



Cursed Fox (Willow Creek Security #4)

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Category: Romance

Description: Cursed Fox is a small town romantic suspense with a tortured silver fox hero and a single mother trying to save her son.

One threat was about to change my whole life.

Years ago, I escaped Willow Creek with the plan to never return after my ex-husband left me in ruin. Now I'm in need of help and my boss wasn't available leaving me with only one option. Willow Creek Security. Oh, and a man who resurrected my dead libido.

Lex was going to be my downfall.

For years I was positive I was cursed. People I cared about tended to die way too soon and their deaths haunted me. I was convinced I didn't deserve the good life my friends found in the small town of Willow Creek, so it was time to move on. But now an old friend needs my help and instead of leaving the town behind, I'm seeking their expertise.

Can I save Nancy, or will she be another person I lose?

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CHAPTER ONE

Lex

I shoved the last of my possessions into my backpack. I came to this town with very little and I was leaving it the same way. Willow Creek wasn't for me anymore. My reasons for staying were slowly dwindling.

Olivia, Maisie's niece, was doing better and better each day after her parents' death.

She talked more to her therapist, and her relationship with Maisie was improving.

She didn't need me as much as she had when things first went down.

Our shared trauma was now a thing of the past, and I was happy for her.

Even if it meant less time with one of the few people I considered a friend.

Speaking of friends.

I looked down at my ringing phone and contemplated not answering it. I hated talking on the thing. Why couldn't people just text me? It saved me the trouble of having to pretend like I wasn't disinterested in the conversation.

But it was Maverick, my boss, and I felt obligated to speak to him.

Although, he might not be my boss for much longer.

I was debating letting him know this wasn't going to work for me. Small-town life wasn't busy enough to keep my mind off what I witnessed and endured while enlisted. It didn't keep the demons at bay. My friends might've preferred the change of pace, but I couldn't stand it.

The call almost rang out before I finally answered. "Yeah?"

One word. I was a man who preferred limited vocabulary.

Fortunately, Maverick understood my need for directness and got straight to the point.

"Wes called. He needs some help with a problem. I figured you could meet with him and see what's going on."

I didn't need to know what the problem was.

I would help him either way. If for no other reason than I owed Wes my life.

Then I could tell Maverick I was done and needed to move on from this place.

I appreciated what he wanted to do for me, but I wasn't like the rest of them. I was too fucked up for a simple life.

"I'll call him."

I hung up and hit the button for one of the few numbers stored in my phone. Unlike me, Wes answered within seconds.

"Hey, Lex. I should've known Maverick would pick you."

"You need my help?" I got straight to the point.

"Actually, it's my office manager, Nancy. Her son is a professional football player for the Oklahoma Pioneers and has been receiving death threats for weeks now. Jimmy thinks it's no big deal. Comes with the game. But Nancy isn't as convinced."

I scrubbed my hand along my jaw in confusion. "Why can't your two teams help?"

Wes ran his own security company and had two different teams that could easily do this type of work. It made no sense that he was asking my team for assistance.

"Nancy doesn't want them to know what's going on. She wouldn't want me to call you guys either."

"Then why did you?"

I wasn't the kind of man who pulled punches. If this Nancy woman didn't want my help, there was no point in me helping. I didn't care what Wes wanted, I wouldn't force myself on anyone. I might be a lot of things, but I refused to be an asshole to some strange woman.

"Because Nancy asked me for help personally, but I'm not in the position to be able to do it. Jennie needs me more right now."

Warning bells went off in my head, but I kept my mouth shut. If Wes wanted to tell me what was going on with his wife, he would. Otherwise, it was none of my business.

"So you went behind her back?" I didn't bother to keep the surprise out of my voice.

"I did, and I did it knowing she'll be mad at me."

Now that was the kind of honesty I admired in a person, and one of the many reasons I respected Wes.

"How pissed will she be?"

Wes chuckled. "Probably very, but I'll smooth the way for you. Nancy won't stay mad for long. She's a single mother of two kids and she would do anything for them. As soon as I remind her of that, she's going to be fine with this."

I would take his word for it. Women were a foreign species to me.

Other than sex, I didn't know a damn thing about them, and I preferred it that way.

Anything more than sex meant talking and getting to know someone.

I didn't want anyone to know me. I didn't want them to learn how fucked up I was.

It was better if I just kept to the physical shit.

"I'll be there in twenty. It better be enough time."

"Don't worry. I'll make sure of it."

Neither of us said goodbye. Greetings were a waste of time, and we both knew that.

Grabbing the keys to my Jeep off the small table, I headed out of Easton's apartment without a single glance back. This place wasn't mine. It was just somewhere to lay my head at night. It certainly wasn't home. No place ever felt like home, and I wouldn't miss it when I was gone.

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CHAPTER TWO

Nancy

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I was mad enough that there was a real chance I could kill my boss right here in my office. "I told you I didn't want anyone's help but yours. I especially don't want anyone from you know where ."

I couldn't bring myself to say the name. Which was ridiculous considering it was just a town name, but to me it was like Beetlejuice. Say it three times and voila, it was back in my life. In my case though, I didn't even have to say anything—Wes already did the summoning.

"Lex isn't from Willow Creek and he's barely been there for a few months. He also doesn't talk much, so it's not like he's going to annoy you. To be honest, the man is perfect for this situation. He'll get the job done with minimal contribution on your part."

I scoffed at his explanation. "I'm not worried about being annoyed with the man. I work for you after all. If I haven't killed you yet, there's hope for the rest of mankind."

And there were some days I asked myself how I managed to come in day after day and not kill the man in front of me. He infuriated me like no other. But then I remembered my kids wouldn't have all they did if it weren't for Wes and the opportunity he gave me.

When I moved to Divot, I was a single mother with no job and a huge gap in my résumé. Most employers took one look at the thing and wrote me off, but not Wes. He gave me the chance to prove I could make something of my life and provide my kids with a stable home.

"I want you to know I take that as a compliment." Wes's words pulled me out of my musings.

I smiled, because of course he did. That was the kind of relationship we had. Wes wasn't just my employer, he was my friend, and some days I felt more like his boss than he did mine. While unconventional, I wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

"Besides, you know if I didn't have everything going on with Jennie, I would gladly help you. But I can't commit that kind of time. Not right now."

I thought about my boss's wife and instantly felt guilty. She was going through so much. Battling stage two breast cancer wasn't easy, and Jennie deserved to have her husband by her side at all times.

I deflated. "I'm sorry. I never should've brought it up."

I didn't know what to do, though. Jimmy wasn't taking the threats seriously even though his manager advised him he should. It didn't matter how old my son got, he would always be my baby and I wanted to protect him. Even if he was being stubborn about his own safety.

"Yes, you should've, and I'm glad you did. Now, I respected your wish not to tell my teams, but I couldn't do the same for Mav's guys. You need help and this is the best solution."

I hated when he was the practical one of the conversation. It rarely happened. No one

would ever consider Westley James a rational man, so this was a “hell freezing over” kind of situation.

Mentally, I sighed. "And you're sure this Lex guy is the right one for the job? You're not just saying that to schmooze me over? Because if so, I will have Missy deny him access. I don't have time to add another pain in my ass to my life. The several I deal with here are enough for two lifetimes."

Wes barked out a laugh and it made me smile. No one in the office had heard that sound in quite some time. I'd almost forgotten how serious he was before he met Jennie.

"And we both know Missy would listen to you over me. How anyone thinks I run this place is beyond me. We all know who the real boss is here."

It was my turn to smile. This was the reason I stayed, despite the headaches I got more often than not when I had to fix mistakes my boss made. Wes valued me as an asset and treated me as such. Not many places did that.

"Stop trying to butter me up." I rolled my eyes. "I'm going to take Lex's help. No need to keep laying on the charm."

My response was more for him than it was for me.

As crazy as Wes drove me, I missed having him around.

The last few months he'd spent more time with his wife and daughter than he did in the office.

Something the old version of him would never have done.

Work used to come first before anything else. I was glad to see that had changed.

"Good, because he'll be here soon."

I looked up to the ceiling and willed myself some patience. Only Wes could go from having me happy to making me want to strangle him within the same breath.

"Why am I not surprised?"

"Lex doesn't like to waste time."

The office alarm system echoed throughout my office, alerting us that someone had pulled onto the premises. I initially hated the disruption the warning system caused, but now was grateful for the extra few minutes it gave me to prepare for what was likely to be an uncomfortable greeting.

Working for Wes had made me too comfortable with the fact that I only spoke to those I was familiar with. Missy now made all the arrangements for the teams and worked the front desk. It allowed me to hide from people. Just how I liked it to be.

Wes and I stared at each other. Neither of us saying anything while we waited. It was several uncomfortable minutes later before Missy buzzed my office phone.

"Yes?" I injected as much happiness as I could into my voice. Missy didn't deserve my wrath.

I wasn't mad, per se. Just uncomfortable with the fact that someone I didn't know was about to learn my personal business.

"There's a Lex Holland here to see you." Missy sounded unsure and it immediately put me on edge.

"Send him back. He's a friend of Wes." I was quick to reassure the woman who was more like a daughter to me than the other wives. "And thank you."

"No problem."

I wondered what Lex did to make Missy hesitant about him. Now that she worked for Wes, and her past was no longer nipping at her heels, she was almost too trusting. Human trafficking should've made Missy wary of all men, but her husband, Kyle, had done a good job of bringing her out of her shell.

And working the front desk of W.J. Protective Services helped as well. Missy was forced to interact with people on a daily basis. Just how she preferred it.

The second the man walked through the door, I understood Missy's hesitation. Lex had a dangerous appeal that probably kept others away, but in my case, it was causing my dead libido to rise.

The man was tall. Taller than Wes by a couple of inches.

His rusty-brown beard hung down past his neck.

I couldn't be sure from my angle, but based on the way his hair was pulled back slick, he wore it longer than most of the guys who worked for Wes, and there was a hint of silver running throughout.

Not to mention the silver at the shaved part of his temples.

But it was the shirt he wore and how it accentuated his muscles that really did me in.

A short-sleeved denim button-up with the top two buttons undone showcased his tan skin.

And holy hell, talk about arm porn. His tight sleeves left nothing to the imagination, with every damn vein making themselves known.

I was pulled out of my filthy thoughts when Wes made quick introductions. "Lex, this is Nancy, the woman I told you about. Nancy, this is Lex."

Lex's green eyes flicked over my body for barely a second before looking back at my boss.

Ouch.

I knew I was no hot mama, but it still hurt. Menopause had taken its toll, adding a few too many extra pounds around my middle, but would it have killed the man to give me more than a cursory and disinterested look. I had practically eye-fucked the man and he gave me nothing in return.

It was a damn shame.

The manners that were drilled into me from a young age had me responding despite being annoyed. "Nice to meet you."

Lex's only response was another quick glance and a small chin nod.

"I warned you he didn't talk much." Wes gave me a lopsided smile that showcased his dimple. If my boss thought that was going to make up for Lex's rude behavior, he was dead wrong.

"I'm not sure this is going to work." I blurted the words out before I could think better of it and prayed Wes didn't ask me why. I doubted telling him I was attracted to his friend would get me the results I wanted.

"You told me this would be smoothed over before I arrived."

Holy hell!

It was probably better the man didn't talk. I thought his good looks were the only problem, but his deep timbre of his voice was going to cause me to spontaneously combust. Sexy didn't even begin to describe it. I was completely screwed.

"She was on board with the plan until you came in here acting like a mute jackass," Wes snapped.

"She is right here and I have a name," I was quick to remind Wes with a little too much attitude in my tone.

"I know your name, dammit. I was trying to make a point."

It would appear Wes the grump was back. This was the man I was used to dealing with. The man I knew how to handle.

"Could've fooled me."

"Nancy," Wes growled, and I chuckled. It always made my day to rile him up.

Lex, on the other hand, just stood there with his brows pinched together as he looked back and forth between Wes and me.

"Are you going to be cooperative and let Lex help you?"

I looked at the man in question and frowned. I wanted to say no. I wanted him to go back to Willow Creek and stay far away from me. I had the feeling Lex would be detrimental to my physical well-being.

But then I remembered Jimmy and the problems he was facing. Wes couldn't help, but Lex could. It didn't matter how attractive I found the man, my kids would always come first. This time was no exception.

So, with a sigh, I answered. "Yes, I'll let him help."

Lex's green eyes locked with mine and I wondered if I had just made the biggest mistake of my life. Because that look held nothing but heartbreak.

CHAPTER THREE

Lex

What the hell was this feeling?

The moment I laid eyes on Nancy, my heart picked up in rhythm and the need to protect her flooded through me. The only other time I had felt this kind of connection with another human being was Olivia.

It made no sense. Olivia was innocent. A young girl with a shared trauma. I understood why I felt the need to protect her.

Nancy was nothing like Olivia, and based on the way she went toe-to-toe with Wes, she didn't need my help. And yet the need to make sure she was safe was strong.

I tried not to think about the fact that it might have something to do with how attractive she was.

Nancy was my age or close to it, with short jet-black hair and expressive green eyes.

Her jeans hugged her curves in all the right places, and I wished her loose top was tighter so I had a better view of a waist I could hold on to.

I preferred my women with meat on their bones, and Nancy was that to a T. It was why I couldn't give her more than a quick glance. If I hadn't stopped myself, I would've spent too long looking over every perfect inch of her.

"Yes, I'll let him help," she said with reluctance.

I hadn't realized I'd been holding my breath waiting for her answer until the air whooshed out of my lungs. A huge part of me had hoped she'd stick to her guns and ask me to leave.

And then Wes dropped the bomb. "Good. Lex can stay with you while he's figuring out who's behind the threats."

"Excuse me?" There was that attitude again.

"What?" I spoke at the same time as Nancy.

"You're going to visit Jimmy, right?" Wes sounded way too cocky when he asked.

My head snapped to Nancy, who looked more than a bit guilty.

After several intense moments, she sighed. "How did you know?"

My friend scoffed. "I know you, Nancy. You've worked for me long enough that I know what you're going to do or say before it happens. Everything you've ever done has been for Jimmy and Jessie. There's no way you wouldn't go to your son with everything going on."

"Fine," Nancy admitted, although reluctantly based on her tone. "I was hoping to go to his place for a bit."

"When did you want to leave?"

I kept my mouth shut and listened to the conversation. I was intrigued by their relationship. Wes normally wasn't this tolerant of people, so it was interesting to see

the exchange.

"Today, if possible. I can take my laptop and work remotely. Missy can hold down the fort here. It's not like you need me in the office, even if it is easier for me to holler down the hall when you fuck something up in my system."

I couldn't tell if Nancy was teasing him or being dead serious. The old Wes I knew would've reprimanded her for the insubordination, but instead, my friend merely chuckled and shook his head. It left me baffled.

"You're right, you can work remotely. But don't worry, I can survive on my own for a bit."

"Ummm . . . no." Nancy crossed her arms over her voluptuous chest. "You can't. And I would rather keep working, even from a distance, than chance you fucking something up that I can't fix. Now excuse me while I go talk to Missy and fill her in on the plan."

She turned on her heel and marched out of the room. And I took the moment to watch as her ass swayed with each step.

Once she was out of the room, I could finally take a full deep breath without being overrun by her intoxicating scent of vanilla. The damn woman must've bathed in the fragrance.

"I know that look."

I turned my attention back to the man who'd saved my life in more ways than I could count, and lifted a brow. I didn't say anything. I didn't have to. The look on my face conveyed my message loud and clear.

"You're interested. You tried to hide it by looking at everything but Nancy, but I know that look."

"I'll keep it professional." The urge to reassure Wes was strong. The last thing I wanted to do was disappoint the man. Despite us being the same age, I revered Wes as someone who was much better and wiser than me.

"That's not why I brought it up."

Now I was just down right confused. Thankfully, Wes kept talking.

"You're a good man. One of the best. Nancy deserves a good man in her life.

I've known her for years, and not once in that time has she ever allowed a man near her.

Not after the number her husband did on her.

I have no problem with you going there, but only if you plan on sticking around.

She's not the kind of woman you fuck and then leave. "

I was stunned silent. Not that it was a hard feat considering I barely spoke, but in that moment, I couldn't think of a single thing to say.

I wasn't a good man. Wes knew that. I was a fucked-up man with too many demons to be good for anyone.

It was why I didn't invite women into my life, and I wasn't about to start now.

Nancy was too good for me, and the only thing I could offer her was a good fuck

before I left her satisfied and ran my ass away.

"As I said. I'll keep it professional."

Wes merely shook his head. "I see you haven't changed one bit. Still as stubborn as ever."

My friend could call me stubborn all he wanted, but I knew the truth. I was cursed. And I was protecting those around me from myself. People I cared about always got hurt, so it was best not to care about anyone at all.

"I'm glad Maverick picked you," Wes continued. "I wanted it to be me, but with Jennie fighting breast cancer, I need to be here with her. You're the next best thing, and I know you'll do right by Nancy. It's just the kind of man you are."

My response was cut off when Nancy walked back into her office with her head down, looking at a tablet in her hands.

"Everything's settled. Missy has everything under control here and I'll handle things remotely. As long as you can manage not to piss anyone off, things will be fine. Is that . . ."

Nancy glanced up from the tablet and stopped in her tracks. "What happened while I was gone?" she asked in an exasperated tone as she set the device on the desk and crossed her arms.

"Nothing." Wes answered for both of us. "Just catching up."

"Uh-huh." It was obvious she didn't believe her boss, but I wasn't about to correct Wes. My friend had just dropped one hell of a bomb, and Nancy didn't need to know we were also talking about her while she was gone. "Let me grab my stuff and we can

get going."

I watched her pack up a laptop and some files, all the while avoiding meeting her gaze—or Wes's for that matter. He'd seen too much already, and I didn't want to give him more ammunition for future discussions. Plus, the news he'd shared about Jennie rattled me.

I didn't know how he was staying so strong with everything that was going on in his life.

"Ready?" Nancy asked after she filled the bag to the brim and hefted it on her shoulder.

I gave her a nod, taking the bag from her and walking straight out the door before she could protest. I looked back to make sure she was following me, but not once did I stop.

Not to talk to anyone. Not to say goodbye to Wes, or to the woman at the front desk who'd given me a wary look when I first walked in.

I headed straight out of the building to my Jeep and waited for Nancy to climb into her own vehicle so I could follow her.

My demeanor screamed that I was an asshole, and that was the way I preferred it. The last thing I needed was for Nancy to think I was the nice guy Wes tried to say I was.

He was wrong.

Nancy believing him would lead to nothing but her getting hurt and me hating myself more than I already did for the things I couldn't change.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nancy

I unlocked my front door and prayed that my house was presentable. I wasn't a messy person by nature, but I also lived alone with very few unexpected visitors. There were times when I left dirty dishes in the sink and uncapped makeup on the bathroom vanity.

Although, there should be no reason Lex ever entered the master bathroom, or the bedroom for that matter. We were there simply so I could pack a bag and then leave.

"Come on in." I motioned for him to enter after I stepped over the threshold. "It won't take me long to pack, but feel free to make yourself comfortable on the couch."

Lex merely grunted, and I took that as a sign that he'd heard me before I dashed upstairs to my bedroom. The house I'd moved into after leaving Willow Creek wasn't big by any standards. The bedrooms were small, but there were three of them, and that was all I had cared about when I started looking.

In so many ways, I'd been lucky. After my asshole of an ex-husband left me with two kids, no money, and no job, I knew it was important I found something reliable.

Wes had been that for me. He gave me a job, helped me find this house, and even helped with the down payment.

He'd been my hero at a time in my life when I would've sworn all men were jerks.

