed forward, dropping to his knees beside her.

She was unconscious, her wrists bound above her head, her breathing shallow but steady.

Her pulse thumped against his finger.

It was there—strong, though slightly irregular.

Relief washed through him.

Something caught his eye—two roses laid carefully beside her.

Rage and fear churned in his gut as he worked to untie her bonds. Her skin felt cool to the touch, and she didn't stir at his efforts.

“Olivia, can you hear me?” Tyson urged, cradling her face. “Wake up. Please wake up.”

Her eyelids fluttered but didn't open.

Tyson noticed a small puncture wound on her thigh, a drop of blood staining her light blue pajama pants. She'd been given something.

The ties loosened and then gave way. He gathered her into his arms, lifting her as he stood. “Hold on, Olivia. Just hold on.”

As he carried her toward the cellar steps, sirens wailed in the distance.

Scarborough was close.

The sunlight was blinding as Tyson emerged from the cellar, Olivia limp in his arms. He scanned the property, looking for any sign of the perpetrator.

The grounds appeared empty.

Whoever had done this was long gone.

Scarborough's car skidded to a stop in front of the house—Tyson had left the gates open—and the detective leaped out.

“Over here!” Tyson shouted, already moving toward the house. “She needs an ambulance!”

“Already called it.” Scarborough jogged to meet him. “What happened?”

“Found her in the root cellar, unconscious. I think she's been drugged.” Tyson didn't slow his pace. “There were two roses beside her.”

Scarborough's face darkened. “Any sign of who did this?”

“None.” Tyson's voice was tight with fury and frustration. “He was gone when I got there.”

As they reached the house, the distant wail of an ambulance joined the chaos. Tyson laid Olivia gently on the couch, brushing hair from her face with a trembling hand.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered. “I should have protected you.”

Her eyelids fluttered again, this time opening slightly. Her gaze was unfocused, pupils dilated.

“Mask,” she murmured, the word slurring. “Casanova . . .”

“Shh, don't try to talk,” Tyson urged, gripping her hand. “Help is coming.”

“He said . . .” She struggled to form the words. “Not over . . . finale . . .”

A chill ran through Tyson as her meaning registered.

This wasn’t the end. The killer had deliberately left her alive.

Which meant this guy intended to return.

Scarborough stood in the doorway, his expression grim as he watched the exchange.

“We’ll post officers here round-the-clock,” he said, answering Tyson’s unspoken question. “And I want a detailed description as soon as she’s able.”

Tyson nodded, his eyes never leaving Olivia’s face as she slipped back into unconsciousness.

Outside, the ambulance arrived, its lights painting the walls in flashes of red.

As paramedics rushed in and took over, Tyson couldn’t shake the cold dread settling in his chest.

The countdown was almost complete.

And somewhere, hidden behind a Casanova mask, The Admirer was planning his finale.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Olivia sat on the couch in Tyson's living room, a thick blanket wrapped around her shoulders despite the warmth of the afternoon.

Paramedics had checked her vitals, drawn blood to identify the drug in her system, and assured her that whatever sedative had been used was already metabolizing.

She'd be fine—physically, at least.

She'd already recounted the morning's events to law enforcement three times, each retelling dredging up memories she'd rather forget. Scarborough and Paul had been on scene.

Wes and Chandler had also come in to check on her.

Everything had been a blur.

How much time had passed? It was well after lunch if she had to guess.

Just when she thought she was done, Detective Scarborough returned and sat across from her, notepad in hand.

"You're certain this guy used the same voice distorter as The Admirer?" Scarborough asked, his pen poised above the paper.

"I can't be certain of anything." Olivia pulled the blanket tighter. "But it sounded

similar. Mechanical. Deliberately inhuman.”

“And the mask—identical to the one from your previous abduction?”

She nodded, suppressing a shudder. “White porcelain. Casanova. The same expressionless face staring back at me.”

“But you never saw The Admirer’s face,” Scarborough said. “So we can’t definitively say whether this is the same person or a copycat with intimate knowledge of your case.”

The implication hung in the air between them.

Either Brian Elliot hadn’t been The Admirer—or someone had studied the case with disturbing thoroughness.

“What about the security cameras?” she asked. “Tyson has them all over the property.”

A shadow crossed Scarborough’s face. “They were disabled sometime before dawn. Professional job. Whoever did this knew exactly what he was doing.”

The news settled like a stone in Olivia’s stomach. “And the guard? Tyson mentioned something happened to him.”

Scarborough hesitated, exchanging a glance with the officer by the door. “Stephen Pearson was found deceased near the security booth. Blunt force trauma to the head. The second guard, Donald Banks, is still missing.”

Olivia closed her eyes, guilt washing over her. Someone had died because of her. Because The Admirer—or whoever was imitating him—had followed her here.

She jerked her eyelids back open, determination hardening inside her. “I need to leave. I’m putting everyone in danger by staying.”

“Ms. Montgomery?—”

“No,” she cut him off, her voice trembling but resolute. “A man is dead because of me. I won’t risk anyone else.”

The detective leaned forward, his expression grave. “Leaving won’t solve this. Whoever this is, he’s fixated on you. He’ll follow you wherever you go.”

“Then at least I’ll be the only target.” She tried to stand, but her legs were still weak from the sedative. Her knees tried to buckle.

She sank back onto the couch, frustration burning behind her eyes.

“We’re posting officers here round the clock,” Scarborough continued. “And Mr. Stone has already arranged for additional private security—background-checked by my office personally.”

Olivia shook her head. “It’s not enough. It wasn’t enough before.”

“Ma’am, if you don’t mind me saying . . .” Scarborough paused and shifted as if uncomfortable. “It’s likely that the person behind this is someone you know. Maybe even someone from New York who’s followed you here.”

She buried her face in her hands.

“Olivia.” Tyson’s voice came from the doorway. “Please, don’t go.”

How long had he been standing there?

She looked up, stared at the concern etched into his features and felt something inside her crumble. “I can’t be responsible for anyone else getting hurt, Tyson. Especially not you.”

He crossed the room and closed the space between them, his eyes meeting hers. “This isn’t your fault. None of it.”

“Stephen Pearson is dead because this person—this monster—came looking for me.”

“Stephen is dead because a killer made a choice.” Tyson’s voice sounded gentle but firm. “The only person responsible for that is the one who did it.”

Olivia wanted to believe him. Desperately. But the weight of guilt and fear pressed down on her, suffocating.

“I’ll give you two a moment.” Scarborough rose and nodded to Tyson. “We’ll talk about the additional security measures when you’re ready.”

As the detective left, silence settled between them.

“I need to go, Tyson,” she whispered. “I couldn’t live with myself if anything happened to you.”

An unreadable look flickered in his eyes—determination tinged with an emotion she couldn’t quite name.

“I understand why you feel that way,” he said quietly. “But I’m asking you to stay.”

The simple request, spoken without demand or pressure, lodged in her chest as if it were a physical object. She looked away, unable to bear the intensity of his gaze.

“Why would you want me to stay?” Her voice was barely audible as she asked the question. “I’ve brought nothing but danger into your life.”

“No one should have to face something like this alone.”

The words broke something open inside her.

A tear slipped down her cheek, then another as Tyson pulled her into his arms.

When he finally pulled away, he murmured, “Don’t do anything rash. Promise?”

“I won’t,” she murmured.

But what Tyson considered rash and what Olivia considered rash might be two different things.

* * *

Tyson stood at the window of his office, watching the police continue to scour his yard.

All he could think about was Olivia.

He’d sent her upstairs to rest after her interview with Scarborough, though he doubted she was sleeping. The sedative had mostly worn off, but the psychological impact of being in that cellar again—bound, helpless, at the mercy of someone wearing that mask—would linger far longer than any drug.

A knock at the door pulled him from his thoughts.

Hobbes entered, his normally composed demeanor fractured by concern. “Is there

anything I can do for you?"

"I don't think so. But thank you." He paused. "Any word on Donald?"

Hobbes shook his head grimly. "Nothing yet. Detective Scarborough has officers searching the surrounding woods."

The missing guard weighed heavily on Tyson's conscience. Had Olivia's attacker taken him? Killed him and hidden the body?