So if my boss said I could trust Lex, then I would trust the man. Wes never steered me wrong.

Well, except when it came to spreadsheets or any of the other software programs I used. Wes absolutely did me wrong when it came to those. The man was what people would call street smart but book dumb.

I carelessly shoved jeans, shirts, and anything else I needed into a suitcase.

Other than visiting my kids, I rarely traveled, but I still managed to keep a toiletry case prepped at all times.

I grabbed it from under the bathroom sink and nearly jumped ten feet in the air when I stood up and saw Lex in the reflection of the bathroom mirror.

"You scared the crap out of me," I chastised him as I turned around. "Did you need something?"

I couldn't even begin to fathom why he would be in my bedroom when the man had barely looked at me for more than a handful of seconds since the moment we'd met.

Lex pointed to my suitcase. "Can I take that for you?"

Huh? Maybe he wasn't a complete asshole after all. I walked out of the bathroom and passed him on the way to the suitcase. It wasn't until I placed the toiletry bag inside that I realized, lying on the very top, completely out in the open, were my underwear.

Of course they couldn't be cute or even lacy ones. Not that I owned many of those at my age, but a woman could try and hold on to her youth. Nope. In my haste, I had grabbed my granny panties. The same ones that showcased just how big my ass really was.

I was sure my face was seven different shades of red when I closed the case and zipped it up. Not able to look the man in the eye, I yanked the blue bag off the bed, set it on the ground, and rolled the case in his direction.

"Sure! I'm all ready to go." The words came out a few octaves too high. Even to my own ears I could tell I sounded like a prepubescent boy about to go through the change.

Before Lex could respond, I rushed down the stairs, leaving my suitcase behind. The whole reason he'd come up was to grab the damn thing anyway, so there was no point in arguing. Not when I was already too embarrassed.

Lex's loud footsteps echoed through the otherwise quiet house as I grabbed my keys from where I'd tossed them on the table in the front entryway. I'd made it to the edge of the driveway before Lex's words stopped me dead.

"You don't need those. We're taking my Jeep."

Looking over at his vehicle, I tried not to let my shiver show. "You expect me to ride in that?" I pointed at the vehicle in question. "It doesn't even have doors. How can it be safe? Or road legal for that matter?"

The man moved quick. I had to give him that. Lex stood next to his Jeep before I even finished asking the questions. With one hand firmly placed on the mesh rope that stood in place of the door, he answered, "It's safe."

Two words. That was all he was willing to give me, and yet somehow I knew they were true.

I thought back to my boss, and how he would never do anything to put me in harm's way. If Wes were standing there with us, he would've confirmed I was perfectly safe

with Lex and his Jeep.

There was that word again. I had spent my whole life playing it safe, and look where it got me.

I married the man I was told would bring me a comfortable life, and he left, leaving nothing but criticism in his wake.

Eventually, I was forced to leave the town I loved rather than subject my children to their father's mistakes.

I took a good job that I eventually learned to love because of the people who worked there, but I never wanted to bother them. Even when I knew they would help me in a heartbeat. I was good at being cautious, but now I wanted to live a little.

"Let's go," I said before I could change my mind, and hopped in when Lex moved the net aside.

Buckling my seat belt, I looked straight ahead. I didn't question if he secured the door properly. I didn't question the lack of a window or roof. I was going with the flow.

Well, for a tiny bit, I did.

When we turned onto the highway instead of heading toward Willow Creek, I asked, "Don't you need to go home to grab anything?" Secretly I hoped the answer was no. The last place I wanted to see was the town I grew up in. There were too many bad memories tied to that place.

"Nope."

One word. That was all he gave me. But it filled me with so much relief, I could've

kissed the man.

I didn't, but I could've.

"What about clothes? A toothbrush?"

Why can't I just stop asking questions?

Lex hooked a thumb toward the back of the Jeep. "Got it."

I glanced over my shoulder, and sure enough, there was an old worn backpack sitting next to my suitcase.

"That's convenient. Do you normally live out of your Jeep?" I had no idea why I was pushing this when there was nothing strange about him having a bag ready. All the guys at work did. They just usually kept them at the office.

"Yup."

If this was how he was going to answer all my questions, it was going to be a long nine-hour trip to Oklahoma.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lex

I followed Nancy's directions to a large high-rise smack-dab in the middle of Oklahoma City. The underground garage attendant gave me a strange look when I pulled up and said I was there to visit one of the tenants. Apparently the fancy place wasn't used to topless and doorless Jeeps.

I found that very strange considering Nancy had explained that several of Jimmy's teammates lived in the same building. I would've thought at least a few of them would've used their signing bonuses to buy something similar. My view on football players was clearly misinformed.

After parking in one of the assigned visitor spots, I jumped out of the driver seat and headed straight for Nancy's side.

We only stopped once on the entire ride up, so my legs were itching to move.

Nancy had the mesh unbuckled by the time I got to her and was climbing her way out.

I stretched out my hand to offer her assistance, but she didn't take it.

Shrugging it off like it was no big deal.

In reality, a small part of me was hurt by her callous behavior. I had to smother that

part of me out of existence. The whole point was to not get close to her. I couldn't do that if I was being chivalrous and getting upset when it wasn't reciprocated.

I left our bags in the vehicle and followed Nancy into the building. It was obvious several seconds after we entered that she was familiar with the place and the people who worked there.

"Hi, Ms. Green. It's good to see you again." The young man behind the front desk greeted her as soon as she got within five feet of the desk.

"Hey, Nathan." Her tone softened. "It's good to see you too. Do you by chance know if Jimmy is home?"

"I haven't seen him leave since he came home around dinnertime. Would you like me to call up and check?"

"No, that's okay. I'll just head up and see him. Say hi to your mother for me. Maybe she and I can get together while I'm in town." Nancy smiled at the man before moving toward the elevator.

"She'd like that," the desk clerk yelled back.

Nancy waved at Nathan before the elevator doors closed.

"You visit a lot?"

"He speaks." Nancy gasped while looking at me and putting her hand to her chest.

My brows furrowed as I looked back at her, completely confused by what she meant. "Of course I speak. We spoke on the ride up." Not much, but words did come out of my mouth.

"No, I spoke and you answered questions when I asked. One- and two-word answers, by the way, but no, talking like normal people did not actually occur."

I continued to look at her like she was a puzzle I was trying to solve. "What had you wanted to talk about?" I'd listened to every word she'd said, and even remembered all of it. Wasn't that enough?

Nancy threw her hands up in exasperation just as the elevator dinged to let us know we had reached our desired floor. "I don't know, but it's customary for people to talk when they are in close proximity for nearly ten hours."

"Maybe for some, but not me," I grumbled as I stepped out of the elevator.

Why people insisted on always talking would forever baffle me. You learned so much more about a person from silence. Case in point, I learned a lot about Nancy and how much she adored her son and daughter simply by listening to her ramble.

Nancy didn't bother to say anything more. She stepped around me and led us down a short hallway. Despite how big the building looked from the outside, there appeared to be only two units on the floor—one on each side of the hallway.

Nancy stopped in front of the one on the left and raised her hand to knock. A few moments passed before a booming "coming" could be heard from the other side of the door.

When it flew open, I was surprised by the man standing on the other side. Well over six feet tall, the man who I assumed was Nancy's son stood eye to eye with me and towered over his mother's five-and-a-half-foot frame. There weren't many people who rivaled my height, but this young man sure did.

"Mom!" her son shouted in surprise and stepped in to engulf her in a hug.

"What are you doing here? You normally call to let me know you're traveling.

" Despite his words, he stepped aside to let his mother in, but put his hand up before I could follow suit.

"And who are you? I know every man my mother works with, and I've never seen your face before.

" He turned to his mother and asked again. "Who's this?"

"Lex Holland," I offered. "A friend of Wes."

I didn't add that I knew twenty different ways to break his hand, and nothing he did would stop me from getting closer to his mother if that was what I wished to do. And I was fighting down that urge.

"Is that true, Mom?"

Only when Nancy nodded her head and told "Jimmy" to "knock it off" did her son deign to put his hand down and grant me entry into his apartment.

Jimmy was kind enough to wait until we all got further into the living room before he started in. "Is everything okay? Are you in some kind of trouble? Is that why this strange guy is with you?"

Nancy sighed. "Everything's fine. Lex isn't some stranger. He was in the Marines with Wes, and when I asked Wes for help, this was who he got for me."

I wondered how much Wes had told Nancy about our time together. I would have to remember to have a discussion with my old friend about that. There were certain things people didn't need to know. My time deployed was one of them.

"Help with what? If you need something, you should have told me."

"Not help for me." She pointed first at herself and then at Jimmy. "Help for you." Nancy sounded exasperated when she spoke, and I could only guess how many times they'd had this conversation.

"I've already told you I don't need help. Those letters are nothing more than some fan who's pissed I screwed up the season for the team."

Oh yeah. Based on Jimmy's tone, they'd had this conversation a few times.

"Fans can be pissed all they want, but when they start threatening to harm my boy, I take offense. And correct me if I'm wrong, but even your agent advised you to take the threats seriously."

I was going to need to see these letters and catch up on the situation fast. I was about to say as much, but Jimmy and Nancy weren't done arguing.

"Fred worries too much."

Nancy threw her hands in the air and I chuckled to myself. It was good to know I wasn't the only one who frustrated her to that point.

"He's your agent. It's his job to worry and take things seriously."

"For now," Jimmy grumbled under his breath.

"And what is that supposed to mean?" Nancy's arms were now crossed over her chest and her face was bright red.

I was starting to consider if it was time for me to break things up for a bit.

Family drama wasn't my thing, and I would've preferred to avoid it if at all possible.

This was starting to get out of my comfort zone, and I wanted it to stop, but Jimmy decided to drop a bomb before I could make my move.

"I was going to wait until after I made my decision to tell you, but I guess now's a good time." Jimmy took a deep breath. "I'm considering breaking my contract and leaving the NFL."

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CHAPTER SIX

Nancy

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" There was no way I heard my son correctly. Like many kids, playing in the NFL was his dream. Most never got the chance. And to just throw that away after one season?

No, just no.

"I've been contemplating it since the end of the season, and I think it's the right choice. Obviously the pressure of playing at a professional level is too much for me."

I couldn't believe the words coming out of this kid's mouth. The man I raised to never be a quitter, to follow his dreams, was just going to walk away because he had a few bad games?

"No." That was the best I could manage without beating my son over the head to knock some sense into him.

"What do you mean, 'No'? This is my decision."

"Maybe. But hell will freeze over before I let you throw away your dream like that. I know you better than that, which means something else is going on for you to even think something so stupid." I had to work hard to keep myself from shouting.

My blood was boiling, and if I thought for even a second that Jimmy felt that way

because he truly didn't want to play anymore, I wouldn't fight so hard. But I knew him, and all he'd talked about during college was getting into the NFL.

It wasn't just a dream to him, it was something he'd worked his ass off for.

There was no way he would just give that up.

"There's nothing else going on."

I really looked at my son, but despite how hard he was trying, he couldn't look me in the eye.

"Bullshit. You've always been a terrible liar. Since you were a boy, if you couldn't look me in the eye, I knew you were lying. So stop with the nonsense and tell me the truth."

Lex shifted from where he stood on the other side of the room, and I had almost forgotten he was there. For a moment, I felt embarrassed that he was witnessing my family drama. Then I remembered why he was there to begin with.

The threats. They had to be the reason Jimmy wanted to quit. I just needed to get him to admit it so we could help him.

"Have you received another threat recently?" I pushed.

My son shifted his eyes away from me.

Bingo.

"Show me," I demanded, but Jimmy shook his head. "Why not? You've read me every one before this. What makes this one so different?"

Then a light bulb went off in my head and it hit me. There was only one thing more important to my son than football.

His family.

"Did they threaten me or your sister?" I didn't have to see Jimmy's face to know I was getting closer. I could tell by the way his body stiffened. "Show me, please." I used my take-no-shit voice with him.

Finally, Jimmy sighed as he walked over to the kitchen and pulled a piece of paper from one of the drawers. He walked back over to me and practically slapped the paper into my hands.

I unfolded the letter and began to read.

You pathetic overpaid bastard. You should never have been born, let alone drafted to the NFL. You're worthless and can't play football for shit. This is your last warning. Leave the Pioneers or your mother dies.

By the end of the note, I was ready to murder whomever wrote those nasty, vile things to my little boy. I didn't care how old he got or how much taller than me he was, I still saw the little boy he was when he first put on a football helmet.

"You're not quitting." My voice vibrated with the anger I felt rushing through my body.

"You read the letter," Jimmy argued. "If I don't, he's going to kill you."

"Let me read that." Lex was across the room and snatching the piece of paper out of my hand before he finished the statement. I didn't bother to comment on his rude behavior. I had a more important argument to have with my son.

"No one is going to kill me. I work in the most secure building with a bunch of guys who would gladly kill someone to protect me."

"You live alone, Mom."

Like I needed the reminder that I was an empty nester. People weren't kidding when they said it was lonely. Especially as a single mother.

"And I can protect myself. Wes made sure of it."

"I'll protect her."

My head shot over to where Lex was still reading the letter. He didn't even pick his head up when he spoke.

"I don't need protection," I argued. I didn't need Lex to think I was some damsel in distress who needed saving. And I certainly didn't need to be spending any extra time with him. He was here for Jimmy, not me.

"Isn't that why Wes contacted me?"

He finally decided to grace me with his eyes, and damn I wished he hadn't. His stare was too intense. I felt like he could see right through me and straight down to my soul.

"No, I asked Wes for help finding out who is threatening Jimmy."

"I'll protect you," Lex strangely replied. "I want to see the rest of the letters you've received."

"My agent has them. The only reason I kept that one was because it threatened my

mother. I was going to have a private investigator look into it."

I scoffed at the idea. "You know damn well Wes and his teams are better than any private investigator."

"Yes, I know that. Wes is amazing as always, but I didn't want you to know about this."

Something about the way Jimmy said Wes's name was off. Usually he adored the man, but right now he almost sounded pissed. "Why did you say Wes's name like that?"

"No reason." Jimmy looked away as he answered.

"Didn't we just talk about lying. You suck at it, so fess up and tell me the truth."

This conversation was becoming more aggravating by the minute.

I thought this type of stubbornness ended after the teen years.

I didn't expect to be dealing with it with my twenty-four-year-old.

And to be honest, I didn't have the patience for it. I'd used that all up when they were younger.

Now I was just a sexually frustrated middle-aged woman with a short fuse.

"Fine." Jimmy sounded equally as exasperated as I felt. "You always talk about how amazing Wes is and how much he's helped our family, but where is he now, huh? He sent this guy instead." He threw his arm out at Lex.

It was in that moment that I realized what was going on. Jimmy's father had left at a critical time in his life, and he'd looked up to Wes like a father figure since the day they'd met. Jimmy wasn't pissed at Wes. He was hurt that he wasn't there to help.

"Oh, Jimmy." I softened my voice. "If Jennie wasn't battling cancer, you know damn well Wes would be here. He's always looked out for us, but his family needs to come first."

"You always said we were like family to him."

I had said that, and now I wished I hadn't. I built Wes up to be this great protector, and the one time we needed him, he couldn't be there.

This was my fault. Not Wes's. He made the right choice when he chose Jennie, and I respected him more for that.

"We are like family to him. But Jennie is his wife, and right now she needs him more than we do. Wes didn't just write us off. He went against all my wishes and contacted Lex so we would have someone. He still cares. It just looks a little different this time."

I watched as several emotions flittered across Jimmy's face. I let what I said sink in and gave him time to come to his own conclusions. I couldn't force him to accept the situation. He would either understand Wes's predicament or he would stay mad at the man. My hope was the first.

"You're right. It's selfish of me to think these threats should overshadow what Jennie's going through. I'm sorry."

I walked over to my son and gave him a hug. It was so strange to lay my head on his chest when it should've been the other way around—me comforting him.

"You don't need to be sorry. I understand this is hard, but we'll get through it together. And without you leaving the NFL."

Jimmy groaned. "I don't want to put you in danger, Mom."

I merely chuckled at his frustration with me and stepped back. "I'll be fine. I can protect myself. And I doubt Lex is going to leave me alone."

Lex didn't hesitate to add, "Nope."

"See." I glanced from my son to Lex, and frowned. He was focused a little too intently on the piece of paper in his hands. I shook my head and turned back to Jimmy, whose attention was also on Lex and the note. "There's nothing to worry about. You can focus on your game and know I'll be safe."

Jimmy finally looked back at me and responded with a cryptic, "We'll see."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Lex

The threat against Nancy pissed me right the fuck off. I couldn't take my eyes off the words.

Or your mother dies.

What kind of sick bastard threatened the mother of a grown man all because he had a crappy season.

I was a Pioneers fan. I knew all about Jimmy Green and the season he'd had.

As a fourth-round draft pick, he was supposed to be exactly what the Pioneers needed to have a winning season.

Unfortunately, that didn't happen. Sportscasters loved to comment about how he was clearly overrated in college or how he couldn't hack it.

None of that meant he should be receiving death threats.

And certainly not ones that threatened his mother.

"Do you plan on staying here while you're in town?" Jimmy asked Nancy.

I continued to listen to the conversation in the room, partaking only when absolutely

necessary.

"If you don't mind."

"Of course not, Mom. The room is just how you left it last time."

I didn't let my face show it, but internally I smiled at the interaction. From everything I'd seen, Jimmy was a great son.

He cared enough about his mother to give up his dream to protect her.

And unlike others who'd made it big in the NFL, he was humble enough to show respect to the woman who'd helped him get there.

"And what about Lex. Where will he sleep?"

"The couch is fine." I spoke up before any other suggestions could be made. Although, I glanced over at the offensive piece of furniture and knew immediately it would be a rough night. I was a big man, and there was no way that couch was long enough.

"No way," Nancy argued. "You can't sleep on that thing. The bed is big enough, you can sleep in there as well."

Jimmy cleared his throat. "I'm not sure I'm okay with that."

The kid just earned another few points in my book.

It didn't matter, though. There was no way I was sleeping in a bed with her. I never slept in bed with anyone, and for good reason.

"I appreciate the offer, but the couch is fine," I insisted. Hell would have to freeze over before I ever allowed myself to sleep in the same space as someone. It was too dangerous. I was too unpredictable.

"You expect me to believe you'll be comfortable on that thing." She pointed to the couch in question and I hid a wince.

No, comfort wasn't what I would get on that, but I didn't tell her that. Instead I said, "I've slept in worse places. I'll be fine." And it was true. Nothing could be worse than sleeping on a dirt floor after being beaten and tortured for hours on end.

"Just because you have doesn't mean you should." Nancy refused to give up, but thankfully Jimmy stepped in.

"Mom, if he wants to sleep on the couch, let him. It's really not that bad. I've done it before." At least the kid was able to say that while looking her in the eye. Which meant at least part of what he was saying was true.

"Fine." Nancy threw her hands up in the air and walked down the hall. I was almost sure it was followed by, "Stubborn-ass men," but I couldn't be sure.

"Thank you." I waited until she entered what I assumed was a bedroom. "And no matter what you hear tonight, keep your mother away from me. You as well. It's safer that way."

Nancy's son nodded his head in agreement, but didn't get the chance to question me because his mother was coming back down the hall.

"I need to go downstairs and grab my bag."

I shoved the letter in my pocket. "I'll go grab them." I headed for the door and was

out in the hallway before either of them could argue.

I needed a minute alone. Time to think about the favor Wes asked and what it would entail.

Oh, and I needed to call the man. I pulled the phone out of my pocket and, as predicted, he answered on the first ring.

"Everything okay?"

"The last letter Jimmy received threatened to kill Nancy if he didn't quit," I said without preamble and listened as Wes ran through a whole gambit of colorful words.

"It kills me that I can't be there."

"How's Jennie?" Small talk wasn't usually my thing, but in this case, I would make an exception. It was horrible to think what my friend and his wife were going through.

"Sick. Chemotherapy is kicking her ass, but she's a fighter. And she doesn't want this to affect Sarah, so she's putting on a brave face."

Sarah was Jennie's daughter from a previous marriage, but Wes had adopted her. The girl was the light of my friend's eye, and it sucked that the three of them were having to deal with something as toxic as cancer.

Jennie had been through enough already in her life, so it made all this that much worse.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I appreciate it." Wes cleared his throat. "So tell me what's happening?"

"Jimmy wants to quit the NFL to keep Nancy safe. Nancy refuses to let him do it. I have to agree with her. Tonight she's spending the night."

"And you?" Wes cautiously asked.

"Sleeping on the couch."

Wes went silent and I knew what he was thinking. My assumption was confirmed when a few moments later he asked, "Have they gotten any better?"

"Nope," I replied honestly.

"Nancy is going to want to comfort you."

I guessed as much. She seemed like the nurturing kind.

"I already warned Jimmy to keep her away no matter what they hear."

It was the best thing I could do considering there was no way I was leaving her alone. I didn't care how big or tough her son looked. From now on, Nancy was my responsibility.

"That might not be enough."

"Then I won't sleep." I refused to subject anyone to my night terrors. It was bad enough that I had to deal with them. I didn't need anyone else to as well.

Wes sighed in frustration. "You can't go days without sleep, Lex. I know you don't want others to know about the nightmares, but you can't keep it from everyone."

I tensed at the accusation. "The guys know about them."

" The seven of us who made up the team in Willow Creek were a tight group and knew everything about one another. There were no secrets. They were very aware of the nightmares and why they happened. Hell, they'd been with me during one of the reasons I had them.

"I'm not talking about your team."

I didn't like where this conversation was going. "I don't want to talk to anyone else about them."

I lived a very simple life for a reason, and I preferred it that way. There was no danger of someone getting hurt if I kept them at arm's length.

"Eventually, someone's going to come into your life and make you think differently. I hope when that time comes, you don't push them away."

Wes ended the call and I thought about the woman upstairs. Already she was making me feel things I didn't want to feel.

She's just an assignment. A favor.

If I repeated that over and over again, eventually I would be able to convince myself it was true. Otherwise, I was going to ruin another person's life with my cursed ways.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Nancy

It sounded like someone in agony.

That was the noise that woke me up in the middle of the night. I wasn't a heavy sleeper to begin with. I blamed that on being a single mother. Over twenty years of worrying about the other people who slept in the house with me didn't go away just because they no longer lived with me.

There it was again.

I threw the covers back and swung my legs over the side of the bed.

Whoever was making that noise was severely in pain, and I wanted more than anything to comfort them.

I was halfway down the hall when I heard it again.

It wasn't coming from my son's room. I nearly collapsed at the relief of that.

The knowledge that those noises were coming from him would've broken me.

That left only one other person.

Lex.

I moved farther down the hall to just outside the living room when the sound hit me again. Through the darkness, I could see Lex thrashing around on the small couch. I moved over to soothe him awake, but was stopped by an arm banding around my middle.

Before I could let out a scream, Jimmy's soft voice hit my ear. "Don't."

I turned on him immediately. "What do you mean, 'Don't'?"

"Lex warned me not to let you near him no matter what you heard."

Jimmy's statement hit me square in the chest. Lex had known this would happen and had put measures into place. It made me wonder just how often he had nightmares.

"Did he say why?"

Jimmy shook his head. "No. But I think you should respect his wishes."

The sounds behind me only got worse the longer we stood there. Whatever dream he was having was definitely doing a number on him.

The only thing that stopped me from ignoring my son's advice and going over to Lex was a conversation I once had with Missy.

Her husband, Kyle, also suffered from nightmares, and the one time she'd tried to touch him, he'd hurt her.

Of course, he hadn't done it on purpose, but in the throes of the nightmare, Kyle thought everyone was the enemy. I wondered if it was the same for Lex and that was why he'd warned Jimmy?

"I won't touch him, but I'm not leaving him out here alone."

My son raised an eyebrow at me, so I quickly added, "I'll stay on the chair, but I can't go back to my room knowing he's out here suffering on his own."

"Promise me you won't try to touch him or do anything to wake him up," Jimmy pleaded.

"I promise." It was like the roles were reversed—I felt like the disobedient teen even though I was lucky enough as a mother to have raised two very well-behaved teenagers.

"Okay. I'll be right back."

I didn't get the chance to ask Jimmy what he meant before he was storming off down the hallway. I was surprised with all the noise we'd made, despite trying to be quiet, that Lex hadn't woken up. In fact, he was thrashing around more than he had been when I first came out.

I walked to the oversized chair and curled myself into a corner. Seconds later, Jimmy came out with a big fuzzy blanket and draped it around me.

"I love you, Mom."

My heart melted. No matter how old he got, Jimmy was always good about telling me how much he cared.

"Love you too, son. Now go back to sleep. I promise not to move from this spot."

And I didn't. I stayed in the same position and thought about the hours since we'd shown up at Jimmy's apartment. Lex had seemed different after he came up from

grabbing our bags. More distant than he had on the car ride in. He'd secluded himself away and claimed he needed to work.

At the time, I hadn't questioned it. Now I wondered if maybe I'd missed some sort of sign.

I would have to ask him when he woke up.

Eventually, my legs started to go numb and I stretched them out. I was just getting comfortable again when I heard Lex's deep timbre begging, "No, please don't make me."

I could see his eyes were closed even though he was no longer twisting side to side. I wished more than anything that I knew what he was dreaming about so I could help him in some way. But I'd made a promise to stay put, and that was what I was going to do.

Two agonizingly long hours later, and a lot more mulling in his sleep, Lex finally started to stir. I could tell the moment he realized he wasn't alone in the room. His entire body tensed up, and I watched in the sliver of light through the window as his chest rose and fell.

"How long have you been sitting there?" he asked without even looking my way.

"Long enough." I didn't want him to know I'd spent most of my night watching him sleep and wishing there was a way to help.

"I asked Jimmy to keep you away no matter what you heard."

I scoffed. "Yeah, about that. Where do you get off asking my son to do that? No offense, but I don't need anyone telling me what to do."

Lex's eyes popped open and immediately found mine. They were the most intense green I had ever seen in my life. "It was for your safety."

I pointed up and down my body. "As you can see, I'm perfectly fine."

"This time." Lex scrubbed his hands over his face. "You can go back to bed. I won't be getting anymore sleep tonight."

I wanted to argue, but I took one look at his face and decided the argument and questions could wait for another time. It was clear as day that whatever haunted him in his dreams, also haunted him while he was awake. I don't know how I'd missed it before.

"Good night, Lex."

I didn't take offense when he didn't answer me back as I walked back to my bedroom. I'd pushed him far enough for one day. Any further battles could wait. I climbed back into bed and made myself a vow to help Lex through his trauma, whether he liked it or not.

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CHAPTER NINE

Lex

I scrubbed my hands along my beard long after Nancy went back to her room. I hated that she had seen me at my worst.

Well, maybe not my worst. As far as dreams went, this wasn't the worst one I'd had. At least I hadn't woken up ready to take someone's head off. That had happened a few times over the years, and each time it did, I swore it would never happen again.

Too bad I didn't have any more control of my dreams than I did on the curse of my life.

Knowing I wouldn't be getting sleep again for a while, I decided to grab my phone and call Maverick. My boss answered after a few rings.

"Hello?"

"Did I wake you?" I didn't have the slightest clue why the question popped out of my mouth. Of course I'd woken him. It was only oh four hundred, and there was no reason for Maverick to be awake.

"Yeah, but it's okay. Night terrors?"

"Yeah." What I hadn't told Wes earlier was I did speak to someone about my dreams. Maverick insisted I call him any time I got them so we could talk them out. I wasn't

sure if it helped or not, but I indulged my boss if for no other reason than he was there for most of what had happened to me.

"Which one was this?"

I cleared my throat. "The incident before Wes and his team rescued us."

Maverick knew all about that day, so it wasn't like I needed to explain much more than that. Besides the night my parents were killed, it was the worst thing to happen in my life.

"You know it wasn't your fault, right?"

It was the same conversation we had every time this particular night terror reared its ugly head. Maverick was convinced that if he said it enough times, I would one day believe it.

"It was my fault."

"No, man, it wasn't. It was those bastards' fault for making you choose. You chose right."

Deep in my cold dead heart I knew he was right. I had the choice to protect my country, and that was what I did. But it came at a significantly high cost.

"Tell that to the poor woman's family."

"They were told the truth. Terrorists were responsible for her death."

Maybe so, but they weren't the ones who ended her life. That blame lay solely on my shoulders.

Thankfully Maverick understood the need to change the subject. "Tell me about this favor Wes needed."

I took a deep breath before I answered. "He asked me to help his office manager, Nancy Green."

"Isn't she the mother of Jimmy Green? The first-year running back for the Oklahoma Pioneers. I thought I read that in the Willow Creek Press several months back."

I rolled my eyes at the mention of the local newspaper. That damn thing was nothing more than a gossip rag on all things Willow Creek.

"Yeah, she is. He's been receiving threatening letters in the mail after the rough season he had. Jimmy wasn't taking them seriously, but Nancy asked for Wes's help anyway."

"But he couldn't help because of Jennie, so he called us," Maverick surmised. "Makes sense. I would've thought he'd ask Bravo Team first, but maybe they were on an assignment."

"Wait, you knew about the cancer?" I didn't hide the accusation in my tone.

"He told me when they first found out."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because it wasn't my news to share," Maverick defended. "I figured he would say something when he was ready."

I shook my head, even though my boss couldn't see me.

"So why didn't Wes ask one of his teams?" Maverick effectively changed the subject back to my assignment.

"She didn't want them to know," I explained.

"Ah. Makes even more sense now. So what do you need from us? Any credible threat, or just the ramblings of a pissed-off fan?"

I thought about the letter jammed into my pants pocket on the floor. "The last letter threatened to harm Nancy if Jimmy didn't quit."

My boss whistled from the other end of the phone. "I would say that's credible. Where are you now?"

I scoffed. "You mean Nolen hasn't tracked my location?"

"If he has, he didn't tell me."

"I'm in Oklahoma City, but I'm not sure that's where we'll stay."

I didn't want to be in the same town as the person threatening Nancy.

If that was even where the person lived.

Without seeing the actual envelope, there was no way for me to know.

But unless Nancy wanted to travel the country with me, my options were limited.

And that was something I seriously doubted she would agree to.

"You going to bring her home to Willow Creek?"

Now was as good a time as any to tell my boss what I'd been thinking about the last few weeks. "Willow Creek isn't my home. Nowhere is. And, no, I don't think I'm ever coming back."

Maverick cleared his throat. "Don't do this, Lex."

I hated to hear the hurt in my boss's voice, but I couldn't be like the rest of them. "You had to know this was coming. I didn't want to come to Willow Creek to begin with. I said I would try, and I did."

"You barely gave it a couple of months," Maverick argued.

"But I gave it a chance, and now it's time to move on. There isn't enough in Willow Creek to keep my mind busy. I need more."

I doubted there was any place that could keep me as busy as I needed to be, but I had to look. Maybe just traveling around the country would do the trick.

"And where do you plan on going?" Maverick wasn't giving up. Not that I expected him to. There was a reason out of the seven of us he became the boss. He was a natural-born leader who cared a little too deeply about those in his command.

"Not sure yet. I was planning to leave when you called me about Wes's favor."

I stayed quite while my boss let out a torrent of curses. The man sure knew how to string together some good ones.

When he finally paused, I interjected with, "Pretty sure, as the boss, you were supposed to clean up your language."

"Fuck that. You guys are giving me even more gray hairs than I already have."

I chuckled at the thought. Maverick reminded me of Santa Claus. If he went anymore gray—or, heaven forbid, even white—kids would be lining up to sit on his lap.

"Then I guess it's a good thing I won't be your problem for much longer."

He sighed heavily. "Lex, I'll worry even more because you aren't here."

The man took too much of the world on his shoulders, and I told him as much.

"I know it, but I can't help it. I wish you would give Willow Creek more of a chance. I think you would come to like it."

I thought about what Maverick said. It wasn't that I didn't like the small town.

In fact, it was great. The people were nice.

Maybe a little nosy, but overall nice. The town had its appeal.

The problem was the lack of excitement I needed to keep busy.

My mind needed to be solving problems, not listening to the latest drama unfold.

I was happy my friends were settling in nicely and finding women to spend their lives with, but that wasn't in my future, and I couldn't pretend that it was.

"I didn't say I didn't like it, but we both know it's not what I need."

"It could be. Have you given more thought to talking to someone?"

What was it with everyone wanting me to talk to someone about my night terrors?

Couldn't they just understand that there was no help for me.

That I didn't deserve any. I was forced to kill an innocent woman so I could protect my country. I deserved to have those dreams as a reminder of what I'd done.

"No, and I don't plan to."

Again with the heavy sigh. I was disappointing my friend left and right throughout this conversation. "One of these days, you're going to realize it's okay to forgive yourself. You don't need to keep torturing yourself over what happened. No one would fault you for getting help."

No, but I would fault myself.

The sound of people moving around the apartment caught my attention. "I have to go." I hung up before Maverick could argue with me further. It would do no good anyway. My mind was made up. I just needed to get through this assignment first.

CHAPTER TEN

Nancy

I wasted extra time in the shower and getting dressed because I wasn't ready to face Lex just yet. I had so many questions I wanted to ask him. But based on the little time we'd spent together, I knew he wasn't going to be forthcoming with answers. I understood it, but it was still frustrating.

When there was nothing left for me to do but hide in my room, I decided it was time to face the music. I headed straight for the living room and was surprised to find the blankets folded nicely and stacked on one end of the couch, the couch and the room empty.

Voices coming from the kitchen caught my attention. I headed that way and stopped dead when I saw Lex and Jimmy working together in silence at the island.

"Good morning . . ."

Jimmy rarely cooked, and for some reason I didn't imagine Lex as the cooking type either. Although, if he lived alone, I would guess he would have to. Unless he had a personal chef like my spoiled son did.

"Morning, Mom. I hope you're in the mood for quiche."

I glanced over to where Lex was indeed plating up breakfast.

"Smells yummy, but since when did you learn to cook breakfast? Or any meal for that matter?"

I wasn't being mean. I loved my son dearly, but no matter how hard I'd tried to teach him, I swear the kid could burn water when he tried to boil it.

"Oh, no, I didn't cook anything. Ms. Roberts likes to make extra meals and leave them in the freezer. Lex did all the work. I just watched and tried to learn."

"And how did that work out?" I smiled at my son.

"I absolutely would've burned it if left to my own devices."

I chuckled at Jimmy's honesty and could've sworn I saw the briefest upturn of Lex's lips, but it was gone so fast, I couldn't be sure.

"Does that mean you know how to cook, Lex?"

I nearly laughed when his nose screwed up like what I asked sounded horrible. "I'm barely two steps above Jimmy. I can follow directions to heat something up, but that's about it."

"Good to know." I laughed.

"Let's eat," Lex said as he carried all three plates over to the small table in the kitchen.

Jimmy grabbed glasses and juice while I got the utensils and we settled in for an uncomfortably silent breakfast.

As usual, Lex didn't speak and I wasn't sure what to say. Jimmy kept glancing back

and forth between the two of us like a kid trying to decide which parent's side to be on. The whole situation felt odd, but I didn't have the first clue how to make it better.

The only saving grace was the fact that about halfway through our meal, the building's fire alarm went off.

"Does this happen often?" Lex asked, and there was something off about his tone.

"No." Jimmy shook his head. "In fact, it has never gone off that I know of since I moved in here last year."

"Let's go." Lex pushed back his chair and stood up. "Nancy, don't leave my side."

I didn't understand what the big deal was. It was just an alarm. Someone cooking breakfast most likely set it off. But I followed anyway.

As we stepped out into the apartment complex hallway, a booming voice echoed throughout to use the stairs instead of the elevator. I thought about the seven flights down and sighed. I really needed to get out of the office more and work out.

By the time we got to the lobby, I was sweating and slightly out of breath. It didn't go unnoticed that neither Jimmy nor Lex had the same problem. Both men were the epitome of in shape. I slightly hated both of them for that.

We were barely outside for a moment before chaos erupted.

One minute I was standing between Lex and Jimmy, and the next I was being thrown to the ground.

The sound of screeching tires filled my ears and the noxious odor of burning rubber invaded my nose.

People screaming only further added to the mayhem.

A large body kept me pinned to the chilly concrete, and out of instinct, I covered my head with my hands, unsure of what was going on.

"Are you okay?" Lex's hot breath tickled my ear and sent a shiver through my body.

"I think so," I whispered. "What happened?"

"Someone tried to run us down."

Lex finally pushed himself up off me, and there was no way for me to miss the veins straining at the effort. I watched them in fascination until he put his arm out to help me up.

I let him pull me up and looked around. Black skid marks marred the sidewalk where we'd been standing just minutes earlier. People were milling about, staring at us, but it was the body on the ground that caught my attention.

"Jimmy!" I pulled out of Lex's embrace and ran to where my son lay crumpled on the ground, clutching his leg. "Oh, God. Jimmy. What happened?"

"That crazy driver hit him," some random man said, but I ignored him and looked around for someone to help. Thankfully, a set of paramedics were running our way.

The two paramedics gently pushed me out of the way so they could help Jimmy, and before I knew what was happening, I was wrapped up in Lex's arms. "We need to get out of here."

"No!" I beat on his chest and tried to pull out of his embrace, but he was too strong.

"Mom," Jimmy hollered from where he was being loaded on a stretcher. "Go with Lex. Please."

I didn't want to listen. I didn't want to be dragged away. But Lex was too strong, and no matter how hard I fought, I couldn't get away from his arm banded around my waist.

At one point, he picked me up like a child and carried me the rest of the way to the underground garage where his Jeep was parked.

"Put me down," I demanded, but it was no use. Lex refused to listen to me. He refused to bend to my wishes. "Where do you think you're taking me?"

I never should've asked. I should've fought harder to go in the ambulance with Jimmy. Because the moment Lex said his next words, my whole world stopped.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lex

I couldn't believe I was going back. Twelve hours ago, I would've sworn I would never see this town again and yet there I was.

Willow Creek.

"Nancy." I put my hand on her leg and shook it gently. She'd freaked out when I told her where we were going, then proceeded to ignore me for a majority of the drive down except for when she'd fallen asleep about an hour ago. "We're here."

"We"—she pointed between the two of us — "aren't anywhere. You"—she pointed at me—"are." Her tone was laced with menace. "I'm calling Wes as soon as possible to come pick me up."

I'd heard that before. I'd even texted Wes after she fell asleep and he agreed with me. "Go ahead and call him. I'll even dial it for you." I handed her my phone even though it was connected to the Jeep.

My friend answered within two rings and immediately asked, "Is Nancy still giving you trouble?"

"Ask her yourself. You're on speakerphone." I smiled innocently at Nancy.

"I'm not going back to Willow Creek, Wes." To emphasize her point, Nancy crossed

her arms over her chest.

"Actually, you're already here," I reminded her. I was parked in the driveway that led to Easton's apartment, just waiting to see what our next move was.

The fiery look Nancy gave me would kill lesser men. It was a good thing I'd built my walls up high a long time ago and didn't get affected by such looks anymore. Otherwise, I would be a pile of ash.