Or—a more disturbing thought—had Donald somehow been involved?

"Sir, if I may?" Hobbes hesitated, uncharacteristically uncertain. "Perhaps it would be prudent to consider relocating. At least temporarily."

"Olivia suggested the same thing," Tyson murmured. "She wanted to leave—without me, however."

"Leaving is a sensible instinct, if I may say so. But I wouldn't recommend she do so alone."

"Running won't solve this, Hobbes. Whoever is behind this has proven he can get to Olivia regardless of security measures. It's better she's surrounded by people who can protect her."

Better she's with me . Tyson didn't say the words, though the thought resonated through him.

The older man studied him a moment. "You've grown fond of her."

It wasn't a question, and Tyson didn't bother denying it. "This isn't about feelings,

Hobbes. It's about keeping her safe."

"Of course, sir." But Hobbes' expression remained knowing. Then he shifted and changed the subject. "I've prepared a light dinner. Should I bring a tray up to Ms. Montgomery?"

"I'll take it." Perhaps Tyson said the words too quickly. "I need to check on her anyway."

As Tyson grabbed the tray from the kitchen, another idea filled his mind.

An idea that held the most promise.

An idea that could keep Olivia safe—and under his watchful eye.

But he had to convince her it was a good idea.

That might be the biggest challenge of all.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Tyson knocked softly on Olivia's door. "Olivia? It's Tyson. I've brought some food."

After a moment, the door opened.

Olivia stood in front of him, somehow looking smaller with her hair damp from a shower and the oversized joggers and sweatshirt she wore.

But the haunted look in her eyes was what cut him to the core.

"You didn't have to do that." She glanced at the food he held before stepping back to let him in.

"I wanted to." He set the tray laden with vegetable soup and homemade bread on her nightstand. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been drugged and left to die in a root cellar." A ghost of her usual humor surfaced briefly before fading. "Sorry. Defense mechanism."

"No apology needed."

She sat on the edge of the bed, hands clasped in her lap and ignoring her food. "Any word on Donald?"

Tyson shook his head. "Not yet. I actually just got an update before I came up here. The police are still searching. However, they fear . . . they fear Donald might be the

one behind this.”

Her eyes widened. “Really?”

He nodded grimly. “They found a mask in his house.”

Her breath caught. “And roses?”

“I’m not sure about that detail yet. All we can do right now is wait and see what the police discover. I know it’s hard.”

“I don’t know what to think.” Her gaze drifted to the window.

“Listen . . .” Tyson remained standing, maintaining a careful distance. “I think you were right with what you said earlier. I think you shouldn’t stay here.”

Surprise flickered in her gaze, and she stood. “Of course. I should leave.”

“You should. With me.”

“What?” She blinked as if she didn’t understand.

“I need you to pack your suitcase, Olivia,” Tyson told her. “I want to take you somewhere safe, where no one will be able to find you. This location has been compromised.”

Olivia’s eyes flashed to his, the blank look he’d become accustomed to seeing still present. He could almost see her processing the words. The idea. What it would mean to leave with him.

“What about Chandler and Wes?” she finally asked.

“It’s best if it’s just the two of us. For now, at least.”

Olivia didn’t say anything.

Tyson fully expected her to refuse.

To his surprise, she nodded—although the action seemed robotic. “Okay then.”

Relief filled him—and concern. The fact Olivia hadn’t fought him showed more of her mental state. That worried him.

He took a step back, knowing he needed to get busy if they wanted to leave soon. “Eat. Then we need to be ready to leave in an hour. Okay?”

She glanced at her food and nodded. “Got it.”

Tyson prayed this was the right choice.

* * *

Tyson had arranged a private plane to take them to an island off the North Carolina coast. He’d let Scarborough know of his plans to take Olivia out of town, just not where he was taking her.

Not that Tyson didn’t trust the detective, but the fewer people who knew where they were going, the better.

The entire time they traveled Olivia appeared catatonic.

Tyson knew she was processing everything, trying to absorb and deal with what had happened. In good time, she would talk. It might not be with him, but she had to

eventually talk with someone.

She probably only said three words the entire trip. Otherwise she simply stared out the window, asking no questions. Just how deeply this incident had affected her was overwhelming.

Tyson tried to put himself in her shoes, to imagine what she was feeling. When he thought he'd arrived at that point, he realized that in his imagination he couldn't even begin to touch her actual emotions. She was a strong woman who was at her breaking point.

He swallowed hard at the thought. No matter what the state of things between him and Olivia was, he couldn't stand to think that someone had purposely put her in this position.

The realization infuriated him and left him feeling helpless. Whoever was doing these things was a coward. The man wouldn't show his face and thrived on people's fears.

It was disgusting.

By the time they landed on Ocracoke Island, it was nighttime. Tyson had arranged a car and driver—Ernest Bryant—to wait for them. Ernest served as caretaker for Tyson's property here.

Silently, they drove down a strip of dark beach, sand dunes barricading the road on both sides of them.

Tyson glanced at Olivia in the back seat, wondering if anything was registering with her.

The same blank expression still captured her face.

They drove past a couple of restaurants, a bed-and-breakfast, and a gift shop before turning down a back road. Tires rumbled over broken seashells beneath them.

Eventually, they pulled up to an old beach house facing the Atlantic Ocean.

This place had been Tyson's haven after his father had passed. And no one knew about this house except for Tyson, his mother, and Ernest.

Tyson had found healing and a refuge here.

He prayed Olivia might also.

CHAPTER FIFTY

The next morning, Olivia awoke disoriented, the unfamiliar ceiling above her spinning a moment before reality crashed back.

The mask. The escape. The beach house.

She pressed her eyes closed, willing away the images that flooded her mind. Instead, even more came.

The root cellar. The garden shears. The expressionless face of Casanova hovering above her.

When she opened her eyes again, sunlight streamed through gauzy curtains, so different from the absolute darkness of her captivity.

Olivia forced herself to sit up.

She barely remembered the journey here—just fragments of a private plane, Tyson's concerned glances, the car ride along dunes. She'd been floating somewhere outside her own body, watching herself move through the motions while her mind retreated to a safer place.

She lay in bed, still trying to process what had happened.

Detective Scarborough seemed to indicate that the man who'd abducted her was someone she might know.

The thought was terrifying.

But who could it be? Was it Donald?

She couldn't really believe that.

She ran through a mental list of suspects. Guilt pounded at her for each thought.

Wes. But he couldn't be behind this. Not only was he like a brother to her, but he'd been out of town during one of the incidents. She'd even seen a picture of him on social media. He'd been on a date with his flavor of the month.

Chandler was a family man and so even-tempered. She couldn't see him doing this either. And he'd been out on medical leave when Olivia's first abduction happened. He'd had knee surgery and hadn't been able to walk without a limp for weeks.

Paul . . . he had arrived in town at a suspect time. Had he wanted to be a hero and set himself up to save her during her first abduction? Had he arranged for someone else to take the fall? He had the knowledge and skills to do so. Olivia shuddered at the thought.

Who else could it be?

Lyle's image came to mind. The thought of Lyle being guilty made her stomach churn with disgust. Her therapist couldn't be behind this. But if he was . . . he would have a front row seat for her turmoil. Wasn't that what predators preyed on?

She swallowed hard. Was there a way she could check his schedule? To see if he'd been out of town while she was in Charlotte?

Maybe. Perhaps she could make a few phone calls, see what she could find out. But if

so, she'd need to be very careful.

That only left one other person . . . one person she couldn't bear to think about.

Tyson.

She shook her head. It absolutely couldn't be him. If this madman was Tyson, he'd need to have a serious personality disorder. Or he was a master of disguise.

No, Tyson would never do this to her. Besides, their paths hadn't even crossed until recently.

The thought was absurd, and Olivia chided herself for even considering it.

However, the truth was she needed to seriously examine everyone in her life.

She didn't want to just sit back and wait for this guy to find her.

No, Olivia needed to be proactive and do what she did best: research.

* * *

Tyson lifted his head as he sat at the kitchen table reading his Bible.

Footsteps padded down the hallway.

His breath caught when he saw Olivia. She looked sleepy and somber but not quite as in shock as she had yesterday.

He rose to his feet. He was hardly ever unsure of himself, but right now Tyson didn't know how to greet her. More than anything he wanted to pull her into his arms. But

he wasn't sure that would be the right choice given what she'd gone through.

Instead, he shoved his hands into his pockets and observed her. "How are you?"

She paused in front of him and crossed her arms. She wore black yoga pants with an oversized sweatshirt that swallowed her small frame. Her dark hair was pulled into a sloppy ponytail, and her skin still looked pale.

More worry coursed through him.

"About as well as you might expect," she started, her voice soft. "Thanks for the nightlights you left around the house."

"I thought they might help." He'd been desperate to do whatever he could to help.

"They do." She glanced around. "Where are we?"

"Ocracoke Island, off the North Carolina coast. The place is only accessible by plane or boat, and only two people know I bought this beach house a few years ago. You should be safe here."

He wanted to say she would be safe here. Looking at all the facts, that assessment was correct. But Tyson couldn't afford to let down his guard and feel too comfortable.

Olivia's gaze drifted out the window to the waves as they crashed against the sand. "It's beautiful."

"And secluded. I thought we could lie low here. Let the police do their work. Let them follow clues until they catch this guy."

Olivia frowned, the expression clearly showing her doubt.

But they couldn't lose hope. This had to end somehow, and it couldn't be with Olivia being hurt.

She moved to the kitchen table, and Tyson pulled the seat out for her, tucking her chair in with her. Then he went and poured her some coffee, placing it in front of her.

"So what do we do while we're here?" Olivia wrapped her fingers around the warm mug.

"You're welcome to do whatever you want. I just don't think you should tell anyone where you are."

She frowned. "I don't plan on it."

"I'm able to work from wherever I need."

Her intense gaze bore into him. "But don't you have interviews set up?"

He shrugged. "I already rescheduled them. It's really not a big deal."

Alarm filled her eyes. "But it is. You have a lot going on and?—"

He reached across the table and squeezed her arm. "My business will be fine. I'm not worried about it."

She stared at him a moment, doubt in her gaze. Then she opened her mouth as if she might argue.

But she didn't.

Instead, she nodded. The motion almost made her appear resigned, like the fight in her was dying.

Olivia was pulling away, Tyson realized. He knew all the reasons she was doing so.

But despite the reasoning, those facts still worried him.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

While Tyson worked, Olivia decided to call Deb.

She sat cross-legged on the bed, her phone—a new burner Tyson had provided—pressed to her ear. Through the window, the afternoon sun cast long shadows across the beach.

Something about the scene intrigued her. Maybe she'd eventually get out there and see the beach up close. Feel the sand under her feet. Touch the salty ocean water.

“Wes and Chandler are back,” Deb told her after a moment of chitchat. “They’re being hounded for details.”

Olivia’s throat tightened. “Have they said anything?”

“No, you have their loyalty.”

“When does the network expect me back?” Olivia asked the question, even though she was fully ready to walk away from her job if it meant keeping her mental well-being.

But she really wanted to finish this story first. After that, her career was up in the air.

“We can talk about that later,” Deb said. “I know you need some time.”

As soon as she got off the phone with Deb, Olivia decided to call Lyle.

She needed to talk to him, but she also wanted to ask him some questions.

She gave Lyle the update.

“I’m okay, Lyle. Really.” She tried to inject conviction into her voice. But her suspicions about Lyle fluttered back through her mind.

He wasn’t The Admirer . . . right?

She swallowed hard.

Her therapist’s sigh carried across the line. “Olivia, you were abducted and drugged. That’s a significant trauma, especially given your history. You need proper care.”

“I’m getting it.” She didn’t elaborate on where she was or who she was with. “I’m reading my Bible. Praying. Doing the grounding exercises. Writing in my journal.”

“And the nightmares?”

She hesitated. “They’re becoming less frequent.”

A lie. But what good would it do to admit that every night she awoke gasping, convinced she was back in that cellar? That sometimes, in that space between dreaming and waking, she could smell roses?

And that had been before her second abduction. It would only be worse now.

“You need to come back, Olivia,” Lyle pressed. “I really think we should have an in-person session. I’m worried about you.”

“Soon,” she promised vaguely.

He didn't press her on the issue. Did that mean he wasn't the culprit?

She wasn't sure.

After ending the call, she decided—against her better judgment—to see if what had happened to her had been reported on. To see if the media had seen the police report about her attack.

A quick internet search pulled up tons of results.

Olivia closed her eyes. Of course. The story was too juicy to ignore.

Entertainment reporter abducted while filming with fitness guru.

Journalist disappears while retracing killer's steps.

Reporter becomes the latest victim . . . again.

The media loved stories like this. What had she expected?

The headlines were lost as Olivia's gaze fixed on something outside her window.

A figure walked along the beach's edge in the distance. The person was too far away to identify, but something about the posture, the deliberate stride . . .

Olivia's heart hammered against her ribs.

The figure turned toward the house. As he got closer, she recognized him.

It was just the caretaker. Ernest. Tyson had introduced him to her earlier when he'd given them a ride to the cottage.

Olivia released her breath, wanting to laugh at herself. But she couldn't.

She was too on edge, seeing danger around every corner.

She didn't anticipate those feelings letting up any time soon.

* * *

The first couple of days at the beach house with Tyson had passed in a blur.

She spent some time exercising. Other time she spent sleeping. And the rest of her time, she spent trying to research her suspects, which had proven harder than expected.

The one thing she had discovered was that Lyle had been out of the office several times since Olivia had been gone. She'd called another friend of hers who also went to Lyle. Her friend had said she'd had to do telehealth services also.

So where had Lyle been? What was the chance he'd been in North Carolina?

The question left her feeling unsettled.

Olivia ate when food was placed before her, though she tasted nothing. She slept in fits and starts, waking gasping from dreams where the mask appeared in darkened corners of her room.

Tyson was always there for her, waiting for her to indicate she needed him.

She knew she was pulling away. But she wasn't ready to accept Tyson's offer to help yet.

Finally, on the third day, she ventured out to the beach.

Something about the endless horizon and the rhythm of waves against sand anchored her when nothing else could.

Her first time out, she'd only managed ten minutes before the exposure—the feeling of being watched—drove her back inside. Later that same day, she managed twenty minutes. By that same evening, she stayed for an hour, letting the salty air scour away the lingering scent of roses that seemed permanently lodged in her nostrils.

Tyson didn't push. Didn't prod her with questions or demand responses. He simply existed nearby, a steady presence who asked for nothing.

Olivia was grateful to have the space to piece herself back together without an audience.

Sometimes, when the memories became too vivid—when she could feel the rope burns on her wrists or taste the chemical sweetness of chloroform at the back of her throat—she would wade ankle-deep into the cold Atlantic, letting the shock of it ground her in the present. Then she'd pray more.

But even as prayer and the ocean worked their healing magic, the question lingered beneath every moment of peace: How long would she be safe here?

She dug her hands into the sand, feeling the granules slip between her fingers.

The masked figure's words echoed in her mind: This isn't over, Olivia. It was never about killing you quickly.

Whoever was hunting her had been patient, methodical. The kind of obsession that wouldn't be deterred by distance or difficulty.

She caught herself scanning the horizon and the dunes, searching for a familiar silhouette. For white porcelain gleaming in the sun.

The countdown was almost complete. Only one rose was left.

Unless the police caught this guy in time, Olivia was certain she'd end up dead. She didn't want to be lulled into a false sense of security.

It's most likely someone you know.

Scarborough's words kept repeating in her mind.

But maybe he was wrong.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

As Tyson stood on the deck keeping an eye on Olivia as she sat on the beach, his cell phone buzzed against the wooden railing. He glanced at the display.

Detective Scarborough.

“I have an update for you,” he started. “It’s about Donald.”

Tyson’s breath caught. “What about him?”

“They found his body this morning. Hidden in a drainage ditch about five miles from your property. We searched that area before, and I’m not sure why we didn’t find him there earlier.”

Tyson closed his eyes. “What happened?”

“It appears to be a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Maybe the guilt got to him.”

“Are you sure it was self-inflicted?”