"Fine, I'm not staying here," she corrected.

This was where I turned things over to Wes and kept my mouth shut. I didn't want to be in the town any more than she did, but I was curious as to what her reasoning was.

"It's either there with Lex, or you let Bravo Team protect you here." Wes gave her the ultimatum. "Which would you prefer?"

The thought that she might choose a team she was very familiar with over me made my pulse pick up.

I would understand it, though. On my watch, her son had been run down by a car, resulting in a tibial fracture.

The doctors were saying nine months to a year before he would heal enough to play again.

That meant he was out for the season—a thought that pissed me off because it meant the person sending the threats got what they wanted.

For now, at least. I doubted Nancy would let her son consider this a career-ender.

"Neither," Nancy finally answered. "I don't like either of those options."

Wes sighed. "I know you don't, but it's the best we can do with the information we have."

"I should be back in Oklahoma with Jimmy. He's going to need me there to help with recovery. The doctors are expecting it to be tough to get him game-ready again."

"And you can go back. Just as soon as Lex figures out who's after you."

Wes's frustration was starting to show. Guilt ate at me for calling him when I should've been the one explaining all this to Nancy. He had enough going on in his own life. I didn't need to be piling more on him.

"Wes, I'll handle it from here." I disconnected the call and turned to Nancy. "I know this isn't ideal. I understand you don't want to be here. Neither do I. But our options are limited. My team is here and can help us."

"Help with what?" she begged. "It's Jimmy who needs protection. The car hit him, not me."

I did my best to keep my own frustration out of my tone. "The car only hit him as he was jumping out of the way. It was gunning for you."

It was obvious as she shook her head that she didn't want to believe what I was saying. I didn't blame her. No one wanted to believe that someone was after them. Even if we had the note to prove otherwise. "You don't know that," she argued back.

I gave her the benefit of the doubt. "You're right."

I can't know for sure, but I don't believe in coincidences.

The fact that Jimmy received that letter and then you show up, a fire alarm goes off that brings us outside, and a car decides to jump the curb and try to run people over ...

Could that all be a coincidence? Sure. But, again, I don't think so. "

It was the most words I had used in her presence since we'd met, and by the end, I wanted to jump out of my Jeep and stomp off, that was how frustrated I was.

I wasn't used to someone questioning me.

My friends trusted my instincts, and I avoided nearly everyone else in the world.

This was all new to me, and to be honest, I wasn't sure I liked it.

"You're right," she said in a whisper a few seconds later.

I was shocked silent by her confession, and clearly Nancy found it somewhat amusing because she rolled her eyes and let out a little "haha." Yes, she actually said the words.

"Yes, I understand that might come as a shock to you, but if there is one thing I've learned after all these years of working with Wes, it's that there is no such thing as coincidence."

While I was happy she was agreeing with me, it was annoying that the only reason was because of Wes. I was starting to despise hearing my friend's name come out of her mouth. I felt like I was being compared to the man, and truthfully, I didn't even come close to matching up.

"Now that we have that settled, can we go inside?"

"Is there food inside?" She lifted her brow in question.

I only had to think about that for a second to know there was nothing in the fridge or the cabinets. Not unless Easton went on a shopping spree, and that seemed highly unlikely considering he rarely stayed here anymore. He much preferred to stay with Kati.

"How does the diner sound?"

I expected an argument when Nancy winced, but thankfully her words didn't match her expression. "Sounds good."

I backed out of the driveway and headed a couple of streets over to Main Street, where the only diner in town, The Crazy Fox, was located.

It was late enough in the day that most of the street parking was open.

I found a spot in front of the security firm I worked for, and quickly pulled in.

The lights were on inside the office, which meant someone was still working.

I hoped they didn't come out because I wasn't ready to tell them what was going on.

As far as I knew, only Maverick was privy to my current situation, and I wanted it to stay that way.

I didn't need my other friends knowing my business.

Luck was indeed on my side because we made it into the diner without running into any of my coworkers. The luck stopped there though. We were barely three steps inside when Bee's voice could be heard over the patrons.

"Nancy? Nancy Green? Is that you, darlin'?" Bee waddled her old self across the place and pulled Nancy in for a hug. "It is you."

It was obvious to everyone in the diner—except possibly Bee—that Nancy wasn't very receiving of the hug. Her arms hung down at her sides and a frown pinched her face.

"Bee, I think you're crushing her." I stepped in and tried to save the woman who I was slowly starting to care a little too much about.

The old woman stepped back but said, "Nonsense," anyway. "These old arms couldn't hurt a fly."

I smirked. "I've watched you kill several flies in this place."

"It's an expression," Bee scolded me.

"Obviously not a very good one," I returned, then grabbed Nancy's hand and pulled her along until I found an open table off to the one side.

It was bad enough that everyone in the diner was staring at us, I didn't want to make it worse by grabbing a table in the middle of the place as well. Nancy didn't need that.

Bee didn't get the hint and followed behind. I whispered, "I'm sorry about this," in Nancy's ear before Bee caught up with us.

I watched Nancy take a deep breath and paste on the fakest smile I ever saw. "Hi, Bee."

"I just can't believe my eyes." Bee barely took a breather before she continued on. "I never thought I would?—"

"Grams." Jo, Bee's granddaughter, stepped up to the table and interrupted. "They need you back in the kitchen."

"Good heavens." Bee huffed. "I swear they can't do a dang thing without me."

I waited until Bee made it to the kitchen door before looking at Jo. "Thank you for that."

Jo smiled. "Any time. I know how my grandmother can get, and if left to her own devices, she would've talked your ears off. Sorry about that." She turned to Nancy. "I'm Jo, by the way."

"Hi." This time the smile on Nancy's face was genuine. "And yes, thank you for the save. I should've known coming here was going to be similar to being dropped into a pit of vipers. I didn't exactly leave this town on the best of terms."

"No need to thank me. I know how my grandmother can get. Now what can I get you today?"

We both ordered drinks and the daily special. When Jo walked away to put our order in, I jumped at the chance to find out a little more about Nancy.

I leaned over the table some before I asked, "So what is it about Willow Creek that you don't like?"

Based on the sour look on her face, Nancy wasn't too keen on answering, so I was surprised when seconds later she spoke. "I grew up here."

I waited for her to say more, but when it was obvious that was all she was going to give me, I raised a brow. "That's it?"

With a heavy sigh, Nancy spoke again. "No, that's not all.

I met my ex-husband when I was in high school.

Everyone in town convinced me it would be smart to get married and have his kids, so I listened.

After I had my son, Jimmy, I decided to become a stay-at-home mother.

Well"—she snorted—"it was more like it was decided for me.

As soon as both kids were in school, I wanted to go back to work.

But my ex convinced me not to. Said a woman's role was in the home. Like an idiot, I listened. Then I found out that he'd been cheating on me for years.

We fought about it, and then one day, he drained our bank accounts and left. "

What a fucking asshole.

"And no one in town helped you?" I found that hard to believe. With how much these people were in each other's business, I thought for sure they would've rallied around Nancy and her kids to make sure they were okay.

"Honestly, they probably would have, but I didn't give them the chance. When the bank foreclosed on the house because the prick hadn't been paying the mortgage, I was too embarrassed to face anyone. I packed the kids up and moved us out of town before anyone could question me."

After hearing her story, I felt even worse about bringing her back. I knew all too well how it felt to face my demons. I didn't want Nancy to have to go through that.

"We can leave Willow Creek tonight. Find someplace else to stay while I figure out who's threatening Jimmy and you."

Nancy shook her head. "No, it's okay. I'm overdue to face this problem."

I wasn't so sure about that. "If you change your mind, just say the word and we leave, got it?"

"Got it." Nancy smiled at me and that feeling in my chest was back again. The one I didn't know what to do with or how to feel about it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Nancy

After a very interesting meal, where several people stopped to say hi or stared longer than necessary, we walked out of The Crazy Fox and crashed smack-dab into another person.

Just great!

Before I could think to apologize, the woman was talking.

"Nancy? Is that you?"

It took me a second to place the face and voice. "Shirley?"

There were very few people I missed in Willow Creek, but Shirley Bronson was at the top of the list. We went to school together since we were young kids.

Although Shirley was a year younger than me, we used to babysit some of the local kids together.

Our parents were good friends. If there was anyone I should've stayed in touch with, it was her.

"Yes!" Shirley didn't hesitate to wrap me up in a hug, and unlike when Bee hugged me, I returned the gesture with enthusiasm. "It's so good to see you."

"It's good to see you too. It's been a long time."

"It has." Shirley pulled away with a smile. "What have you been up to? Where have you been living? Sorry I'm rambling, but I'm just so happy to see you."

"No, it's okay. I'm happy to see you too. I moved just a few towns over. I'm actually an office manager for a security company. How about you?" I pointed at her. "What have you been doing since I left?"

I asked because I genuinely wanted to know, not because I felt obligated to return the sentiment.

The last time I spoke to Shirley, she was considering starting her own business, she just didn't know what kind she wanted to run or where. I'd half expected her to skip town at some point and go to a bigger city.

"You're looking at it." She pointed to a shop behind her. "I opened up an antique shop right here on Main Street." The smile took up her whole face.

The name on the building read Until the End of Time.

It was a cute red stucco building with big display windows on either side of the large front door.

The second floor looked to house some apartments.

I remembered the building from when I was a kid, but for the life of me couldn't say what used to be there before it became the antique shop. Either way, it was gorgeous now.

"That's awesome. I'm so happy for you," I told her honestly.

Shirley looked over my shoulder at where Lex stood guarding my back. "Is he why you're back in town?"

For a second there I had almost forgotten why I was back in town. My face heated up at the insinuation. "He is." I was quick to continue on when I saw the excitement on Shirley's face. "But not for the reasons you might think. Lex is friends with my boss and he's helping out with a problem."

"Bummer." Shirley frowned. "I was hoping it was something more exciting than that. Ever since his friends have come to town, it's been nothing but excitement here for a change."

I turned to look at Lex with a brow raised. I nearly laughed when he held up his hands and shook his head as if to say "not me."

"Well, I can promise you there's nothing exciting happening in my life." Even if I wished there definitely was something exciting going on. And by that, I meant with a man. That was the kind of excitement I could handle.

Lex cleared his throat behind me. "We need to get going."

I took that as my cue that he was trying to get me out of another awkward conversation with someone in town. "It was nice seeing you, Shirley."

"You too. Maybe we can catch up some more when you have time."

I smiled. "Yeah, absolutely."

I waved goodbye and headed straight for Lex's Jeep. I didn't say anything when he opened the net and offered his hand to help me in. I appreciated the gesture, even if it meant the whole town would be talking about it in a matter of minutes.

We rode in silence for the short drive from the diner. When we entered the same driveway as earlier, I had to ask, "Is this where you live?" Lex didn't seem like the kind of guy who would have something as permanent as a house when he insisted he didn't like the town either.

"No, it's a friend of mine's."

I was even more confused when we walked toward the garage instead of the house. "Oh, so you rent." That made more sense when I saw there was an apartment on top of the garage.

"Not exactly."

I threw my hands up in frustration. "Do you know the meaning of having a conversation with someone?"

Everything felt like pulling teeth when it came to talking to this man. How he socialized in the world was beyond me. Unless he just didn't socialize. That would actually make the most sense.

"I do," was his only response.

I gave up and decided to check out the place instead.

It could barely be considered a studio apartment.

There was a bed in one corner with a dresser next to it, a sofa against one wall, and a door that I assumed led to the bathroom.

The place barely had a kitchen. Maybe the area with a small fridge, sink, and tiny stove could be called a kitchenette, but personally, I wouldn't agree.

"This used to be Easton's apartment before he moved in with his girl. I was using it before I decided to leave town. I don't have any place I would consider mine."

That was a little sad.

"Is Easton one of the guys you work with?"

Lex nodded and I looked back around the tiny space. A thought occurred to me.

"Where exactly do you plan for me to sleep?"

The couch didn't look comfortable. In fact, it looked old and lumpy.

"In the bed," Lex finally answered after a few moments of silence.

I turned to look at him, but his gaze was far off. I doubted he was even seeing the room. "And how about you?"

If last night was any indication, I already had an idea what the answer would be. I wasn't sure if the nightmares were a daily thing, but I doubted Lex would sleep anywhere near me knowing they could happen.

"On the couch."

He didn't sound happy about that plan, so I continued to push. "You could always share the bed with me. I promise to move away if you start having a nightmare."

Lex was shaking his head before I even finished my sentence. "Absolutely not."

Stubborn, stubborn man.

"That"—I pointed to the couch—"can't be comfortable."

He merely shrugged his shoulders. "I've slept on it before."

I noticed he did that. Rather than lie, he just evaded the question asked. It was annoying, to say the least.

"Fine, have it your way." I was done arguing. "I'm tired and ready for bed."

It wasn't until I was ready to open the bathroom door that I remembered I didn't have my suitcase. Dropping my head to my chest, I prepared myself to ask Lex for something to wear.

It was obvious he was two steps ahead of me, because the next second, a pair of shorts and a shirt were being thrust into my hands. "There's also a new toothbrush in the bottom drawer."

"Thank you," I whispered before rushing into the bathroom and slamming the door. I was absolutely done with this day and needed to crawl into bed and sleep before I did or said something I would regret.

Like kiss the handsome man who'd had my stomach in knots in one way or another since the moment I met him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lex

"Please don't do this."

I listened to her beg for the third time since being brought into the dingy, dirty room and told that her fate rested solely in my hands.

I didn't want to kill her. In fact, I had pleaded for them not to make me do this, but it was no use. It was either end this young woman's life or tell them where they could find our contact. I couldn't do that. National secrets depended on that person's identity staying hidden.

"I'm sorry." That was the best I could offer her before I snapped her neck and let her body crumple to the floor.

I could still feel the warmth of the woman's skin on my fingers as I slowly woke up from the nightmare. It wasn't until I was half conscious that it dawned on me what I was feeling wasn't just in my dreams.

Shit!

I forced my eyes to open and found my worst fear come to life. Lying flat under me with my hands wrapped around her neck, was Nancy. Her green eyes were wide with fright, and I could already see the faintest red marks where my fingers touched her skin.

I quickly scrambled off her and landed on my ass on the floor.

She leaned over the edge of the sofa and softly asked, "Are you okay?" but I couldn't find my voice to answer her. All I could do was stare down at my hands.

I wanted to cut them off. To make sure they never harmed another human being again. To make sure they never harmed Nancy again.

"Lex?" She slid off the couch and moved close to me, but it wasn't until she rested her palm against my shoulder that I freaked.

"Don't touch me!" I hollered and slid across the floor on my ass to get as far away from her as I could in the small space. "How can you possibly want to touch me after what I did?" My question was demanding and accusatory.

"Because it's my fault. I never should've touched you while you were sleeping. You told me not to and I did it anyway." Her voice was much calmer than mine.

"Why? Why did you do it?" I was far too emotional to have this conversation, but I couldn't stop. I needed to understand what she was thinking.

"I couldn't take it anymore. You were in agony and I wanted to help."

I dropped my chin to my chest. "As I should. I deserve it after what I did."

Nancy didn't give up. Nor did she stay away from me. Each time I moved, she got closer. We were going in circles on the small floor.

"I don't believe that. No one deserves to be tortured in their sleep night after night."

I lifted my head, and in a hollow voice said, "They do when they kill an innocent

woman."

I could see the question in her eyes, so I went on. Maybe after she heard my story, she would leave me alone to suffer in peace like I deserved.

"On our last deployment, my team and I were captured by rebels.

They knew we had an informant from their camp, but they didn't know who.

The information we were passing back to the United States was considered a national secret.

Another team was assisting ours, and we were tasked with keeping the individual safe and providing passage to the States.

During one of our recon details, we were captured and tortured.

When they couldn't get anything out of us, they brought in people from a nearby village to torture in front of us, but it didn't work. "

I felt my Adam's apple bob as I swallowed hard.

"As a last-ditch effort, they demanded that I kill a young woman.

I begged them not to make me do it, but it was either her or they would start killing my team one by one until I told them who the informant was.

I think they honestly thought I would give in.

The whole fucked-up situation made no sense, but I couldn't let them kill my friends.
"

"So you killed her instead," Nancy whispered.

I nodded my head. "Snapped her neck and watched her body fall like it meant nothing to me. The next day we were rescued by Wes and his team."

There was nothing but pity in Nancy's eyes and I wasn't sure which was worse—that or if she feared me. "Don't look at me like that."

"You have to know it's not your fault."

"Why does everyone insist on saying that?"

"I wanted to scream. Instead, I jumped up and started to pace the small living space. I'd never hated that cramped apartment more than I did right then."

"Why can't you all see that it was my fault. Everything is my fault. My parents' deaths."

The guys killed in combat with me. It's all my fault. I'm cursed."

I couldn't take it anymore. I needed to be out of there. Away from that place, and away from Nancy.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Nancy

The door slammed behind Lex as he stormed out of the small apartment. I took a deep breath as I climbed off the floor and settled on the lumpy couch.

I wasn't sure what to do. It was obvious Lex wasn't ready to listen to reason.

I wasn't sure who he was referring to when he screamed about everyone insisting he was innocent, but apparently he was talking to someone about his nightmares.

That was good at least, because after tonight, I doubt he would be talking to me again.

I was still trying to best figure out how to help Lex when a knock on the door caught my attention. I debated ignoring whoever was on the other side, but then thought better of it. Maybe it was just Lex and he was locked out.

"Who is it?"

"Maverick. Lex's boss," a deep voice from the other side of the door answered.

I knew who Maverick was, or at least I'd heard of him a lot when he was starting up his business. Wes had told me to make myself available in case his friend needed any help. Thankfully, Maverick seemed to be more capable with technology than Wes ever was and never needed my help.

Getting up from the couch, I slowly made my way over to the front door. Opening it only a crack, I got my first look at the man my boss had described to me. And holy hell was Wes right. The man did look like Santa Claus.

"Hey." Maverick gave me a soft smile. "Do you mind if I come in?"

"Sure." I opened the door wider. "But I should warn you that Lex isn't here. He stormed out a little bit ago and I haven't seen him since."

I looked out the door to see if maybe I could get a glimpse of Lex, but he was nowhere in sight.

"He actually called me and asked that I come over to sit with you for a bit."

"Ohhh." I practically deflated right in front of the man. Lex was pushing me off onto someone else.

"Don't worry, he'll be back eventually."

I scoffed. "I'm not so sure about that. I think I pissed him off."

I imagined the look Maverick was giving me was the same pitiful look I had given Lex not too long ago. "He gets pissed when he has to talk about his time in captivity."

It was hard to hide the surprise in my tone. "He told you why he left?"

Maverick gave me a sad smile. "I make sure he calls me any time he has a night terror. I just didn't expect him to ask me to come here and stay with you."

"Did he tell you I tried to wake him up?"

Maverick nodded. "He did. Not the smartest move, but I understand why you did it. It's hard to listen to someone go through that and not want to help them."

It sounded like he knew from experience, which I guessed maybe he did. "I know I shouldn't have, but I just wanted to help. And look where that got me."

"You frightened him when he woke up with his hands around your neck."

I brought my hands up to the spot where Lex had been holding. He hadn't hurt me. In fact, he hadn't even squeezed that hard. I doubted I would even have any kind of bruises come morning. A few red marks maybe, but no bruising.

"I didn't mean to, and trust me, now I know better in the future. That's if he ever comes back. I get the impression he doesn't want anything to do with me anymore."

There was that sad smile again. "I wouldn't give up on him just yet. The fact that he asked me to come here says a lot about how much he cares. The Lex I've known for thirty-five years would've just walked away and been done with it."