“He still had the gun in his hands. Between that and the mask we found in his house, it seems like a slam dunk.”

Tyson’s throat tightened. “That doesn’t fit this guy’s MO.”

“I get what you’re saying. We’ll keep investigating. But if someone did this to

Donald and set him up, then I have to say he has some kind of familiarity with the area. I don't think this is a random strange who blew in from out of town. It could be someone close."

A lump formed in his throat. Tyson hated the thought.

Someone close? Close to him?

Even though he'd background checked his staff, if one of them was guilty . . .

The only person who possibly came to mind was Hobbes—not that he believed his assistant would do something like this.

But Hobbes was the only one constantly around. Plus, he had been in New York when Olivia had been abducted the first time.

But he just didn't want to believe it was true.

Tyson thanked the detective. But just as he ended that call, his phone rang again.

His chest tightened when he saw the name on the screen.

Damon Kudlow. The casino developer who desperately wanted the property Tyson was building the school on.

With a grimace, he answered. "Stone."

"Time's running out." Kudlow's voice sounded smooth, practiced. "The tribal council votes next week. Without you there to charm them, I like my odds."

Tyson gripped the railing until his knuckles whitened. "The school will be built,

Kudlow. With or without me physically present.”

Kudlow chuckled. “Noble sentiment. But we both know how these things work. They need to see your face, your commitment. Otherwise, it’s just another empty promise from another outsider.”

Tyson’s jaw tightened so hard it ached.

The worst part was that Kudlow wasn’t entirely wrong. Tyson’s absence at this critical juncture could be disastrous for the project. Years of work, his grandmother’s dream—all of it hung in the balance.

“And these . . . incidents with your houseguest,” Kudlow continued. “Unfortunate timing, wouldn’t you say?”

Ice slid down Tyson’s spine. “What exactly are you implying?”

“Nothing at all. Just observing that with you distracted by Ms. Montgomery’s troubles, my proposal looks more attractive by the day.” His voice contained a smugness that only served to further irritate Tyson. “You have a nice day now.”

The call ended, leaving Tyson staring at the ocean, jaw still clenched and thoughts racing.

Could there be a connection between this casino and what had happened to Olivia? He’d considered it before but brushed off the idea. But now, maybe he should consider the idea more—and maybe even share it with Scarborough.

After all, the timing was suspicious. The escalation of threats against Olivia did coincide with the final phase of the school fundraising project.

As his thoughts wandered, Tyson stood motionless, watching the waves crash against the shore. Olivia sat on the beach watching them too.

She didn't know it, but he always watched her when she was outside.

He wanted her to feel a sense of independence and privacy. But he also wanted to keep her safe.

However, how was he supposed to keep Olivia safe when they were facing someone this determined, this calculated?

* * *

Tyson waited until Olivia was back inside later that day.

She'd gone to her room and had said she was going to take a nap.

When he was sure she was safely in her room, he went back to his office and stared at the papers spread across the small desk. The numbers blurred before his eyes.

No matter how he calculated it, the result was the same.

Without his presence at the council meeting—without his ability to address concerns in person, to leverage his relationships—the school project would lose momentum.

With Frontier Resorts applying pressure, offering immediate economic benefits over long-term educational investment, that loss of momentum could be fatal.

He raked a hand through his hair and closed his eyes.

He needed to make a decision, and he had no time to waste.

His phone rang. It was Danuwoa from the tribe.

“The council’s wavering, Tyson.” Danuwoa’s voice sounded tight with concern. “Kudlow’s people are saying you’ve abandoned the project, that your fitness empire is more important than the community.”

“That’s not true.” Tyson’s back went ramrod straight as tension pulsed through him. “You know why I can’t be there right now.”

“I do, but they’re asking for assurances. Physical presence. They need to see your commitment.”

“You know I’m good for it. I’ve been there for you in the past. You know I’m a man of my word.”

“I do. But I’m having trouble convincing everyone else of it. You know the people here are untrusting and sometimes desperate. The casino seems to offer more immediate answers to their concerns—it will bring jobs and money.”

Tyson raked a hand through his hair. “What am I supposed to do? I’m trying to protect Olivia.”

“It sounds like you have some decisions to make.”

Yes, he did.

After the call, Tyson stared out the window.

The choice before him was impossible. Return to the reservation for the council meeting, potentially saving the school but leaving Olivia vulnerable. Or stay, protecting her but watching his grandmother’s dream slip through his fingers.

Years of work. Millions invested. A promise made to a dying woman.

But how could that compare to the safety of someone he was coming to care for deeply? Someone who'd already endured more than anyone should?

He closed his eyes and poured out his troubles to God in prayer.

Tyson made his decision.

He'd stay in Ocracoke. He'd keep Olivia safe, even if it meant losing everything else.

The school, his reputation, his promise—all of it was secondary to preventing another tragedy.

He only hoped Olivia would forgive him for the choices he was making on her behalf.

For the way he was inserting himself into her story . . . whether she wanted him there or not.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Olivia paused near the door to Tyson's office.

She hadn't meant to eavesdrop. She really hadn't.

But she hadn't been able to help hearing part of the conversation.

Tyson had made it seem as if it wasn't a big deal that he was here in Ocracoke with her and missing his prior engagements.

But it was.

Now his school was on the line. The building campaign might not happen, all because Tyson had chosen to come here with her.

How could Olivia live with herself knowing that?

She couldn't.

The psycho taunting her had already ruined so much. She couldn't let him ruin Tyson also. She knew Tyson thought he was being noble by staying here and protecting her.

And he was.

But Olivia couldn't let him do that.

The only way she could think of to make things right was to . . . leave.

She wouldn't be stupid about it. She wouldn't leave without a plan.

But she could think of a safe way to get away from here and give Tyson his life back.

That was what she needed to do. She had no other choice.

If she tried to talk to Tyson about it, she had no doubt he'd convince her to stay.

Her gut squeezed at the thought of leaving. Of not being with Tyson.

But too many people's lives had already been ruined.

It was time for that to end.

* * *

That night, Olivia and Tyson sat on a wooden swing on the deck and watched as the sunlight disappeared from the sky. It had become their routine.

Olivia truly would miss her time here. Her gut clenched at the thought.

She knew she'd been distant from Tyson since her last attack. But she needed to let him know how much he meant to her without tipping her hand.

As he walked her to her room, Olivia paused in front of him. Looked up at him. Soaked in the beautiful lines of his kind and handsome face.

She knew he'd been purposefully keeping his distance, trying to give her space. Unsure if she was ready for affection. Trying to be respectful.

She appreciated the way he put her needs first.

That quality was the same reason she had to leave, however.

Then she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him close. Without thinking, she pressed her lips into his. The kiss was gentle at first, hesitant—like a question she couldn't bring herself to ask aloud.

He stiffened for only a moment, surprised by her sudden closeness, before his shoulders relaxed. His hand found the small of her back, steadying her as he returned the kiss with a tenderness that made her heart ache.

She memorized everything—the warmth of his breath, the slight tremor in his fingers against her spine, the scent of him that had become so familiar.

When they finally pulled away, Olivia stared up at him, fighting to keep her expression from revealing too much. Her thumb traced the line of his jaw once, committing it to memory.

“Thank you for all you’ve done. For bringing me here. For everything. I know you didn’t have to do any of it.” The words felt painfully inadequate.

“You mean a lot to me, Olivia.” His voice sounded deep and husky, his eyes searching hers with a question she couldn’t answer.

Not now. Not yet.

It was one of the first times he’d said that aloud. Olivia relished his words—even though they made it harder for her to do what she needed to do.

“You mean a lot to me also,” she admitted. “I’m sorry I’ve been so distant and

confused.”

“You’ve had a lot going on.” He rubbed her arms.

Now she had to wait for the next part of her plan.

She hoped Tyson understood . . . and she prayed it was the right decision.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

At ten minutes past midnight, Olivia slung her backpack over her shoulder and took one last look at her room.

She'd truly found this place to be wonderful. She'd miss her time here, her mornings with Tyson, her afternoons sitting on the beach, her evenings watching the sunlight disappear.

But she couldn't be the tornado that destroyed Tyson's life.