Maverick's answer gave me some hope. "Lex mentioned something about being responsible for his parents' deaths. What did he mean by that?"

Shock was written clear as day on Maverick's face. "He mentioned them?" When I nodded my head, Maverick whistled. "He never talks about his parents. Except to Olivia."

"Who's Olivia?"

I tried to keep the little green monster under control, but for some reason the thought of another woman getting any piece of Lex made me jealous.

"Maisie's niece. Her parents recently died at the hands of a greedy son of a bitch. The two bonded over their shared trauma."

My heart broke for the girl who'd lost her parents, and for the younger version of Lex who'd lost the same.

"How can I help him?"

A huge smile broke out on Maverick's face. "Just continue doing what you're doing, because it's working. I'm already seeing the difference."

I could do that. As long as Lex let me.

Lex never came back that night after he stormed off. At some point, I caved and went back to bed, only to wake up with Maverick still hanging around. Since there was no food in the apartment, he offered to run to the bakery to get some for us.

Despite declaring that I wasn't hungry, it was hard to pass up the scones he brought back. I was adding meet Maisie and visit Wickedly Delicious to the top of my list. For not one, but two reasons. I wanted more scones and I wanted to meet the little girl who'd captured Lex's heart and devotion.

First, I needed to get back to my house so I could once again pack clothes since my suitcase was still at Jimmy's. I was getting sick of wearing other people's clothes and using their products. I wanted to smell like vanilla again, dammit.

"You're awfully quiet over there."

One side of my lips turned up in a smirk as I thought about Lex. "I guess I just got used to the silence while in a vehicle."

Maverick chuckled. "Yeah, Lex isn't much of a talker." Not much? That was an understatement. "Besides, it's a little hard to have a conversation when the wind is constantly blowing through the Jeep."

This time I laughed. "It was a little hard to hear unless Lex yelled. I can't imagine why he would want to ride around like that every day."

"The guys and I like to tease him that it was his midlife crisis purchase.

Most men go for sports cars, but not Lex.

"Maverick cleared his throat. "But the truth is, I think it's more than that.

I think he purchased the Jeep because he couldn't be confined inside a regular vehicle after everything that's happened to him. "

That made sense. I couldn't imagine how much it changed a person to be tortured. "You don't seem to mind."

We stopped at a stop sign just outside of Divot and Maverick turned to look at me.

"Lex had it worse than the rest of us, and I don't just mean being forced to kill that woman.

For some reason, they tortured him more than the rest of us.

I think that, paired with the death of his parents at a young age, just broke him. "

I looked down at my hands in my lap. "Do you think he can eventually heal?"

"I think with the right woman in your corner, any man can heal."

I wasn't sure if Maverick was still talking about Lex or himself at that point. And it wasn't my place to ask, so I kept my thoughts to myself and waited until we pulled into the driveway of my house.

"I don't need long. Just a quick shower and to pack another bag." I wanted to make this quick just in case Lex came back while I was gone.

Unlike when I came here with Lex, I wasn't worried about how my place looked. I wasn't trying to impress Maverick. He was a means to an end while Lex was being stubborn.

"Take your time. I'll just work from the couch if you don't mind."

"I don't mind at all," I hollered on my way up the stairs.

I rushed through a quick shower, then pulled out the matching suitcase to the one that was at my son's apartment. This time I took care to pick out my outfits, even stuffing a few of my nicer pair of undies into the bottom. I'd learned my lesson from the last time.

There was no way I was going to accidentally let Maverick or anyone else see what I wore under my clothes.

I glanced around my bedroom and made sure I didn't miss anything before heading back downstairs to find Maverick in the same spot I'd left him.

"Is that everything?" Maverick looked up from his phone when I hit the bottom of the stairs.

"I think so. Let me just take a look around."

I didn't make it very far before I saw the messenger bag on the floor. I'd forgotten I brought it home. I'd been in such a rush after meeting Lex, I'd completely forgotten I wanted to work while I was away. It was a good thing I hadn't brought it to Oklahoma. Otherwise it would still be there.

Picking the bag up off the floor, I started to bring it over to the couch. "I need this as well." Unfortunately, the old bag had seen its last day and the bottom fell apart, allowing everything inside to tumble straight onto the couch next to Maverick.

"Shit!" I scrambled to clean up the mess when a particular envelope caught my attention. "What the . . ."

There was no return address, and while the white envelope was addressed to me, it was sent to my place of employment. I wasn't sure why this particular piece of mail set off every one of my alarm bells, but something about it was off.

"What's wrong?" Maverick was off the couch and leaning over my shoulder in a heartbeat.

"I'm not sure."

Flipping the envelope around, my hand shook as I ripped the flap open and took the piece of paper out.

You should never have given birth to such a worthless piece of shit.

I read the words over and over again. Each time becoming more and more angry at whoever had the audacity to send such a nasty note.

"What the fuck?" Maverick snatched the letter out of my hand. I didn't even have it in me to argue because I didn't want to be holding the garbage anymore.

I watched on as Maverick pulled out his phone and began to make a call. I didn't have to wait long to know who.

"Wes, I need to borrow your office."

I didn't hear what my boss had to say, but based on Maverick's response, it was something along the lines of "why?"

"Nancy received a nasty letter and I would like to talk to your teams about it."

I tried to interrupt and explain that I didn't want Charlie or Bravo Team to know what was happening, but Maverick continued to steamroll right over me. "Yeah, we'll be there shortly."

I waited not so patiently for Maverick to hang up and then I let him have it. "What the hell do you think you're doing telling everyone my business. I purposely didn't want the guys I work with to know anything about this."

Maverick didn't seem to care one bit about my outburst. "Wes said as such, but I think we're long past that. Whoever threatened you knows where you work."

I threw my arms up in frustration. "Everyone in the area knows where I work. It's a small damn town."

"Yes, but the person who mailed this isn't local." Maverick held the envelope up to my face while pointing to the corner where the postage was located. Whoever sent the letter wasn't from Texas, but from Oklahoma.

"Ohhh," was all I could manage to say in response.

"Yeah. Ohhh. They know more about you than we realized. Now let's go. I have some

calls to make on the way."

I obediently followed along and wondered if one of those calls would be to Lex. Then I remembered he left without his phone, which meant he didn't want anyone getting ahold of him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lex

I don't know what possessed me to go to the office when as far as I was concerned, I didn't work there anymore. When I'd stormed out of the apartment, I couldn't think of anywhere to go, so I went straight to Maverick's house. I begged him to go stay with Nancy while I figured my shit out.

I wasn't angry at her. I wasn't even angry about what she said. I was mad that for the first time since killing the innocent woman, I wanted what everyone said to be true. I wanted to believe it wasn't my fault, if for no other reason than so Nancy never again looked at me with pity in her eyes.

No matter how hard I fought my feelings for her, it was no use. Somewhere in the last two days, Nancy had snuck underneath every guard I'd put up and wormed her way right into my heart.

And how was I dealing with it?

By running away like a scared little bitch.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

I looked up and found a very pissed-off Easton glaring at me.

"Last time I checked, I worked here, just like you did." I didn't know what his

problem was, but I wasn't in the mood to deal with it.

"That's not what I mean. Why are you here when your girl is over at Wes's office dealing with a threatening letter she received in the mail?"

I jumped up so fast the chair I was sitting on crashed to the floor with a loud bang. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Mav called me. Nancy got a letter in the mail. This time it was mailed to her."

What the fuck?

"Why the hell didn't he call me?"

Easton looked at me like I was stupid. "Do you have your phone on you?"

I patted down my gym shorts pockets, then hung my head in shame.

In my infinite wisdom I had stormed out of the apartment in the middle of the night without any of my possessions.

My phone, my keys, everything was back at the apartment.

It was a good thing everything in Willow Creek was within walking distance.

"I need to go see Nancy."

"No shit, asshole."

I bristled at his tone. "What the hell is your problem?" I stomped over to Easton and went toe to toe with him. We were similar in height and build. A lot of people said we

looked alike, but I could never see it and neither could Easton.

"You're my problem. Since retiring from the Marines, we all thought it was best to just let you handle your shit in your own way. Clearly, we were wrong. We should've made you face things long before now."

I didn't appreciate his implications. "You have no idea what you're talking about. I'm dealing just fine."

I moved to shove past Easton, but my friend didn't budge. Instead he pushed me back.

"Oh yeah? Is that why you're hiding in the office after running out on Nancy and leaving Mav to deal with your mess?"

Easton was two seconds away from getting punched in the face. "Back off, man. You have no idea what you're talking about."

"I'm sorry," Easton replied sarcastically. "Is that not what you're doing here?" He poked me in the chest. "Hiding like a little bitch."

Okay, that was it. Before I could think about it and change my mind, I took a swing at one of my good friends.

Easton was prepared, though, and managed to dodge the punch. "Is that really all you've got? You've gone soft, man," Easton taunted.

I saw red, and like a bull, I charged my friend. We both crashed to the floor, sending chairs and tables skittering across the open space.

"I'm not hiding." Despite years of training in the military and being one of the best hand-to-hand-combat fighters of the group, I was throwing haymakers without a care

in the world if I actually connected with anything.

I was too busy letting out years of built-up frustration. "You don't know anything."

I threw punch after punch, but I was too far gone to realize Easton wasn't fighting back. He was protecting his face, but no punches were being thrown my way. In fact, the bastard was too busy laughing beneath me.

"What the fuck is going on here?" Aaron's booming voice gave me enough pause that Easton snuck in one really good swing and connected with my jaw.

"Ah, motherfucker. You sucker punched me."

I shook off the hit and glared down at my friend. The corner of his mouth was bleeding and a bruise was already forming on his right cheek.

"You deserved that," Easton said on a laugh. "Kati is going to be so pissed at you."

I moved off my friend and plopped my ass on the floor. Then I thought about my friend's girl, and paled. She was going to be pissed that I messed up Easton's face.

"Are either of you going to tell me what the hell is going on?" Aaron demanded.

"Our boy Lex here needed to get some of his frustration out."

I glared at my friend.

"So you offered up your face and decided to destroy our office in the process."

I looked around the space. Chairs were overturned. One of the tables was on its side. Probably from being pushed out of the way too hard. Papers were scattered

throughout, and even a laptop was tipping precariously on the edge of another table.

Oops.

"Did it help?" Easton looked at me.

With a deep sigh, I explained that the night terrors I was used to having were getting worse. And then I told them how I woke up with my hands around Nancy's neck.

It was the first time I'd talked to anyone besides Maverick about what was going on with me.

Easton let out a slow whistle and Aaron frowned when he asked, "Why didn't you say anything before this?"

I lifted my shoulders. "I didn't want to burden anyone. And honestly, I thought I could handle it. As long as I kept my mind busy enough, I was good."

"But Willow Creek doesn't give you that," Easton rightfully surmised.

I shook my head.

"So what do you plan on doing now?"

I gave Aaron's question some serious thought. "I'm going to go to Divot and make sure Nancy's okay. Then I'm going to find someone to talk to. Because maybe what everyone's been saying is true. Maybe it wasn't my fault."

A week ago, I never would've considered getting help for my night terrors. But that was before Nancy came into my life. Now I had a reason to work through my issues, and maybe, for once, settle down in a place for more than a few months.

We all laughed when Easton looked at Aaron and said, "Yup, it helped."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Nancy

A loud commotion in the hallway halted all conversation in the room. Before I knew it, four men were between me and the door. I was tempted to roll my eyes when, a few seconds later, Lex walked through the door demanding, "Where is she?"

I guess I was hard to find with all four men standing in front of me.

"Right here," I hollered and waved my hand. Wes and Maverick moved out of the way, but Falcon and Arlo stayed right where they were. "It's okay, guys. Missy would never have let him in if Wes didn't vouch for him."

Both team leaders turned to Wes, who gave them the okay nod, but it was still several long seconds before they stepped out of the way. I appreciated the fact that they were so willing to look out for me. They were the respected team leaders of Bravo and Charlie Team and took their jobs seriously.

Lex stepped farther into the room and came straight to me. "Why didn't you tell me about the note?"

I huffed and crossed my arms over my chest. "How, exactly, would you have liked me to do that when you stormed off last night with nothing but the clothes on your back?" It was then that I saw the red mark on his chin. I uncrossed my arms and grabbed it to get a better look. "Who the hell hit you?"

"Easton," Lex grumbled.

When both Wes and Maverick laughed, I spun on my heels and gave them a piece of my mind. "It's not funny. Why the hell would Easton do that?"

"I knew I sent the right man to knock some sense into you." Maverick continued to smirk.

"Good choice," Wes strangely added.

"Umm, no. Not a good choice. Look at what he did?"

Maverick mimicked my stance and crossed his own arms over his chest. "And if I had to guess, Easton is sporting similar marks."

"A cut lip and a bruise to the cheek, actually," Lex said from where he stood behind me. "Kati is going to be pissed, so I wouldn't brag too much about being the one who sent him."

I whipped back around with wide eyes. "You hit your friend?"

Lex lifted his shoulder like it wasn't a big deal. "He had it coming."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Thankfully, Wes started to speak and kept me from clunking Lex over the head. It was clear enough punches were thrown for one day.

"Glad you decided to show up. Here's the letter Nancy received." Wes walked past me and handed it to Lex.

"Was it delivered to her home?"

"No, here at the office," Maverick answered.

"So she didn't actually see it first."

"Ummm, hello." I waved my hand in front of Lex's face.

"She is right here." I pointed to myself.

"And yes, I did see it. Missy handed it to me when we were here the other day, but I got distracted, so it got shoved into my bag with all the other stuff.

Luckily, I remembered to grab the bag while I was at the house today.

"I left out the part where I only saw it because the bag broke. That wasn't necessary information.

Lex looked over my head to Wes. "Mail carrier?"

"Not likely to remember," Wes answered. "He's a few months away from retirement, so he's just trying to get through each day. Postage shows it came from out of state."

"So that's a dead end."

"Pretty much," Wes responded to Lex.

"Excuse me one moment." I grabbed Lex by the arm and dragged him out of the room, very much aware that if he didn't want to come with me, there was no way I would've been able to move him. I brought him to my office and slammed the door behind us. "What is your problem?" I demanded.

"What are you talking about?"

Unbelievable. "I'm talking about you walking in and demanding answers from everyone in the room, but not giving me the chance to talk. This is my life. I'm the one who found the note. I'm the one who can give you answers. Not the guys who work here," I hissed.

"I'm sorry, I assumed Wes was in charge. Last time I checked, this was his business."

I let out a frustrated squeak. "Yes, this is his company, but the threats and that letter are my business. Mine." I pointed to myself just in case my words weren't enough. "I would appreciate it if you gave me the same respect you gave everyone else."

"I do respect you."

"Well, you have a shitty way of showing it." I put my hands on my hips because I was tired of flailing them around like I was completely unhinged.

"That's because women may as well be foreign objects to me. I either fuck them or make friends with them. I don't know how to handle these other feelings."

Well, that brutal honesty gave me pause. "What feelings are those?" I asked with caution.

Lex scrubbed his palm down the side of his face. "That's the thing. I don't know. I feel like I need to protect you. I want to make you smile. I don't like when you're pissed. I've never felt all these things for one person."

He was feeling the same things I was, except I knew exactly what they meant. I was falling for this man, even if that was never the plan.

I didn't give myself time to think about what I did next. Hell, I can't even say if it was a conscious thought or if I just went for it. All I knew was one minute my hands were

on my hips and the next they were wrapped around Lex's neck with my lips on his.

When he didn't kiss me back, I felt my cheeks darken. Dropping back down onto my heels, I mumbled a quick, "I'm sorry," before turning to rush out of the room.

I barely made it a foot before I was being swung back around. I opened my mouth to once again apologize for what I did, but I never got the chance. Lex's lips claimed mine.

Only, it was nothing like the kiss I'd tried to give him. Where I went in for a small, closed-mouth one, Lex consumed me. There was no easing into it. The man didn't do gentle or slow, and I was all for it.

Lips smacking, tongues dueling, teeth clanking, it was the sexiest kiss of my life. Made even sexier when he lifted me up with one arm wrapped around my back and carried me to my desk without breaking the kiss.

Without an ounce of finesse, Lex swiped the papers off and plopped my ass on the edge. I finally broke the kiss to ask, "Do you plan on cleaning that up?"

He merely chuckled and shook his head. "Not a chance."

I gave him my best teasing smile. "Then I guess you better make this worth it."

I leaned forward to grab the waist of his shorts, but he stopped me. "The first time I fuck you won't be on your desk with our bosses just down the hall." I whimpered at his words. "But I will take the edge off for you."

Lex dropped to his knees and moved my baggy shorts to the side. Before I could even comprehend what was happening, his tongue was spearing me through my panties.

I nearly fell off my desk. The only thing holding me in place were his large palms clamped down on my thighs. When I said he needed to make it worth it, I wasn't expecting that.

He feasted on me like a man starved for days. And damn, I didn't make him work very hard for my first non-self-induced orgasm. That bitch hit me like a freight train. So hard I had to bite down on my knuckles to keep from screaming the place down.

Lex didn't stop, though. He tongue-fucked me through one orgasm and worked extra hard for the second.

The friction of my panties quickly brought me to the brink again.

And at that point, I didn't care who heard me.

I grabbed on to Lex's hair and rode his face like it was the last thing I would do in life.

And maybe it was. If I died in the next five minutes, I would do so a very satisfied woman.

"Fuck, you taste incredible." Lex breathed the words against my sex and caused a shiver across my skin.

With his hair a mess and some of my juices on his lips, Lex sat back on his haunches with a satisfied grin on his lips.

"That wasn't why I brought you in here." I was one hundred percent out of breath.

"Maybe not, but I like how this ended better."

So did I. Except now we had to go back out and face the music.

I slipped off the desk and straightened my shorts. There was nothing I could do about my soaked panties unless I wanted to go commando. Then I looked around my office. Papers were scattered across the floor. "Definitely worth it."

Lex and I chuckled as we tidied up my office.

"What do you think they're going to say when we go back out there?"

Minutes earlier I hadn't cared if the whole office heard me, but now that I wasn't in the throes of passion, I cared very much. I didn't think I'd been loud enough for the guys to know what had happened, but again, I was too far gone to care at the time.

"They won't say anything. Not unless they want me to kick their asses."

I crossed my arms at the implication. "Is fighting how you solve all your problems?"

Lex leaned in and swiped his lips over mine. I could taste myself on him, and surprisingly, I found it arousing. "Only when someone threatens you."

I smiled at his answer. I liked that. I liked that a lot.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lex

I could still taste Nancy on my tongue. And just like I feared, I was addicted.

Addicted to the feel of her body beneath my fingers. Addicted to the taste of her. Addicted to the fact that she was bold enough to make the first move and stand up to me. I enjoyed the whole package just a little too much.

The guys were lucky none of them said anything when we returned. They acted like nothing had happened, and continued on with the conversation.

Wes kicked my chair. "Lex, you still with us?"

"Sorry, what did you say?"

Wes gave me a disapproving look, and I could only imagine what he was thinking. Maybe he did know what happened in Nancy's office after all.

"We were discussing what to tell Jimmy."

I looked over at Nancy. She was biting the side of her lip, and I wondered if she too was remembering what happened in her office, or if she was worried about her son. Was it bad that I was hoping it was the first option?

"What does Nancy want to do?"

If the collective gasps were any indication, everyone was surprised by my question. It made me feel like a bigger jerk. I'd never meant to be an asshole when I excluded Nancy. I just wanted to take care of her.

"As a mother, I don't want him to know. But as someone who's worked in this business long enough, I know how important knowledge can be."

"Has the NFL made a statement about Jimmy's injury yet?" I asked her directly, almost pushing the rest of the room out of my focus. She wanted me to speak to her, and I was happy to do as she'd requested.

"Not yet. His manager has been able to keep it under wraps so far."

I thought about that for a minute. I had an idea in mind, but I couldn't say I liked it. "If the NFL releases that Jimmy was injured and will be out for the season but plans to return next season, the person threatening Jimmy will likely continue to send threats."

"You want to use Nancy as fucking bait?" Wes boomed. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

I turned to the man I respected and yelled back, "Do you really think I would let any harm come to her?"

"Your track record would say so," Wes fired back, and it was like a slap to the face.

How could I possibly forget that those around me died? I was such an idiot for thinking I could protect Nancy, or anyone for that matter.

"That's uncalled for." Maverick was quick to jump in and defend me.

"No, he's right. I've said it a million times. I'm cursed."

I got up from my chair and walked straight out of the room without looking back. I didn't stop to speak to another person. I didn't acknowledge Missy at the front desk when I passed by, and I headed straight for my Jeep.

I was just climbing in when Nancy came crashing through the door. She looked around until she spotted me, then rushed my way.

"Lex, stop."

I started the Jeep but didn't pull away. I couldn't do that to her. I couldn't just leave her standing there while I left. Not again.

The old me would have, but after our time together in her office, I couldn't hurt her like that.

I waited until she climbed into the passenger seat before I spoke. "You should go back inside."

"Not unless you're coming with me."

I couldn't look at her when I replied. "You heard Wes.

Those around me get hurt. Some even die.

I couldn't live with myself if that happened to you.

"I needed her to live. To be safe. I needed to know nothing would happen to her, even if that meant me taking a step back so someone else could protect her.

"Look at me," Nancy demanded and I found I couldn't deny her what she wanted. I turned my head and found her piercing green eyes locked on me. "I know a lot of bad shit has happened to you, but that doesn't mean you're cursed."

"You don't understand." I could barely make sense of it myself some days. There was only so much a person could take, and I had hit my threshold. If I lost Nancy, that would be the end for me. She had my heart, even if I'd never intended to give it away.

Nancy took my hand in hers and pleaded, "Then help me understand."

"It started when I was twelve." I hated talking about this, but if I truly wanted her to understand, I needed to start at the beginning.

"I was spending the night at my friend's house across town.

I was an only child, so my parents were using the time to go out on a date.

My friend and I got into a fight, so I stormed out of his house and decided I was going to walk home.

It was dark out and we lived in a pretty busy town.

It was before people had cell phones at the ready, so of course my parents didn't find out until they got home.

By that time, they were frantic to get out and find me. "

I was such a selfish asshole back then. As an only child of wealthy parents, I thought I was untouchable. I learned that night that wasn't the case.

"They were rushing so much, they ran a red light and got T-boned by another car. The worst part? I was less than a block away. I saw the whole thing. I ran to them, but it was too late. Both my parents were thrown from the car and died on impact."

If only I hadn't been so self-centered. My parents would still be here today.

"It wasn't your fault."

I pulled my hand away at her comment. "Yes it was. If I had just stayed at my friend's house that night, they would never have been out looking for me."

"That might be so. But I tend to believe in fate, and when it's someone's time, it's their time. That night it was your parents'. I know that's hard to accept, but it's the truth. There was nothing you could have done differently."

"Can you really say the same for every good man I couldn't save. Every soul I lost in war. And the innocent woman who died at my hands?" I stared out the front windshield, but Nancy wasn't having it.

She grabbed my chin and forced me to look at her. "Yes, I can. Those are all things you can't change. But you want to know what you can change?" When I didn't answer fast enough, she continued. "You can change how you handle what happened around you."

Nancy took a deep breath. "You have two choices, Lex. You can let these things define you by continuing to believe you're cursed and you don't deserve happiness. Or you can look at it differently. You can live your life to the fullest in honor of those whose lives ended too young."

She held my gaze as if challenging me, and I guess she was.

"Which one is it going to be?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Nancy

I waited with bated breath to see which one Lex was going to choose.

I knew what I wanted him to do. It hurt my heart to watch him constantly blame himself for things that were out of his control.

He saw it as being cursed, but I saw it as the universe seeing what he could shoulder.

It was clear he'd hit his breaking point, though.

"I want what we discussed in your office. I want to live my life."

I brushed my thumb along his beard. "I want that to."

Lex let out a humorless laugh. "Less than an hour into this and already I've fucked things up."

My lips turned up into a small smile. "It's going to be a learning curve. I'm essentially asking you to change forty years' worth of thinking. That would be hard for anyone."

He needed to learn to not be so hard on himself all the time.

Pot, meet kettle.

I was one to talk. All I'd done since Thomas left was put the blame on myself for every struggle my kids and I were forced to face. I should've let those feelings go a long time ago.

Lex cupped my cheek in his large palm. "How did I get so lucky?"

I couldn't help but laugh. "I wouldn't go that far," I told him, but he shook his head.

"If I have to change my way of thinking, then so do you."

Damn this man for knowing the right words. For someone who claimed not to like to talk, he sure had some sweet words. "You're right. I guess we're both a work in progress." I took a deep breath and looked back at the building. "We should probably get back inside before they come looking for us."

Lex turned off the ignition but didn't move. "I really don't want to use you as bait. You have to know that isn't my intention."

Oh this man.

"I know that. But I also know there's no other way. I've thought about this repeatedly, and there's no saying if Jimmy quit the NFL, the person sending the letters would stop. I need to know why this person is targeting my son. If that means using me, then so be it. My kids come first."

"No." Lex shook his head. "You're just as important as your kids. I need you to remember that."

I softened my expression. "I'll do my best."

Lex seemed to like my answer because he got out of the Jeep and came around to

help me out. We walked back in and through the building holding hands.

I didn't miss the huge smile on Missy's face when she saw us. I also didn't miss the fact that no one looked surprised when we walked back into what Maverick had dubbed the war room.

Wes was quick to apologize as soon as he saw us. "I'm sorry, Lex. I'm just a bit stressed right now and the thought of anything happening to Nancy made me say something I didn't mean."

I dropped Lex's hand and walked straight over to my boss to give him a hug. Despite how much what he said pissed me off, I appreciated the apology to Lex more than he could realize.

"I'll forget all about it as long as you take your hands off my woman."

Wes being the ballbuster he was only hung on tighter. "She was my friend first."

I rolled my eyes at the childish response and stepped back.

"Knock it off." I went straight back to an eagerly awaiting Lex who wrapped me up as soon as I got close enough.

"Getting back to the topic at hand, I agree with Lex.

We need to have the Pioneers make a formal statement that while due to the injury, Jimmy will be out for the season, he fully plans to return. "

"You do realize that's only going to piss the person off, right?"

I knew Wes was just trying to protect me, but it pissed me right off that he would

think I would be so naive to jump at something without fully thinking it through.

"Yes, I'm well aware. That's what I'm hoping for. It's important to me that I find out who is sending those letters to my son."

"And you," Maverick added.

"Yes, and me." I rolled my eyes. My one letter compared to the dozen or so Jimmy got was hardly worth mentioning. It didn't even threaten me.

Wes looked at Falcon and Arlo, who had stayed quiet through the entire discussion. "Are you guys okay with providing any support Maverick and his team might need?"

Both men simply nodded. Like Lex, these two barely spoke unless necessary.

"Okay. Give him a call."

I used the phone on the table and waited as the call almost rang out. At the very last second, Jimmy answered. "Hello?"

"Hey, son. It's me."

"Oh thank God. Tell Lex, the next time he whisks you away because you're in danger, at least make sure you have your phone."

I rolled my eyes at how dramatic my son was acting. "I'll be sure to let him know."

"Do that or let me talk to him. I'll set him straight."

There was no way I was putting Lex on the phone with my son right now. It was too early in our relationship for that. "Or I could tell you why I'm calling."

Jimmy sighed. "I have a feeling I'm not going to like this."

Not in the least. But instead of saying that, I injected happiness into my voice. "I want you to ask the Pioneers to make a statement about your injury. I know Fred has been holding them off, but I think it's time."

My son didn't say anything for a while. Long enough that I had to check the phone to make sure the call wasn't disconnected.

"So let me get this straight. You want the team to announce that I'm coming back after my injury so that whoever is threatening me can try to kill you ?" Jimmy enunciated the last few words.

Well, when he put it like that.

"I don't plan on letting anyone kill me."

"No one ever plans on it, Mom."

Oh the dramatics of the men in my life. "I promise to be safe, but I should warn you ... I got my own letter in the mail."

"What?!"

My son shouted that single word so loudly, I had to pull the phone away from my ear. I considered yelling at him for that, but I understood his concern, so I let it slide.

Just this one time.

"What did it say, Mom?"

There was no way I was telling him that. "Nothing important."

"Are you kidding me right now? You forced me to show you the last letter I got and now you want to be secretive about this one. Tell me what it said."

"I'm your mother. That's different."

"Seriously? You're going to play that card."

I would absolutely play whatever card I needed to if it meant protecting my son from knowing what was said about him. Only once in my life had I ever heard anyone say anything similar.

Then it hit me. Suddenly, everything fell into place. I couldn't believe I didn't see it before this. "Jimmy, I have to go." I hung up on him and turned to Wes and Lex.

"It's Thomas."

"Who?" Lex said at the same time Wes growled, "Your ex-husband, Thomas?"

"Yes, my ex-husband. He's the one who's been sending the letters to Jimmy. I need to see the others to be sure, but if they're anything like the last two, it all makes sense."

"What makes sense?" Maverick joined in on the conversation. "Why would your ex-husband be sending your son threats about quitting the NFL and harming you if he doesn't."

"Because Thomas never wanted kids. He hated Jimmy and Jessie. Would constantly remind me that they never should've been born. But it was what he said to me before he left that makes me think it's him."

"What did he say?" I could practically see the anger pouring off Lex in waves.

"That if he could, he would leave us with nothing. Because he never wanted any of us to succeed."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Lex

"What a fucking asshole." The words were out of my mouth before I could think better of it.

Actually, I didn't care what it said about me. The guy was a fucking asshole.

"Why did you never tell me that?" Wes demanded, and I wanted to punch him in the mouth for talking to Nancy that way.

"Because after he left, it didn't matter. I focused on me and the kids. We proved him wrong, so as far as I was concerned, it was a thing of the past."

Until it wasn't.

"Do you know where he is these days? I know the letter was mailed from Oklahoma, but is that where he's living?"

Nancy shrugged her shoulders. "No clue. I haven't thought about him in years. I guess you can ask around in Willow Creek. Someone there might still talk to him."

Oh I was going to be doing that all right. Bee was in everyone's business in town. If anyone would know who still talked to the prick, it was her.

"I guess that means we're going back there."

Maverick's look said it all. He wasn't pleased with my tone. I didn't much care though.

Nancy sighed. "My bag is already packed."

This time we were smart enough to grab food before we left Divot so we could avoid stopping at the diner or anywhere else in town. Neither of us were too keen on being back, and for Nancy's sake, I wanted to avoid people for at least one more night.

Dropping our bags next to the bed, I looked around the small apartment. "I don't like the way things ended the last time we were here."

Nancy walked over and slid her hands under my shirt. "So let's make some new memories."

I liked that she was bold enough to make the first move. I liked her confidence to seek out what she wanted.

And I wasted no time grabbing her hips and bringing her crashing into me. I couldn't get enough of her curves as I ran my hands up and down her sides over and over again. I wasn't able to get the full feel when we'd been in her office, but I knew now just how well she fit me.

"I can't stop thinking about how good you tasted." Leaning down, I nibbled on her neck just below her ear. "Mmmm, you smell like vanilla again."

Nancy giggled. "I was able to use my own stuff for once."

"Have I told you yet how much I like it?" I nuzzled in closer and took a deep breath.

Nancy tilted her head, giving me better access. "I don't think you have."

Damn, I was going to have a hard time keeping my hands off this woman. I backed her up until the backs of her knees hit the bed and I slowly leaned her back. I got a glimpse of her soft stomach where her shirt rode up and I instantly wanted to see more of her.

"You're not going to need these." I peeled her shorts and panties off, dropping them to the floor. Then I grabbed her hands and pulled her to sitting, yanking her shirt off over her head. "Won't need this either for what I have planned."

"Is that so? How is it I'm almost completely naked and you're still dressed?" She looked up at me through her lashes as I stared down at her.

My eyes locked on her thick thighs that I knew from experience would suffocate me in the most intoxicating way when I got between them. And don't even get me started on her curves. I couldn't wait to hold on to them as she rode me.

"I guess you need to do something about that."

Confident as ever, Nancy traced the band of my shorts and boxers with her finger before dipping her fingers inside and yanking them down my legs. My cock bobbed out, perfectly lined up with her mouth.

I knew the moment Nancy realized it as well. She licked her lips and looked up at me with a sultry smile before leaning forward and flicking the tip with her tongue.

My eyes rolled back into my head when she wrapped her pouty lips around my shaft. Being inside her hot mouth nearly had me erupting with just a few sucks. I bit down hard on my molars to keep from spilling too soon.

When it was clear I couldn't take any more without the fear of exploding down her throat, I lifted her up underneath her arms and tossed her farther up the bed. The

popping sound she made when I pulled her off my cock was nearly my undoing.

"Hey!" she pouted. "I wasn't done."

"Just like I wasn't going to fuck you for the first time in your office, I'm also not going to come down your throat until I've filled your pussy."

I took pleasure in the way her body shivered at my words. I kicked my shorts and boxers off the rest of the way, then grabbed the back of my shirt and yanked it off, leaving me completely naked to Nancy's perusal.

And damn did she soak up the sight. Her eyes glossed over with lust.

"Take your bra off," I demanded. "I want to see those beautiful tits bounce as you ride me." I crawled up her body and rolled us over until Nancy was on top of me, her legs straddling mine.

She was slow to take it off, and my mouth watered as soon as they were freed.

I could see the uncertainty in her eyes and I wanted more than anything to banish it, so I ran my hands up her curves until I slipped the heavy mounts into my palms. Flicking her nipples with my thumbs, I watched as lust replaced the uncertainty.

"Take my cock, baby. Take me inside you and show me how you fuck me."

I felt her gush at my words. My girl liked it when I talked dirty to her. Good to know.

Leaning forward ever so slightly, I took one of her nipples into my mouth as she lined my cock up with her core.

Fuck, she was tight, strangling my cock in the best way.

I suckled on one of her tits while massaging the other as she slowly worked me in. I wanted nothing more than to feel her warm heat wrapped completely around me, and had to restrain myself from thrusting up.

When she was finally fully seated, I popped off her nipple and moaned at how perfect she felt.

I gave her time to get adjusted before I demanded that she ride me. Then I watched in amazement as her confidence grew with each roll of her hips. Never had I let a woman be in control in the bedroom, but with Nancy, it felt natural.

Her tits bounced, her body rolled, and when I felt she was getting close, I encouraged her to lean back and grab on to my legs.

"Yeah, just like that, baby." She did so without hesitation and I rewarded her by playing with her swollen nub.

"I'm close," Nancy whimpered and I could feel her flutter around me.

With shaking limbs and my name on her lips, I worked her until she climaxed.

Nancy screaming my name sent me over the edge. Never in my life did I come as hard as I did inside her. Our combined juices leaked out of her and onto my lower belly, but I didn't have the heart to ask her to move when she collapsed on top of my chest.

Running my fingers along her spine, I felt her soften under my touch until she was completely nuzzled into me.

"I could lie like this all night long." Nancy sighed into my chest, and I immediately felt my body go taut at her suggestive tone.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Nancy

"Stay with me," I pleaded. "Please."

Lex shook his head vehemently as he tried to get out of bed, but I was latched on to his arm.

"I can't. I don't trust myself not to hurt you."

"But I trust you. Doesn't that count for something?"

His eyes pleaded with me to understand.

"I promise to get out of bed if I hear you so much as whimper."

"Don't look at me like that."

I knew exactly what he was talking about, but I played dumb anyway. "Like what?" I asked innocently.

"With those puppy dog eyes. It makes me want to cave even though I shouldn't."

I did the opposite and cranked it up even more. If I didn't fully believe he would be fine, I wouldn't be begging so hard. But I had faith in him, even if he didn't.

"Fine, I'll stay. But you have to promise not to try and wake me again. I can't handle it if I hurt you again."

"You didn't hurt me. See." I showed him my unmarked neck, but he didn't look convinced.

"Roll over so I can hold you."

I did as he asked, surprised to discover that he was a cuddler. When he said he only fucked women, I figured that meant no snuggling in bed. And while I learned very quickly that Lex might never have cuddled before, he was damn good at it. In his arms, I instantly felt safe and cherished.

However, I struggled to doze off knowing that Lex might not get a wink of sleep that night.

When I woke up the next morning, I noticed two things. Lex was still in bed like I'd begged him to be, and his eyes were closed. I tried to remember if I heard him call out in the middle of the night, but my mind was still trying to wake up.

"I can feel you staring at me."

I startled so hard, I almost fell out of the bed.

Of course Lex was right there to catch me. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you," he said while leaning over me.

"It's okay. I just thought you were sleeping. Did you get any sleep?" I asked cautiously. Then released the breath I was holding when he smiled at me.

"Yeah, baby. I slept a couple of hours."

"Really?" I asked with so much hope in my voice. "No nightmares?"

Lex shook his head. "Nothing. But it was more cat nap than actual sleeping."

I was so happy I could cry. "That's okay. It's a start." When he leaned down and brushed his lips across mine, all thoughts of crying quickly disappeared. I was lost in all things Lex for what felt like mere seconds but was probably longer.

"We have to go into town," he said after pulling away and resting his forehead on mine.

"Do we though? Can't we just stay in this bubble forever?"

Lex laughed, and damn was it the sexiest sound in the world.

"We could, but then I wouldn't get the pleasure of punching your ex-husband in the face."

I laughed so hard I snorted, then proceeded to cover my face as embarrassment flooded my body.

"Now that was the cutest sound I've ever heard."

I smacked his naked chest. His very defined and totally drool-worthy chest. "Let me up."

He did as I asked, but only to wrap me up in his arms so we were cuddling together on the bed. That was fine by me. I didn't want to go talk to people anyway. I would've been happy if we never left the apartment.

Well, that wasn't true. I would want to visit my kids occasionally. See Jimmy heal

and watch him make the comeback I knew he could make if given the chance.

"We really should move," I said a few minutes later.

"I know. I was just enjoying the moment."

Lex would soon become the king of sappy quotes at this rate. And damn did that make me swoon over him.

Eventually he let me go and I rolled out of bed to get in the shower. I took my time under the spray. The last few days had been nothing but rushed showers and constantly being on the move, so I soaked up the hot water while I could. There was no telling what the next day would bring.

Lex jumped in after me but only took about a quarter of the time, barely leaving me enough time to get ready before he was demanding we get a move on.

"Stop rushing me." I swatted at his hands when he tried to put my makeup away before I was done using it.

"I don't know why you're putting that stuff on. You're beautiful without it."

I almost melted into a pile of goo right there and then.

"Has anyone ever told you that you say the nicest things?" I tossed the mascara back in my makeup bag.

Lex snorted. "I don't think anyone has ever said that to me."

"That's because they never got to see this side of you."

He walked up behind me and wrapped his arms around my middle, pulling me back so I was flush against his chest. "And they never will. I reserve that only for you."

At this rate, I was going to be begging the man to marry me.

"All right, time to go." If we didn't get a move on, I would be fucking the man in no time just to show him how much I appreciated all his sweet words.

Lex chuckled but followed me out the door and down the steps to his Jeep.