Keeping the lights off, she quietly walked to the back of the house, opened the door, and slipped outside. As she walked to the road, the ocean roared behind her and the wind rushed over the marsh grass lining the driveway.

Right on time, a car pulled up.

She hesitated only a second before opening the door.

Just as planned, Wes sat in the driver's seat.

His eyes lit when he saw her. "Olivia . . . thanks for trusting me enough to ask me to help with this."

"Thank you for dropping everything to come."

"Anytime."

She climbed in and shut the door.

Then Wes took off. He'd reserved a cabin in the mountains under his name.

Olivia should be safe there . . . until she could end this.

While there, she planned on continuing to do her research. To keep asking more questions.

She had to figure out who this new Admirer was—and figure out if Brian Elliot really was responsible for those other deaths.

She prayed Tyson understood. She'd left him a note explaining everything.

But she couldn't ignore the pang of hurt that captured her every heartbeat.

* * *

As Tyson lay in bed, unable to sleep, he kept thinking about that kiss Olivia had given him.

About how wonderful it was.

About how he'd been dreaming about kissing her again ever since they got here.

How he wished the moment between them didn't have to end.

How . . . there was more behind the action than just a kiss.

It was almost like a goodbye.

He sat up straighten at the thought.

Was that what it was? Or was he reading too much into this?

Just then, his phone buzzed, and he grabbed it.

It was Scarborough. If the detective was calling at this hour, he must have a good reason.

“Sorry to wake you, but I knew you’d want to hear this ASAP,” Scarborough started. “I know it seemed as if Donald was the one behind what happened, but something about his guilt—and his death—left me unsettled.”

“Me too.”

“I decided to double-check some alibis, and I found a hole in another suspect’s story.”

Tyson’s pulse quickened. “Who?”

Scarborough rattled off a name, and Tyson felt everything go still around him.

No . . . it couldn’t be.

“Thanks for the update,” Tyson rushed as he ended the call.

Now, more than ever, he needed to talk to Olivia.

Praying he didn’t regret this, he hopped out of bed and threw his clothes on. Though it was almost 12:30, he had to know if his suspicions were correct. He’d ask for forgiveness if he was wrong.

He walked to Olivia's room and gently tapped on the door. "Olivia? Are you awake?"

No answer. But she could be sleeping and not hear him.

He tried again with the same results.

Then he gently twisted the knob.

It was unlocked.

He cracked the door open, praying Olivia understood his reasoning for looking inside without her consent.

But it was just as he feared.

Her bed was empty.

Tyson's heart leapt into his throat.

Where was she?

He threw on the lights and glanced around.

Her bag was gone.

But a piece of paper lay on the dresser—the burner phone he'd given her beside it.

With hesitation marring his steps, he walked toward it.

His name was on the top.

His gut clenched. “Please, Olivia, tell me you didn’t do what I think you did . . .”

He began reading.

Tyson,

I can’t let you lose everything for me. I know about the casino. You have to make sure the school is built.

I’m going somewhere safe. I’ll stay there until I’m able to show my face again. I can’t tell you where I’m going. Only one other person knows. It’s better this way.

I’m not sure if it’s possible that I already love you. My heart says I do. And love means putting the other person’s needs before your own.

I hope that one day you’ll understand. I’m doing this for you.

Love,

Olivia

His jaw tightened.

Her leaving was a terrible idea—no matter how noble her intentions.

He jogged back to his room to grab his car keys.

Maybe she hadn’t left the island yet.

If she hadn’t, then Tyson needed to find her.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

Olivia stared at the road around her, trying not to second-guess her decision.

But she'd be lying if she said her nerves weren't running hot.

She and Wes would get off this island, drive through the night, and get to the cabin.

He'd told her he had enough leave time to stay with her the whole time.

Doing so would be a huge sacrifice. But Wes didn't have to stay if he didn't want to.

Though Olivia didn't want to face this nightmare alone, she would if necessary.

She sat up straighter as she watched the road, her nerves on edge. "Weren't you supposed to turn back there? We're going to the ferry, right?"

She thought she'd seen a sign.

Wes shook his head. "I thought you knew. It's closed right now. The last trip was at midnight."

Olivia settled back in her seat. That made sense.

She was reading too much into things, and her nerves were making her jumpy.

She glanced out the window again, her thoughts still churning. "So what are we going

to do? Fly?”

“I couldn’t get a plane. But don’t worry. I have a plan.”

She tried to relax, but tension still thrummed inside her.

A moment later, Wes pulled to a stop in front of a marina. Boats bobbed on the water, only illuminated by the moonlight.

“A boat?” Olivia hadn’t expected this one.

He nodded. “We’ll take it to the mainland. I’ve already arranged for a car on the other side. This is the best way.”

She released her breath. His plan made sense. She just needed to take a deep breath and trust that this would work.

Olivia glanced at Wes’ familiar profile as he stared at the road ahead. “You really did some work on this, didn’t you?”

He flashed her a soft smile. “I did. You’re worth it.”

* * *

As Tyson sped down the island roads, Ernest stayed back at the house checking security footage.

Tyson kept the phone on as he scanned the streets, listening for Ernest’s update.

“Wait . . . I see something,” Ernest said.

His grip on the wheel tightened. “What is it?”

“At about ten after twelve, a black SUV pulled up on the road near the house. Olivia got inside—willingly.”

Tyson frowned, even though he’d assumed that much.

“Can you see the driver?” Tyson held his breath as he waited for the answer.

“Unfortunately, I cannot.”

He wasn’t surprised. But if Olivia had left so late, she couldn’t take the ferry off the island.

That only left two options—the airport or the marina.

He knew where he needed to head.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

Olivia squeezed the straps of her backpack as she stared at the boat.

She didn't know much about boats. But this one appeared to be a cabin cruiser. It wasn't huge, but it was nicer than she'd expected.

The boat nestled in its slip, gently rising and falling with each passing wave. The motion created soft creaking sounds as the fenders squeezed between boat and dock. The watercraft's lines strained with each swell, then slackened while halyards clinked softly against aluminum masts like distant wind chimes.

"How in the world did you manage to get this?" Olivia asked as she stood on the dock, the breeze blowing through her hair.

"My dad was an avid fisherman. He used to come to this area quite a bit. I still had some connections. But don't worry—I was discrete."

"Nice." Wes really had thought of everything, hadn't he? She'd known she could depend on him.

He stepped onto the boat and extended his hand to help her aboard.

After a moment of hesitation, Olivia placed her hand in his and hopped onto the boat.

It took a moment to find her balance as the choppy water swayed the boat.

Her nerves tightened. “Is it okay to take this out with these waves?”

“We should be fine,” Wes said. “We’ll head out of the harbor and then head into the Pamlico Sound toward the mainland.”

She nodded, knowing she had no choice but to trust him. “What can I do to help?”

“Untie the dock lines while I start the engine.”

She unwound the ropes from the pier where they’d been secured.

A few minutes later, Wes pressed the throttle forward, and they gently eased from the slip.

Then they were off.

Olivia breathed in the fresh air.

She wished she felt relief as she left Tyson behind.

But she didn’t.

She only felt anxiety. But she couldn’t afford to question her decision. She had to believe this was for the best.

When the harbor became mere lights twinkling in the distance, Wes slowed the boat. But the waves continued to rock them back and forth, occasionally splashing over the edge and onto the deck.

She was ready to be out of these rough waters and somewhere more stable.

She glanced up at Wes as he stood at the helm. “What should I do now?”

“You can go into the cabin and wait if you want. It’s more comfortable down there. You should just relax for a while.”

Olivia thanked him before walking toward the glossy brown door leading below deck.

She opened it and paused as darkness stared back at her.

She swallowed hard, chastising herself for being irrational. Of course it was dark. No one had been down here since they boarded.

She reached for the light and flicked it on.

She stepped down into the boat’s hull, curious as to what she’d see below deck.

But when she reached the cabin, her world began to spin.

A single rose waited on the table there.

* * *

Olivia took a step back and collided with . . . something.

She flinched and spun around.

Wes stood there. But his expression had morphed into one she’d never seen before.

He no longer looked like her friend. He looked . . . diabolical.

“Do you like it?” His voice sounded gravelly and intimate.

“Do I like what?” Her voice trembled as she tried to buy some time to think. To adjust to the fact that all this time she hadn’t known Wes at all. Not the real Wes.

“The rose.” His tone warmed. “This wasn’t how I planned to surprise you. But I think it worked out well.”

She took a step back, trying to put distance between them. The boat continued quietly rocking.

That was when she realized Wes had cut off the engine.

A lump formed in her throat.

“Wes? You’re not The Admirer . . . are you?”

He grinned and stepped closer. “I thought you would’ve figured it out. I thought you’d see through me.”

Her lungs tightened until she could hardly breathe.

This couldn’t be happening.

But it was.

How could she have been so stupid? But she’d never suspected Wes.

He had alibis.

She’d trusted him.

Thought he was her friend.

“Why would you do this?” Her voice trembled as she asked the question.

“I’ve loved you for so long, Olivia.” He reached for her, tucking a hair behind her ear. “So long. Only you never realized it.”

Nausea rose in her, but she forced herself not to react.

She feared the slight movement could set him off.

Could make him hurt her.

“You never told me,” she finally said, reaching for the table to brace herself.

Her wrist brushed the rose, its thorny stem scraping her skin.

She was trapped, she realized. Totally trapped.

She’d trusted the wrong person. And now she was going to pay for that decision.

“You set up Brian Elliot?” Maybe Olivia could keep him talking until she could figure out how to get away. It was the only plan she could think of right now.

“It was so easy, really.” He smirked. “That man loved flowers. I used to buy them from him. He sold them on the side of the road. That’s how I got to know him. I’d stop and get some before I went on dates. It was how I made sure his fingerprint was on that evidence.”

“That’s . . .” Olivia wanted to say disgusting, but she didn’t. “That’s really clever of you.”

“You know the best part?” Wes charged ahead. “After you escaped and when the public heard what happened to you, your popularity grew. Your show numbers tripled. All because of what happened. All because of me .”

The nausea in her stomach grew stronger. “What are you going to do with me now, Wes?”

He grinned, but his eyes appeared absent of any soul. “Now the two of us can be together . . . forever.”

Don’t throw up. Hold yourself together. Keep your wits. “But Wes . . . you really think that’s going to work?”

He didn’t seem to hear her. “At first, I didn’t like this boat. I like places where I’m surrounded by dirt. That’s where roses grow, you know? Roses are beautiful . . . just like you.”

“There’s not much dirt around us now.”

“Then I realized there are three things a rose needs to thrive—dirt, sun, and . . . water. And we have plenty of water here, don’t we?”

“But saltwater kills roses.” Pointing that out was risky, but she hoped it paid off.

She held her breath as she waited for his response.

Wes’ gaze darkened, and he skimmed his fingers across her jaw. “Don’t you worry about that, my darling. Let me worry about it. If there’s one thing I know, it’s how to tend to flowers.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

Tyson checked the island's small airport.

No one was there, and it didn't appear anyone had been there in the past hour.

Then he headed to the marina, making more phone calls on the way.

He couldn't know for sure Olivia was in danger right now.

But everything inside him said she was.

He screeched to a halt at the harbor and hopped from his car. He scanned everything around him—the boats, the slips, the vehicles parked nearby.

He didn't see Olivia anywhere.

However, he did see a dark-colored SUV that looked very similar to the one that Ernest had mentioned pulling up outside of Tyson's home. Maybe even identical.

He sprinted toward it and checked the doors.

The back driver's side door was unlocked.

Quickly, he searched through it, trying to get a kind of idea as to who might have picked Olivia up.

That was when he saw it.

A rose petal halfway under the seat. That couldn't be a coincidence.

That was all the evidence he needed.

Tyson grabbed his phone and called the local police, explaining the situation to them. Then he called Scarborough. As he spoke, he sprinted toward the docks, searching for anyone—or any signs of life.

There were none.

Until he heard someone say, “Where’s the fire?”

A man rose from the stern of a fishing vessel. If Tyson had to guess, the guy had been sleeping back there and enjoying the breeze. He must have heard Tyson’s frantic footsteps.

As his face came into the moonlight, Tyson quickly noted that man was probably in his thirties with a shaggy brown beard and a well-worn T-shirt and cutoff jeans.

No doubt a fisherman.

“I’m looking for a man and woman who might have been here within the past hour,” Tyson rushed. “Did you see anyone?”

The man nodded. “Sure did. They just left about fifteen minutes ago in a Sea Ray Cabin Cruiser.”

Tyson pulled out his wallet. “How much would you charge to take me out there?”

The man raised his eyebrows. “Right now?”

“Right now.”

He shrugged. “A hundred bucks to start with. A hundred bucks an hour afterward.”

“It’s a deal.” Tyson pressed some cash into his hands. “But I need to go now.”

He couldn’t wait for the Coast Guard or the marine police.

Every second that passed was another second that Olivia might slip away.

* * *

Olivia trembled. “Wes . . . did you kill those other women?”

He continued to gaze at her as if transfixed. “When I realized I couldn’t have you I tried to find someone who was as good as you. But there’s no one.”

“But . . . how did you get away with it?”

“No one ever thought to track where I worked my assignments. This job actually gives me quite a bit of flexibility when it comes to travel. I thought those other women would satisfy me. But they didn’t. Only you.”

She shuddered again but tried to hide it.

“Wes . . . if you love me, you can’t just decide to keep me.” Her voice cracked with every word. But maybe she could get through to him. She had to at least try.

He tilted his head, almost looking . . . innocent. “Will you stay with me on your

own?”

Her mind raced. She hadn't expected him to ask that. Nor was she sure how to answer exactly.

Saying no could be a death wish.

But saying yes . . .

“Of course, I'll stay.” Maybe if Olivia told him that, it would keep her alive longer so she could escape.

Maybe her plan of action should be to act as if she was on his side. It was risky but . . . what other choice did she have? They were adrift, the boat rocking back and forth, and no one else knew where she was or who she was with.

“Why roses?” She wasn't sure where the question came from, but this side of Wes didn't match the one she knew.

Her Wes liked burping and football and jokes.

But psycho Wes liked roses and gardening and make-believe romance.

“Did you know I was married before?” Wes' cheek twitched as he asked the question.

“You were? You never told me that.”

“Her name was Leesa. She loved gardening. Taught me so much about how to take care of plants.”

Everything around her went still. She didn't like where this might be going. “What

happened?”

“She left me.” His gaze hardened. “On Valentine’s Day. Can you believe it? I came home and found a note she left for me—along with a single rose. Then she laughed to her friends about how pathetic I was. One of them told me about it.”

“That’s terrible, Wes.” That was where his own emotional trauma came into play.

And this whole twisted plan had been born.

“When Leesa died, I made sure to plant roses on her grave. It was my way of keeping her memory alive.”

Her breath caught as his words settled in her mind.

“Leesa died? Did you . . . ?” She couldn’t finish the question.

His eyes gleamed, but he didn’t answer.

He didn’t have to.

This man was even more twisted than she thought.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

Tyson scanned the horizon, looking for any sign of that boat.

So far, he hadn't seen anything. But the nighttime was inky black, and the water was rough. The most he could hope for was to see some of the running lights on the boat.

But if the person who'd taken Olivia was smart enough, he would have cut them off and then all but disappeared into the sea.

Tyson should have known better. Should have kept a better eye on Olivia.

Yet he knew he couldn't control her. She'd made this choice of her own free will.

But if she'd only talked to him, he could have convinced her to stay.

Maybe.

The boat continued to buzz through the water.

"You see what you're looking for yet?" asked Walleye—that was the name the fisherman had given himself.

"No, not yet."

Tyson hoped the police and Coast Guard had gotten their boats in the water by now.

Maybe there was still hope Olivia could be found.

Please, God . . . let that be the truth.

* * *

Olivia continued to stare at Wes, praying she'd see his gaze transform from The Admirer back to the Wes she knew.

Maybe he had multiple personalities. Maybe he just needed to switch back to someone who could help her.

She knew better than to get her hopes up, however.

“Where are we going?” she asked, that rose brushing her fingers again.

He shrugged nonchalantly as he remained in front of her, standing uncomfortably close. “Anywhere we want.”