"Where do you think we should stop first?" he asked as soon as we were both seated.

"Remember Shirley from the antique shop?" When he nodded his head yes, I continued on. "She was one of my best friends when I was in high school and pretty much the only person who saw straight through Thomas's nonsense. I figured we could start with her and see what she knows."

"Sounds good to me."

The drive to Main Street was short. It took longer to get buckled and start the vehicle than it did to drive the couple of streets over. No wonder most people preferred to walk in town.

Once again, Lex parked in front of the building labeled Willow Creek Security. "Is this your place?" I pointed to the sign.

"It was. I'm not sure it will be anymore."

I raised my brows. I hadn't known he was thinking about leaving.

"Before I met you, I wasn't sure Willow Creek was for me."

I had to ask. "And now?"

Lex shrugged. "I'm not sure anymore. The reason I wanted to leave might not be a problem anymore."

This probably wasn't a discussion we should be having out in the open, but I couldn't find it in me to postpone it to a later time.

"And what was that?"

"My night terrors. The only way to keep them at bay was to stay busy enough that I would go to bed at night completely exhausted. If last night proved anything, there's other ways to get rid of them."

I had a feeling I knew what he was referring to, but I wanted to be sure. "And what ways are those?"

Lex smirked at me. "Oh I think you know."

My face heated at the suggestion. I needed to get out of the Jeep before I got myself arrested for indecent exposure when I jumped Lex's bones. "Let's go see if Shirley has any information for us."

I watched Lex get out of the vehicle and walk around to my side. I gladly took his offered hand and held it as we walked to the store.

A little bell dinged as soon as we walked in. "I'll be right with you," Shirley's sweet voice echoed throughout the place.

I looked around the shop and instantly found several pieces that I loved. "I could cause some serious damage in this place."

"Is that what you like? Antiques?" Lex looked at me with genuine curiosity.

"When it comes to furniture, absolutely. They don't make dressers and such like they used to." I loved seeing how older items lasted over the years. It was nothing like the newer stuff. Everything nowadays was made flimsy and barely lasted a few years.

"Nancy!" Shirley exclaimed when she walked out of the back room. "I'm so glad you decided to stop in."

"I wish I could say this was a social visit, but I need your help."

Shirley's smile slipped a bit. "Sure. What can I do to help?"

I cleared my throat and got right down to it. "Do you know where Thomas is living these days, or know anyone who does?"

Shirley scoffed. "I don't have the slightest idea. You know how I felt about him when you were married. Couldn't stand the guy. But you should ask Tim Senior. He keeps all the records of everyone in town. I bet he would know where the asshole is."

I knew there was a reason I liked Shirley so much. She had been the only one in town who saw Thomas for who he really was.

"Tim Senior owns the service station down at the end of the road," I explained to Lex.

His only answer was a jerk of the head as if to say let's go.

"Give me one second."

I walked straight over to Shirley and gave her a hug. "As soon as this mess is over, we need to get together. Maybe grab a drink so we can properly catch up."

"I look forward to it. And I don't know why you're looking for Thomas, but be careful. I always got a bad feeling from him."

She wasn't the only one. Unfortunately, I made the mistake of ignoring my feelings as a teenager and instead listened to everyone else in town.

I said goodbye and followed Lex out of the shop. We walked in silence until we came across Wickedly Delicious.

"After we speak to Tim, I want to stop in here and grab a few things."

Lex looked up to see where we were and gave me a smile. "Maverick introduced you to Maisie's scones, didn't he?"

"Oh my God, yes. I would marry the woman if she wasn't already taken."

He laughed. "Yeah, Hendrix wouldn't stand for that. He's a bit possessive when it comes to Maisie."

"I'd like to meet her and Olivia." I watched closely to see how Lex reacted to that, and wasn't the least bit surprised when he smiled.

"They are going to love you."

I sure as hell hoped so.

We continued our walk down the block and stopped when we hit the old service station. Tim Jr. was working the counter and gave me a big smile as soon as he saw me.

"Hey, Nancy. I heard you were back in town."

Tim Jr. was around my age. He was a decent-looking man in the boy-next-door kind of way, but he had nothing on Lex.

"Hi, Tim." I smiled. "And yeah, for a little bit. I was actually looking for your father. Is he here, by chance?"

"Of course. I think he's tinkering in the shop. He's usually here every day no matter how many times I remind him he's supposed to be retired."

I laughed at Jr.'s explanation. From the little I remembered about his father, he was always working on something or other. The man loved his antique cars.

"Let me just go grab him for you."

"Thanks, Tim."

I glanced around the small service station and realized nothing about the place had changed.

The decor was still stuck in the sixties.

The old soda fountain machine was still in the same spot and looked to be in working order.

It brought back memories of riding my bike down there on hot summer days just to grab a drink. It was the hot spot back in the day.

"Nancy, dear." Tim Sr. pulled me back from memory lane as he slowly walked straight over to me and pulled me in for a hug.

I had forgotten how big this town was on hugging people. "Good to see you, Senior."

As kids, Tim hated to be called sir, so he insisted we all called him Senior.

"Bee told me you were back in town, but what brings you around to my place? Lookin' for a drink, perhaps?"

I smiled at the old man. "Not today. I was actually hoping I could pick your brain some."

"Well, it ain't what it used to be, but I'll do my best."

"I need to know where Thomas is these days. Shirley mentioned that you keep records of everyone in town."

I wondered if that meant he'd known about me moving to Divot? I pushed the thought away. It didn't matter at the moment.

"I sure do. And are you talking about that ex of yours?"

I bobbed my head. "The same one."

"Well now, it's been a while, but last I heard he was in Oklahoma. Same as your boy."

I tensed at the mention of Jimmy. "You're sure?"

"Again, it's been a few years since I asked around, but yeah, I'm sure that's what was said."

"Who said?"

Sr. gave me a soft smile. "Now, I can't tell you that. A man can't reveal his sources."

If there was one thing I remembered well about Tim, the old man was a vault. He kept secrets better than anyone else in town. A surprise really, considering gossip ran rampant in a place like this.

"Well, if you could ask those sources and find out for sure, I would really appreciate it."

"Anything for you, dear. Can I ask why you're lookin' for him?"

"No particular reason." Sr. wasn't the only one who could keep a secret if needed. And when it came to my son, I could do just about anything I put my mind to.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Lex

We walked out of the service station and headed back toward Wickedly Delicious.

"Do you think he'll find out where Thomas is?" I asked once we were out of earshot of the place.

"If anyone can, it's Senior. He's the male version of Bee. I swear those two were cut from the same cloth when it comes to finding out information."

"I don't think there's anyone in this town who doesn't gossip," I mumbled under my breath.

Nancy laughed. "It's always been that way. It was one of the reasons I had to leave after Thomas cheated on me. The last thing I wanted to be was the topic of the gossip chain."

I put my arm around her shoulder and pulled her into my side. "You don't have to worry about that with me." I would make sure she never had to deal with any negative gossip again.

A minute later, we walked into Wickedly Delicious and Nancy stopped dead.

"Wow," was all she said, and I tried looking at the shop from a newcomer's point of view. Most bakeries were soft and inviting colors, but Maisie's place was nothing like

that. The woman lived for Halloween, and, based on the décor, it was evident she carried that love into her shop.

Black and dark purples were the main colors. Even the cookies leaned toward a horror movie as they were knife cutouts.

"I'm in love with this place already," Nancy whispered. "And I haven't even met the owner."

"Well, you're about to meet one of her employees, and fair warning, she's the complete opposite of this place."

"Welcome to Wickedly Delicious!" Janie's bubbly voice hit us as soon as we got closer. "Oh, hey, Lex. Maisie saved some orange scones for you in the back. I think she planned to drop them off at the office later, but you're here now, so let me just go grab them."

Janie skipped into the back room—and yes, I mean skipped. The young woman was always full of energy.

"Orange scones saved special for you?" Nancy crossed her arms and popped one brow.

I had to hide a laugh at the little green monster of jealousy she was trying not so successfully to hide.

"Yeah, it's the only thing from here I pretty much eat. When I was helping Maisie and Hendrix with Olivia, Maisie quickly discovered they were my favorite and would bring them over."

I could tell the moment what I said sank in. "You were there to help Olivia."

"Every day. For a while I was the only one she would talk to, and that was rare. Most of the time we just sat in silence."

"I bet you loved that." Nancy bumped my side with her shoulder in a teasing way.

"More like I understood her need to do it. I was the same way after my parents died. I didn't want to talk to anyone, but everyone insisted I should. The more they pushed, the quieter I became, until I barely ever spoke. It drove everyone crazy. I didn't want that for Olivia."

"And your silence helped her more than talking ever could," Maisie interrupted from the other side of the counter.

I turned to the one woman in town I actually considered a friend. "Hey, Maisie."

"Hey, Lex. It's good to see you. I was starting to think you skipped town?" I didn't miss the disapproving look on her face.

"I almost did," I told her honestly.

"Did Olivia know?" When I nodded my head yes, Maisie just shook hers. "Of course she did. If there was anyone you would tell, it's my niece."

"Hi, I'm Maisie. You must be Nancy. I've heard at least a dozen people in here today talking about how you're back in town." Nancy groaned and Maisie chuckled. "I know the feeling."

"How bad was it?" Nancy asked.

"I mean, I'm not sure what drove you out of town, but everything I heard today was good things."

People are excited you're back. I will warn you though that most of the talk was about you and Lex.

" Maisie wiggled her eyebrows, and from the corner of my eye I could see the faintest of pink tinge Nancy's cheeks.

"So much for not having to worry about that with you," Nancy threw my words back at me.

I was quick to clarify though. "I just meant no negative gossip. I can't help with the rest. This town seems to thrive on other people's love lives."

Maisie leaned on the glass case. "Don't I know it. I found the best way to deal with it is to control the narrative. When I started banging Hendrix, I made sure to go straight to the gossip queen herself and give all the juicy details."

Nancy laughed so hard she had to double over and clutch her sides. It took a few moments before she was able to control it enough to speak, and even then she wiped a tear from her eye. "Oh my God! I never would've thought to do that. It's genius."

"Believe me, it took some time for me to realize I could do that, but I was sick of all the talk in town about what I did."

I expected Nancy to ask what that was, but she proved she didn't care to join in on the gossip. That, or she would ask me later when it was just the two of us.

"So what brings you into my shop today? Just browsing or . . ."

"Your scones," Nancy offered. "Maverick brought me some the other day and they were so delicious I just had to stop in and see what else you had."

"Maverick, huh?"

I shook my head and Maisie got the message, because she changed the subject quick. "So which ones are your favorite? I know Lex here loves the orange, but how about you?"

"The blueberry."

"Coming right up."

I watched as Maisie packed up the scones, plus a few other desserts I was sure Nancy might love. By the time it was all said and done, we were leaving with two big boxes of stuff.

"It was nice to meet you, Maisie."

"Nice to meet you too. We'll have to get together sometime outside of this place."

"I'd like that." And based on Nancy's smile, it was a genuine response.

Once we were back out on the sidewalk, Nancy looked down at the boxes. "I can't wait to try all this stuff. No wonder my ass is so big."

I placed a hand on her arm, stopping her from walking any further. "You say that like it's a bad thing. I happen to like that ass of yours."

Nancy flushed but didn't have a response, so I took pity on her and changed the subject. "Would you like to meet the rest of my friends?"

"As long as I don't have to share those." She pointed to the boxes in my hand.

"Absolutely not. They can get their own." I winked at her and started walking back toward the Jeep, where I hid the boxes in the backseat before taking her hand and leading her into my office.

"Hey, Lex. Hi, Nancy." Annalee greeted us as soon as we walked through the door.

Nancy groaned. "Does everyone in town know I'm here?"

Annalee answered before I could. "Sorry! Something similar happened to me when I came to town. People I didn't know were using my name. It was a bit strange. I swore I wouldn't become like them, and yet here I am, doing the same."

"It's okay." Nancy sighed. "I actually know who you are as well. Maverick likes to keep Wes apprised of everything going on, so I heard about you when you got hired."

"All good things I hope."

"Yes, all good things. I believe the term Maverick used was 'godsend.'"

Annalee laughed. "I can see that. You would swear having to answer the phone and greet people was a form of torture the way these guys described it."

Nancy looked over at me but I held up my hands. "Don't look at me. I wasn't here when Maverick started the place. I came to town the same time as Annalee."

And thank heavens for that, because there was no way I would have acted as a secretary. Not even for a minute.

"Is everyone in the back?" I asked Annalee.

"They are. And probably watching us right now."

The glass behind Annalee's desk was a one-way mirror. Those back there could see out, but people in the reception area couldn't see in. I didn't have the slightest idea how Annalee worked like that every day. It would've driven me crazy. "Maverick really needs to replace that already."

"I don't think Owen will let him. He likes knowing I'm safely within his line of sight."

I didn't blame my friend. Not after what happened to her. It was just a good thing Maisie was there to kill the man who went after Annalee.

I grabbed Nancy's hand and escorted her into the back room. Sure enough, all six of my friends were watching the interaction out in the lobby.

"Don't you all have something better to do?"

Owen was the first to answer. "Nope. I could stare at Annalee all day."

I shook my head and made the introductions. By the time I was all done, Nancy looked a little nervous.

"Nice to meet you all." Nancy's voice was much softer than normal and even cracked a little when she spoke.

I couldn't even begin to understand what that was all about. I hadn't seen Nancy nervous in all the time since I'd met her. I was about to ask her what was going on, but Nolen spoke up.

"How did your conversation with the townsfolk go in regards to Thomas?"

I should've known Maverick would bring them in eventually. "Good. According to Tim Senior down at the service station, Thomas was last known to be in Oklahoma."

"I can work with that." Nolen turned back to his computer and started typing feverishly. The rest of us left him to his work.

"Did you get to talk to anyone else?" Maverick asked.

"Shirley over at the antique shop. We were really good friends in high school and I felt comfortable asking her. She's the one who directed us to Tim Senior."

Maverick nodded at Nancy's explanation. "I thought for sure you would've gone straight to Bee."

"That was my first guess, but I let Nancy take the lead. Besides, if I asked Bee, the rumor mill would've gone into full effect, and I wasn't sure I was ready to deal with that."

"Ain't that the truth," Easton grumbled. He would know better than anyone how quickly the gossip train could leave the station in this town.

"I'll keep her in mind as a last resort," I advised them, "but in the meantime, we're going home."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Nancy

I paced around the small apartment. Something was bothering me, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

"We need to go to Oklahoma," I blurted out as soon as Lex stepped out of the steaming bathroom.

"Ummm, all right. Is everything okay?"

I chewed on my lip. "No, it's not. I don't know what's wrong, but something is. I need to get to Oklahoma and make sure Jimmy's okay."

"Then we leave now."

And just like that, Lex agreed. He didn't ask for further explanation. He didn't push it off until tomorrow or even another day. I voiced a concern and Lex was willing to drop everything to make it happen. I never thought I would find someone like that.

"Thank you."

"Baby, you don't need to thank me. If you feel something is wrong, then we need to go check it out. My whole life I've followed my gut instinct. I wouldn't expect anything different from you."

I walked straight over and planted a kiss right on the man's lips. I could feel him get hard against my stomach, so I backed up with a chuckle. "We don't have time for that right now."

"Woman, you're the one who kissed me," Lex growled as he stomped off to get dressed.

"Whoops." I said the word but didn't actually mean it. I liked knowing that it only took a kiss to turn him on.

In less than ten minutes, Lex was dressed and we were on the road. I called Jimmy as soon as we hit the highway.

"Hello?"

Shit, I kept forgetting I didn't have my phone, so every time I called Jimmy, it was from a different number. "It's me again."

My son huffed. "You really need to either get a new phone or come get yours already."

"That's actually why I'm calling. We're on our way to see you."

"Who's we?"

I rolled my eyes at my son's tone but didn't miss the smirk on Lex's face from the corner of my eye. He was finding this amusing.

"Lex and I."

"Okay." My son almost sounded relieved by my answer.

"Have you heard from your sister lately?"

Jessie was going into her senior year of college and interning over the summer to gain some extra experience before graduation. Normally we spoke several times a week, but without my phone, it had been too long.

"Not since she called your phone and I told her you left it here."

At least she had checked in. That was all I cared about.

"I'll call her when I get there. I'll see you in about eight hours."

We said our goodbyes and I ended the call. "I should've grabbed another phone when I was at the office yesterday."

"Wes has extra phones lying around?"

I nodded my head. "You mean Maverick doesn't?"

I laughed when Lex merely shrugged his shoulder. "I guess I never thought to ask."

"I can't tell you how many times one of the guys broke a phone while on an assignment. It was either keep them on hand or listen to them whine when they had to wait for a new one to come in. I got sick of listening to it and learned to order in bulk."

"Huh." Lex scratched his beard. "That actually makes sense."

The rest of the drive continued in a similar fashion—completely opposite from the last time we'd made the same drive. I learned so much about Lex during our trip, it felt like I had known him forever.

By the time we got to Jimmy's apartment building, it was super late. Nathan was once again manning the front desk when we walked through. I apologized for running out before I could see his mother, but promised to make it up to her.

I felt bad about knocking on Jimmy's door so late, but it was obvious when he answered a moment later that he was up waiting for us.

"Shouldn't you be resting your leg, not hobbling around on crutches?" I asked with concern as soon as we walked through the door.

"I knew you would be coming soon and I figured you didn't have your keys on you."

He would be correct. They were in my suitcase in his guest room. A lot of good that did me.

"How are you feeling?" I directed Jimmy over to the couch and sat next to him after he was fully settled in.

"Some hours are better than others. I know I was talking about leaving the NFL, but I didn't want it forced on me."

"You're not leaving. Just on the injured reserve for the time being. This time next year, you'll be good as new," I reminded him.

He didn't look convinced. "That's if the Pioneers even want to keep me."

"Wait, what are you talking about?"

Jimmy sighed. "There's talk of a trade."

I was taken aback by his response. "Already? I thought you signed a three-year

contract?"

"I did. But that's what happens when you have an awful season and then wind up spending the next season on the injured reserve. I'm not exactly useful to them."

"Is there any chance the letters could be coming from someone on the team?" Lex spoke up for the first time.

"You don't think ...?" I mulled over the suggestion, but it didn't feel right. My gut was telling me it was Thomas.

"I'm not sure what to think. We have no indication it's Thomas other than the fact that what's in the letter is similar to what he said to you."

"That's why I need to get the other letters." I turned my attention back to Jimmy. "Do you think you can ask Fred if he can have them delivered here?"

"Yeah, I'll text him right now."

Jimmy pulled his phone out of his pocket and his fingers flew across the screen. "Done."

A few seconds later it dinged with a response. "Fred said he will deliver them himself first thing in the morning."

I knew there was a reason I liked the guy so much.

"Okay, thanks. I think once I read them all at the same time, things will make a little more sense."

"I'm not so sure." Jimmy sat further back on the couch. "A lot of them are just the

ramblings of an unhappy man."

"You mean an unhappy father," I clarified, but Jimmy frowned.

"I haven't thought of him as my father since the day he left us. He lost that right. If it is him, I hope like hell someone takes care of him."

I had a feeling I knew what he meant by take care of. I was now regretting all the times I let him spend at my office with Wes and the guys.

"You don't talk like that. The last thing people need to hear is you wishing your father was dead."

I knew that smirk. "I never said dead, Mom. That was all you."

Damn my kid for being so smart. I needed to change the subject. "What did the team doctors say about your injury?"

"Pretty much the same thing the doctors at the hospital said. I'm looking at a minimum of nine months before I can play again, and that's if everything goes right. If I'm lucky, I'll be ready in time for training camp. If not, definitely by the start of the regular season."