“I’m sure this boat only has a limited amount of gas.”

He gave her a pitying look, almost as if she were a clueless child. “Of course, we won’t stay on the boat. As you pointed out, roses don’t like saltwater. That made me think . . . the mountains are really more appropriate. Don’t you agree? It’s easier to grow roses there.”

An image of that permeated her mind, and despair tried to fill her.

She couldn’t let her thoughts go there.

She still had a chance of getting out of this.

But how? Tyson probably wouldn't discover she was gone until the morning. By that time, she'd be long gone.

She'd planned it that way.

And no one would know Wes had come here for her. He wasn't on anyone's radar.

A cry lodged in her throat.

Right now, she could only depend on herself and God.

That meant she either needed a plan or she needed to wait for the right opportunity.

She was a decent swimmer. If she could get away from him, then maybe she could swim back to shore.

It beat the thought of being trapped with Wes in an off-grid house for months—if not longer—without being discovered.

Wes reached behind him.

Looking away from her.

Was this her chance?

But what could she use as a weapon?

Her fingers circled that rose. Its thorns dug into her flesh. But she didn't care.

When Wes turned back to her, all the air left her lungs.

He wore a Casanova mask.

Even the sight of him made her knees go weak with fear.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

Tyson continued searching the horizon, desperate to catch a glimpse of that cabin cruiser Olivia had departed in.

He couldn't lose hope. There was still a good chance they could find her.

They had to find her.

The boat rocked back and forth, the water rocky.

"Anything?" Walleye asked as he stood at the helm.

"No, keep going!" Tyson shouted over the sound of the engine.

"Aye-aye, Captain."

Tyson had a feeling this guy didn't care what happened, not as long as he got paid.

Finally, Tyson thought he saw a light up ahead, barely visible in the darkness.

He blinked, unsure if he was seeing things.

But as they got closer, he realized he wasn't.

There was a boat in the distance.

Someone else was out there!

He had to know if it was Olivia.

“Over there!” he shouted to Walleye.

The man nodded and kicked the throttle into higher gear as they skimmed across the choppy water.

As they traveled, Tyson continued to pray.

He prayed the police would be here soon.

He prayed for wisdom.

But most of all, he prayed that Olivia was safe.

* * *

Now, Olivia. Now!

She couldn't wait for another opportunity—because another opportunity might not come.

She gripped the rose, her fingers now bloody.

Then she raised it and plunged the stem through the only opening in the mask.

The eyehole.

Wes howled with pain and bent forward.

Horror swept through Olivia as she realized what she'd done.

But she'd had no choice.

And now she needed to run.

She swept past Wes, her legs wobbly.

He muttered curses behind her.

She kept moving.

She had to make the most of every second.

She rushed up the steps to the top deck and glanced around.

What now? Jump overboard? Find a life jacket? A lifeboat?

Before she could decide, movement sounded behind her.

A hand over his injured eye, Wes rushed up the steps.

She had to move.

Now!

She ran toward the railing.

As she did, she saw a light in the distance.

Another boat?

But as quickly as she saw it, the light disappeared.

Maybe she'd been seeing things.

“Wait till I get my hands on you, you little . . .” Wes lunged toward her.

That was when Olivia realized she had no choice.

She had to jump.

CHAPTER SIXTY

“That looks like the boat,” Walleye muttered, pulling out some binoculars.

“Cut your lights so they won’t see us coming.”

“Since you’re footing this bill . . .” He flipped off the lights. “Your wish is my command.”

They idled closer.

Tyson took the binoculars from Walleye and focused on the boat in the distance.

Someone rushed onto the deck.

A woman.

Was that . . . Olivia?

Relief filled him. But the emotion was short-lived.

Because a man then appeared. He was crouched over, holding his face.

The woman ran to the railing. It was Olivia. He knew it was.

Tyson’s breath caught.

Was she going to . . . jump?

His heart thudded in his ears.

He watched as the woman leapt overboard.

But this water . . . it was rough. Deep.

Dangerous.

Tyson handed his phone to Walleye. “Call 911. Let them know a woman has been kidnapped and give them your coordinates.”

Then he stripped off his shirt, kicked off his shoes, and dove in.

He only prayed he could get to Olivia in time.

* * *

The cold, dark water surrounded Olivia, taking her breath away.

She’d known it would be frigid and rough . . . but it was even more so than she thought.

However, she had no choice.

She had to get away.

Then she heard another splash.

Wait . . . had Wes jumped in also?

No . . .

She couldn't turn to look.

She just had to move.

Drawing in a deep breath, she dove under the water.

Maybe if she was out of sight, he wouldn't find her.

She kicked harder, trying to move faster.

But fingers clamped her ankle.

Panic raced through her.

He'd caught her! She had to get away.

Mustering all her strength, she kicked as hard as she could.

The grip around her ankle loosened.

Then she was free.

Lungs burning, she forced herself to continue forward.

She knew it would be a struggle to make it back to land.

But she had to try.

It was her only hope of staying alive.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

Tyson surfaced. Saw the man dive into the water after Olivia.

He had to move. Quickly.

The current pulled him away from the boat, making him work twice as hard.

Where was the Coast Guard? The marine police?

He took a breath and then dove again trying to avoid the worst of the waves.

He wished it wasn't so dark. That he could see underwater.

But only blackness surrounded him.

A moment later, he surfaced again and treaded water.

Someone else surfaced also.

Was that . . . Olivia?

The woman gasped for air and glanced around in a panic.

Yes, it was her! Olivia!

He wanted to cry out to her, but he didn't dare. If he did, Tyson would also draw

attention from the man chasing her. He couldn't let that happen.

But he did need to reach her.

He wasn't sure how long she'd last out here in these elements.

She'd made some great strides on her fitness journey.

But these conditions would be tough for anyone.

The water was unforgiving.

Please, let backup get here. Quickly!

Then he dove back under the water, determined to reach her before he lost her forever.

* * *

Olivia didn't know where Wes was. She didn't see him behind her.

But he could be underwater.

Hiding out of sight.

Hunting her like a shark stalking dinner.

Fear raced through her.

Her legs burned from the exertion. Her arms felt heavy, tired.

Maybe she could circle back around to the cabin cruiser. Climb aboard. Take off without Wes.

She searched for the boat's outline, but the current had taken it beyond reach, leaving her no choice but to keep moving.

Olivia squinted through the stinging spray of seawater. The harbor lights in the distance still looked so far away.

Could she really make it that far?

She had to. She refused to give up.

Wes, a certifiable madman, had already taken too much from her.

She lowered herself into the water again and swam as hard as she could.

Until someone grabbed her wrists.

More panic captured her.

She thrashed, determined to get away.

How had Wes gotten in front of her?

No, no, no!

He pulled her to the surface.

She sputtered, sucking in deep gulps of air as she tried to gain her strength.

Then she fought with everything she had left, knowing every second counted.

“Take it easy,” he said. “It’s just me.”

But . . . Wes’ voice sounded different.

Then the water cleared from her eyes, and she realized it was . . .

“Tyson?”

She blinked. Was she seeing things? Hallucinating?

How had he found her?

He put a finger over his lips, indicating she needed to be quiet.

Relief washed through her.

It was really him. He was really here.

But they weren’t out of trouble yet.

Wes was still out there somewhere.

And she had no idea where.

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

Tyson wanted more than anything to pull Olivia into his arms. To plant a kiss on her lips.

But he couldn't. Not now.

First, he had to make sure she was safe.

Where had her kidnapper gone?

Holding onto Olivia's arm, he scanned his surroundings.

Waves lapped their faces. Lifted their bodies up and down.

Through watery eyes, he spotted the cabin cruiser drifting farther away. Walleye's boat floating nearby. Or was Walleye idling toward them?

He couldn't be sure.

The killer could be anywhere. Hiding behind a boat. Beneath the water.

Coming up on them.

Tyson was certain the man wouldn't give up. Not after coming this far. This guy wasn't about to let Olivia get away without a fight.

That was when Tyson felt something tug his foot.

At once, he disappeared beneath the water.

Hands circled his neck, strangling him.

Tyson hadn't had a chance to get a breath before being pulled underwater. His lungs were already burning.

Tyson worked his fingers beneath the strangling grip and tugged the man's fingers from around his neck.

Now he needed air.

Before he could get any, the guy grabbed him again.

Pulled him farther under.

Tyson kicked, hitting the killer in the face.

Then he darted to the surface, his lungs screaming for oxygen.

He prayed he could get there in time.

And he prayed Olivia was okay.

* * *

Olivia felt more panic kicking in.

Where was Tyson? Was he okay?

She sensed thrashing beneath her.

She knew she should dive under. That she should try to help.

But the idea terrified her, freezing her body with fear.

Her arms and legs grew weary as she continued to tread water.

Then someone shot to the surface next to her.

Tyson!

Relief filled her.

He was okay!

But as he drank in deep gulps of air, worry replaced the relief she'd felt.

What had happened down there?

“Get . . . to . . . the boat.” His voice sounded hoarse as he nodded to the boat behind them.

She stared at him. “You’re coming too?”

He nodded.

Good.

But where was Wes?

Just then, Tyson disappeared under the water again.

Wes had pulled him under, she realized.

She couldn't leave him.

She needed to fight back.

Lord, give me the strength and courage. I'm begging You. Please!

Taking a deep breath, she dove under the water.

She could see nothing.

But she felt her way around.

Her hands connected with something.

A face.

Tyson's or Wes'?

Based on the hair, it was Wes.

Using all the strength she had left, she began to pull his hair.

Hands grabbed her arms to stop her.

She didn't, though.

As the current tried to pull her back, she kicked with all her might.

Her foot connected with Wes' face.

Then everything felt still around her.

Hands tugged her back to the surface.

When she broke through, she blinked.

Tyson stared at her. "Are you okay?"

She coughed, sputtering out water, but nodded. "I'm fine. You?"

"I'm fine."

But she wasn't sure how much longer she could make it out here. She was so tired.
So cold. So spent.

Just as the thought filled her mind, lights surrounded them and over a bullhorn she heard, "Coast Guard!"

Help was here.

Finally, help was here.

Tears of gratitude sprung to her eyes.

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

Olivia sat on the Coast Guard cutter, a blanket around her shoulders and a warm cup of coffee in her hands. Tyson was also aboard but instead of sitting, he paced, keeping an eye on the situation.

The Coast Guard had been unable to locate Wes.

Had the kick Olivia given him been lethal? She had a hard time believing that might be true.

But where else could he have gone?

The Coast Guard had already boarded the cabin cruiser Wes had been using. He wasn't there. So unless he was swimming back to shore, there was a good chance he hadn't made it.

After a few moments, Tyson came and sat beside her. His concerned gaze met hers.

Olivia knew she had so much to explain.

Yet at the same time, Tyson didn't seem to need an explanation. Certainly he'd pieced together what had happened, and he knew she'd fled trying to keep him safe. There would be time for them to talk about it later.

He put a hand on her knee. "You were brave out there, Olivia."

She appreciated the sentiment, but she didn't feel brave. Yet maybe his words were true. Because without courage, she would have never gone back under that water.

"I didn't want anything to happen to you," she finally murmured.

He pushed a wet strand of hair from her face and stared deeply into her eyes. "I love and appreciate that you did that for me. But you have to know I would much rather you be safe than for you to protect me."

"I know." Her throat burned as she said the words. "But I feel the same way about you."

A slow grin spread across Tyson's face, and he leaned toward her, their foreheads touching.

Before he could say anything else, commotion sounded on the deck.

They both straightened to see what was going on.

* * *

Tyson's muscles went taut.

Had they found Wes?

He wanted to go out to see what was happening. Instead, he stayed by Olivia, knowing she might need his support, depending on what the update was.

He could hardly breathe as he waited.

A few minutes later, one of the Coast Guardsmen stepped toward them. "Our men

found Wes. He was trying to swim back to shore and got too tired. He grabbed hold of a buoy and was hanging on for dear life.”

Relief washed through Tyson. “Where is he now?”

“We have him in our custody. We put him on a different boat in order to keep him far away from you two.”

Tyson glanced at Olivia and saw the relief spread across her face. That had been a good move, one he was thankful for. He wasn’t sure Olivia could handle seeing Wes again right now.

“This is all over,” the Coast Guardsman said. “You’ll have lots of questions to answer, of course. But you should be safe.”

Tears sprang to Olivia’s eyes. Not tears of sadness but of relief.

All these months, she’d had doubts that the real killer had died. That realization had left her living in fear.

But maybe now she could truly take some time to recover.

Tyson hoped that healing would take place with him by her side.

EPILOGUE

Olivia sat on the patio behind Tyson's house.

A month had passed since everything happened, and life was slowly returning to normal.

At least it was returning to a new normal. She'd been staying here in Tyson's guest bedroom as she tried to recover from the trauma of being abducted again. Despite everything that had happened here, she found a lot of peace on this property.

"Hey there," a soft voice said behind her.

She turned as Tyson stepped out, and a grin spread across her face.

He handed her a cup of coffee before kissing her forehead and sitting in the chair beside hers.

Watching the sun rise together had become their routine over the past few weeks. They'd done that this morning, had breakfast, and then Olivia had slipped back outside while Tyson took a phone call.

A lot had happened since Wes' arrest.

The evidence against Wes had been irrefutable. Since he'd refused to admit his guilt, he'd now be going to trial.

Olivia didn't look forward to testifying against him, but she would do it. She knew with Tyson by her side she'd get through those days in court.

She still had questions, things she didn't understand—like where Wes had gotten the roses. He hadn't been able to grow them himself while in Charlotte. The police thought he may have taken them from another house in the area. The homeowner was in Europe for the summer, so he wouldn't have noticed.

She still wasn't sure how Wes had gotten the flowers into the gala either. He wasn't talking or admitting anything. One thing was for sure: He was clever and sneaky.

Olivia had taken a leave of absence from Static Entertainment. Her first instinct had been to throw herself back into her work. But she knew that wasn't the best choice. She needed first to heal.

Not only that, but she'd actually come to discover that she liked Tyson's eating and exercise plan. She'd stuck with it even though the assignment was over.

"I just got off the phone with the tribal council," Tyson told her.

She sat up straighter. "And?"

"The CEO of Frontier Resorts has been arrested on embezzlement charges."

"What?"

He nodded, a grin tugging at his lips. "The cops haven't been able to prove he's the one who's been threatening me, but that's okay. His arrest has shut down the possibility of the casino being built, and the council approved the design for the school."

She threw her hands into the air. "That's amazing. Why did they change their

minds?”

“They decided to invest in efforts that have long-term results instead of a quick fix. Plus, we received some donations that helped us secure all the financing we needed to fully fund this project.”

Olivia reached over and squeezed his hand. “That’s wonderful news. We should celebrate tonight.”

“We should. Maybe by staying in and cooking a nice meal and then taking a walk afterward?”

She smiled again. “That sounds perfect.”

As she sat there with Tyson staring out at the horizon, Olivia realized how much had changed in her life. For starters, the nightlights she once needed were still there, but she found herself relying on them less and less.

“You know,” she said softly, “Lyle told me something once that I didn’t fully understand until now.”

Tyson turned to her, his eyes warm. “What’s that?”

“He said when you know night is falling, you prepare. You turn on lights to see your path. You start a fire to keep warm.” She looked up at Tyson. “I spent so long just being afraid of the darkness. I never thought about how to face it.”

Tyson’s fingers intertwined with hers. “And now?”

“Now I realize that being prepared doesn’t mean the darkness won’t come. It just means you have tools to face it when it does.” She smiled up at him. “You were one of those tools for me, Tyson. You still are.”

He leaned closer. “And you for me.”

As the morning light warmed their faces, Olivia felt the last remnants of her fear dissolving. Perfect love—not just romantic love, but the perfect love of God working through the people He’d placed in her life—had done what seemed impossible.

It had cast out fear.

Not immediately. Not easily. But persistently, day after day, sunrise after sunrise, until finally she could face each morning knowing that whatever darkness came, she wouldn’t face it alone.

And that made all the difference.

~~~

Thank you so much for reading *Before the Night Falls* . If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review.