I chewed on my lower lip. "Any more talk of trades?"

As much as I wanted my son closer, he loved playing for the Pioneers. And I could bet he wanted another shot at proving he was the player they first scouted.

"Nah. I don't think they want the negative publicity. It would look bad if they got rid of someone who got hit by a car while being gunned down."

I didn't care what reason they gave as long as they kept him on until his contract was up.

"Well, I think it's time for bed. We've kept you up long enough."

Jimmy refused to let me or Lex help him up, so I had to sit back and watch him struggle a little. "Goodnight, Mom. Night, Lex," he said once he was standing and his crutches were under his arms.

I waited until Jimmy was down the hall before I looked back at Lex.

"You're sleeping in bed with me tonight. Don't give me lip. I promise to get up if I hear you have a nightmare, but I refuse to sleep alone. Not when I feel like my whole world is about to blow up."

For once, Lex didn't argue.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Lex

"What do you mean you can't find him? I thought you could find anyone. We even gave you the state he's located in."

My phone call with Nolen was getting more frustrating by the second.

"I can if the person uses a digital footprint, but Thomas has gone off the grid. No cell phones, no credit cards, the bank took his house, and he no longer has a job. It's like the man decided to drop off the face of the earth after losing everything," Nolen explained.

"Are we sure he's not dead," I asked.

If only we could be so lucky.

"No death certificate on record, and no one reported missing or in hospitals matching his description. Well, the one I got off his license anyway. I asked the local police department to keep me in the loop, but so far nothing."

Thomas really had fallen off the face of the earth.

"Are you sure he's even our guy?"

I ran my hand down my face in frustration.

"As sure as we can be. Nancy read all the letters and she's confident it's him.

I can't think of any reason someone else would single Jimmy out.

I mean, I understand irate fans, but he wasn't the only reason the Pioneers didn't make it to the playoffs. Football is a team sport."

"True, but social media hyped him up as the player who would change everything for the team. That's a lot of pressure to put on one person. Especially a rookie."

Nolen wasn't wrong. But ...

"My gut is telling me it's Thomas, and that thing is never wrong. Besides, if he really did lose his house and his job, he has more reason to hate Nancy for being successful."

"Unbelievable if you ask me. Who wishes their ex and children to a life of poverty?" I had a feeling it was a rhetorical question, but I answered anyway.

"A narcissist, that's who."

"How's Nancy holding up?"

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "As good as can be expected, I guess. Same as me—she knows something is about to happen, but not sure what."

"Like she's waiting for the other shoe to drop," Nolen correctly surmised.

"Exactly. Jimmy isn't leaving his apartment anytime soon. He understands the danger. Besides, his leg leaves him pretty immobile, so it actually works in our favor."

"And what about Nancy's other child? Jessie, right?"

"Nancy spoke to her this morning. She's interning at a doctor's office and taking summer classes. We made her aware of the threats, but not that Thomas is most likely behind them."

I hadn't necessarily agreed with that decision, but it wasn't my call to make.

"You don't think he'll go after her?"

"Nancy thinks he'll continue to focus on her or Jimmy."

Nolen sighed. "I didn't ask what Nancy thought. I asked what you thought?"

I gave myself time to think about it, but I was no clearer on my answer.

"I'm not sure. My gut agrees with Nancy."

Something is going to go down, but I can't figure out what that something is. Nothing points to Jessie. All the letters were mailed to either Jimmy or Nancy. The only threat made was to Nancy. In all honesty, he's so focused on Jimmy, I don't even know if the man remembers he has a daughter."

It was an awful thing to say, but it was the truth. Everything led back to Jimmy and Nancy.

"That might be a good thing for Jessie, then."

I played with my beard. "Yeah, I guess. Did Maverick find anything out from Bee?"

When Nolen came up empty, Nancy gave Maverick permission to question Bee and a

few of the other gossiping ladies in Willow Creek to find out what they knew.

"Other than to say she couldn't stand the man for what he did to Nancy?

" He huffed. "No, not a thing. I guess it was one of those 'good riddance' things.

No one gave Thomas much thought after he left town.

They were just glad he took his negative attitude with him.

Apparently he liked to show up during council meetings just to complain about every little thing.

Bee said he was a nuisance to the town."

"I thought everyone in town wanted her to marry him?" I could've sworn she'd said something along those lines.

"Yeah, well, they must've changed their minds real quick, because not a single person had a nice thing to say about him."

I could understand why. I'd read the letters. The man was vile. If he was that way when Nancy was married to him, I don't know how she lasted as long as she did.

He isolated her, that's how.

"Keep me posted if you learn anything new."

"Will do. And I promise I'm looking. I won't stop until every stone is turned over."

"Thanks, Nolen. I appreciate it."

Now I had to go tell Nancy I had nothing. Not exactly the way I wanted our day to start.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Nancy

Jessie was missing. Her roommate said she never came home last night and Jessie wasn't answering her phone. That wasn't like my girl.

"I knew something was wrong. Why the hell didn't I listen to my instincts?" I asked no one in particular.

"You did listen to them, Mom. You just figured it was me Dad was going to come after, not Jessie. Not once did he threaten her. There was no way for us to know."

I heard what he was saying, but it didn't change the fact that I felt responsible. Jessie was missing, and it was all because I was focused on one child and not both of them.

"Where could he have possibly taken her?" This time I directed my question to Lex and Nolen.

Nolen had flown out as soon as I got word that Jessie hadn't come home last night.

"The local police are out canvassing. They are aware of the situation, but no one has seen him in at least a week. He got fired from his job and the bank foreclosed on his home. The man is a fucking ghost," Nolen responded.

So basically everything he wanted to happen to us was happening to him.

"He's got to make contact at some point, right?" I knew I was grasping at straws, but I couldn't just sit there and do nothing. That wouldn't bring Jessie back to me. "What if we go to her? He couldn't have taken her far."

I hoped not anyway. And without money, Thomas's options had to be limited.

"We can be there in five hours," Lex assured me.

"I want to go," I said with as much conviction as I could muster, "but someone needs to stay back with Jimmy. I'm not leaving him alone."

"Mom, I'll be fine. I can have one of the guys from the team stay with me if that will make you feel better."

I shook my head. "No. It has to be Nolen." I looked at the man and pleaded. "You can stay with him, right?"

"Absolutely. But are you sure you don't want someone else with you and Lex?" He looked concerned.

"There's no time. We need to get going." I couldn't explain why the sudden urgency, but everything in me was telling me we had to move fast.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Jessie

"Who are you?" I asked when the bag was pulled off my head.

I tried to move my arms and legs, but quickly realized they were tied down to a chair.

I felt like I was in a bad B movie with a very low budget, and the actor playing the kidnapper really couldn't act.

The guy didn't even have the sense to cover his face.

That could only mean one of two things. He was either an amateur who didn't know the first thing about kidnapping. Or he planned to kill me.

Time to lay off the crime scene documentaries.

"I'm hurt." The man chuckled and put his hand to his chest. "You don't even recognize your own father?"

I looked at the greasy, semi-short man in front of me and couldn't fathom how he could be the same man I knew as a little girl.

"My father walked out on me when I was a kid. Why would I bother to remember him?"

My mother always said my attitude was going to get me in trouble one day. And when my so-called father's face got beet red like he was seconds away from stroking out, I realized today just might be that day.

"You always did have a mouth on you," he snarled. "I told your mother she should've just swallowed you."

Lovely visual. And I meant that in regards to my mother ever touching the man in front of me, with his shaggy gray hair and splotchy white beard.

His beer belly and slouchy posture did nothing to help his cause.

He was a train wreck with saggy skin. Nothing at all like the silver foxes I saw on book covers every time I went to the bookstore.

"Then why am I here? It's obvious you didn't want me or Jimmy, so why bring me here. I was doing just fine without you in my life."

Better than fine actually. I could've gone the rest of my life without ever seeing my father again and been happy as a clam.

"Exactly," he snapped. "I left your mother destitute. She was supposed to fail. To live on the streets and know that everything was her fault. Not raise a son who went to the NFL and a daughter about to go to medical school."

So he was pissed that Mom made something of our lives after he left us with absolutely nothing? What a piece of shit.

"Sorry Mom didn't suffer like you wanted, but I assure you our childhood wasn't all sunshine and roses. There were times when things were hard and she had to tell us no, but we got through it together. As a family. Something you don't seem to understand

or know a thing about."

"You weren't supposed to get through it," he seethed.

Talk about egotistical. I didn't know what my mother ever saw in him, but there were no redeeming qualities I could find. Maybe he was different when we were kids, but somehow I didn't think so. I barely remembered him, so obviously there weren't any happy memories.

"So what do you plan to do with me? You have to know who Mom works for. There's no way they aren't out looking for me already. And they're going to find me. They always do. And when they do, they're going to kill you."

"Oh yes, the precious Westley," he mocked. "The whole reason your mother has everything she does today. I wonder if she spread her legs for him like she's doing for the current man in her life. She always did need a man to hold her hand and tell her how to act."

Okay, now I was pissed. Before I was just slightly annoyed, but for this asshole to speak about my mother like that?

Hell fucking no. After this asshole left, she did everything on her own.

Wes got her started, but she'd paid every cent back to him and made sure she worked hard to prove she was worth the risk he took on her.

"You don't have the right to say shit about my mother. And there are some men in this world who are nice without expecting anything in return. Wes is one of those guys. Maybe you should take a few pointers from him."

I didn't see the slap coming, but I sure felt the sting on my cheek as my head whipped

to the side, my body straining under the pressure of the rope keeping me anchored to the chair.

I guess my mother was correct and my mouth finally did get me in trouble one day.

"Is that the best you got?" I couldn't help but taunt. I was letting my anger get the better of me, and apparently when I was angry, my mouth had a mind of its own. Who knew? Obviously not me. Until now.

"You little bitch. So much like your mother. You don't know when to keep your mouth shut."

"I'll take that as a compliment," I said before I could think better of it, and unfortunately it earned me another slap—this one much harder than the last. Hard enough that the chair wobbled and almost tipped over to the side. Thankfully I was saved from crashing to the dirty floor.

If I had any hopes of surviving this ordeal, I needed to learn to hold my tongue.

"You never answered my question. What are you going to do with me?"

"You really want to know?" He paused for dramatic effect until I nodded my head yes, because if I were asking, then clearly I wanted the answer. "I'm going to ruin your brother's and your life like you ruined mine, and then I'm going to kill your mother for ever bringing you into this world."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Nancy

"We have to find her."

I was beginning to sound like a broken record, but I didn't care. The thought that Thomas had Jessie was making me sick to my stomach.

"We will," Lex reassured me. "We won't stop looking until we find her."

He held my hand as we drove to the hotel just outside her university. We didn't know where Jessie could be, but I wanted to be close to her last location just in case.

"I just don't understand. If Thomas did take her, then why? She's a broke college student just trying to get by. If Thomas is mad about Jimmy being successful, then taking Jessie doesn't make any sense."

"Didn't you say she got into med school?"

"Well, yeah, but she's not a doctor yet."

But could that be enough for Thomas? Just knowing that she got into medical school. There was no way to know what my ex was thinking. I hadn't been able to figure it out when we were married, and I sure as hell couldn't now.

I was about to say as such to Lex, but my phone ringing stopped me. I didn't

recognize the number, but the area code was Oklahoma, so I quickly answered.
"Hello."

"Well, if it isn't the bitch herself."

I slapped at Lex's arm to get his attention.

"Thomas?"

Lex pulled off to the side of the road and took his own phone out of his pocket.

"Where's Jessie?" I begged.

"I was wondering if you would figure it out. It was the last note I sent, wasn't it?"
Thomas taunted.

"Just tell me where Jessie is." I wasn't in the mood to play his games.

"See, I don't think I will. Not until you answer my question." The prick always did love his mind games.

"Fine, yes," I huffed. "Yes, it was the last note. The one you sent me gave it away."

Thomas laughed. "I knew I made it too easy, but I was getting sick of being ignored. That little bastard wasn't listening."

I was tempted to remind him that little bastard he spoke of was his son, but the man didn't deserve that kind of recognition.

"I answered your question, now tell me where Jessie is."

"You don't make the rules," Thomas snapped. "I make the rules and I'll tell you when I'm good and damn ready."

I'd almost forgotten how narcissistic the asshole was. Everything was about him, and he didn't give a damn about anyone or anything else. I just hoped his procrastination didn't mean trouble for my daughter.

"I'm sorry." I knew how to play his games. I had spent years being trained to do so. But it killed me to do it today knowing what was at stake.

Thomas was back to laughing. A maniacal laugh that reminded me of all the times he'd enjoyed making me feel bad about myself.

"Please, Thomas." I wasn't above begging when it came to my kids.

"Fine. But only because I want to see your face when you see what I've done. Seven hundred fifty Austin Street." He spat the address out. "Come get your little bitch so she can watch me kill you."

Thomas ended the call and I took a deep breath.

"Did he give you an address?" Lex asked as soon as I took the phone away from my ear.

"Yeah. Seven hundred fifty Austin Street." I put the address into my phone's GPS. "It says it's twenty minutes from our location."

"I'll do my best to get us there sooner." Lex gunned the engine. "What else did he say?"

I didn't want to tell him what Thomas said, but he needed to know what we were

headed into. "He wants Jessie to watch as he kills me."

Lex growled. "I'm not going to let that happen."

He white-knuckled the steering wheel, so I reached over and pried one hand off so he was forced to hold mine.

"I know you're not. Everything's going to be okay."

I hoped more than anything that was the case, because I wasn't sure Lex could take any more people getting hurt in his life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Lex

I sped through the streets in an attempt to make the twenty-minute window in fifteen. I had yet to meet Jessie, but if she was anything like her mother, I knew she was a survivor.

Panic tried to take over, though. Thomas's goal was to kill Nancy, and I couldn't let that happen. Not just because I didn't want another death on my hands, but because I wasn't sure what I would do without her. I was quickly realizing I was in love with this woman.

Seconds later, I pulled into a run-down neighborhood and cursed under my breath.

"This is where he's holding my baby girl?"

The address was nothing more than a dilapidated house that looked like no one had been in it in at least ten years.

The shingles on the roof were falling off.

The shutters around the windows were broken.

At least one window we could see was smashed.

The front porch looked like it would fall down the second I stepped on it.

The house needed to be demolished, not housing anyone, least of all Jessie.

"We need to find another way in besides the front porch."

Nancy nodded her head, but her words contradicted her action. "I need to get in to my baby as soon as possible."

"I know you do, but we need to be smart about this. Who the hell knows what kind of surprises Thomas has waiting for us." I turned the Jeep off and turned to her. "Just give me one minute to do a quick three-sixty to see what we're up against."

I waited until I had her confirmation before stepping out of the vehicle. Starting on the right side of the house, I moved with precision. What I found didn't surprise me. More broken and dirty windows.

A glance inside indicated the interior of the house was worse than the outside.

There were holes in the walls. Some parts were even ripped down to the studs like someone had started a renovation project but never finished.

The few walls that were intact had wallpaper peeling off.

Large water stains could be seen on parts of the ceiling, and the majority of the flooring had been torn up.

It wasn't until I made it over to the other side of the house that I found where Thomas was holding who I assumed was Jessie. The girl was a spitting image of her mother, and she was tied down to a chair while her sperm donor paced in front of her.

I was just turning the corner when I heard the squeak of lumber bending under someone's weight.

"Son of a bitch."

I picked up my pace and arrived back up front just in time to see Nancy's back as she entered the house.

The damn woman hadn't waited like I'd asked. I should've known.

Following behind her, I raced up the steps, praying the entire time that the porch didn't give out on me. Thankfully it held strong as I charged through the front door.

"I see you brought a friend." Thomas's voice was cold and empty. "Is this the infamous Westley who kept you from ruining your life like I expected you to?"

"No," I answered for Nancy. "I'm Lex."

"Well, Lex, I'm glad you could join the party. Now you can watch Nancy die, too."

Thomas whipped a gun out of the pocket of his coat and aimed it at Nancy. He wasn't very steady with it, which told me he probably wasn't used to holding one, let alone firing it.

"No one's dying today," I replied confidently.

Thomas swung the gun in my direction. Good. I would rather it on me than Nancy any day of the week.

"That's not your choice. I don't know if you noticed, but I'm the one with the gun, not you."

Oh I noticed. And I wanted to kick myself for not carrying. I relied so heavily on my hand-to-hand combat that it was rare I had a gun on me. Today would've been the

perfect day.

"Why don't you put the gun down and we can talk about this."

Waving the gun around, Thomas started to yell. "I don't want to talk about anything. I want what I set out to do years ago."

"And what's that?" I moved a few steps closer. If I could just get close enough, I could disarm him. Thomas barely looked proficient holding the gun, I doubted he would be able to ward off an attack when presented with it.

"Kill the bitch who stole my life from me."

Everything happened so quickly, my mind was barely able to keep up.

Before he was fully done explaining what he wanted to do, Thomas aimed the gun back at Nancy and fired. My body immediately reacted and charged forward, tackling Thomas to the ground where we wrestled for the gun. It went off a second time before I managed to rip it from his grip.

I could've sworn I heard someone screaming "Mom" but I was too focused on raining down punch after punch on Thomas's face. I didn't let up even when the body beneath me stopped fighting and went slack.

When I finally did stop, I was heaving for air from holding my breath and my fists were a bloodied mess.

"Mom!"

This time, sure of what I heard, I scrambled off Thomas and frantically looked around the room for Nancy. I found her on the floor, blood pooled around her, and Jessie

screaming for Nancy to wake up.

"Untie me, she needs help." I scrambled across the floor to Jessie and did as she asked. As soon as I got her hands undone, we both worked on the knots on her legs.

Jessie shot from the chair the moment she was free and raced straight for her mother.

"Oh God." I slid across the floor until I was kneeling next to a pale-faced Nancy. "Please tell me she's going to be okay," I pleaded, not the least bit caring how pathetic it made me sound.

"I don't know," Jessie wailed as she put pressure on Nancy's right thigh. "I need your belt."

I fumbled trying to get it off, but as soon as I had it free of the loops, I practically threw it at Jessie who caught it with one hand. I watched in horror as Jessie wrapped it around Nancy's upper thigh and tightened it until the bleeding slowed down some.

"Call for an ambulance."

It was a damn good thing Jessie was keeping her head about her, because I sure as hell wasn't.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and dialed 911. When the dispatcher answered the call, I rattled off all the information and begged them to hurry.

"Please be okay," I whispered to Nancy. "Please don't leave me like the others."

My worst nightmare was coming to life as I sat there and watched the woman I loved bleed out.

"I love you," I leaned down and whispered straight into her ear. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you before this, but I love you so damn much. You've made my life better and I don't know how I would survive without you. Please don't leave me."

I continued to plead with her over and over again until the paramedics and police arrived.

Jessie had to pull me off her so that they could work. "You need to let them do their job."

"I can't lose her," I told Jessie. "I know you don't know me at all, but I'm in love with your mother and I can't lose her." Tears shamelessly poured down my face but I didn't have the energy to push them away.

"We're not going to lose her," Jessie said with conviction. "We have to believe that."

I hoped like hell she was right.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Lex

The trip to the hospital was agonizingly slow. As Nancy's daughter, Jessie, was able to ride in the back of the ambulance while I was stuck driving my Jeep. I tried to follow right behind the ambulance, but was cut off at an intersection and hit every red light after that.

By the time I got to the hospital, I parked my Jeep illegally in the drop-off area and raced inside. Jessie met me just inside the doors and it was then I noticed the blood on her hands.

Nancy's blood.

My legs gave out and I fell to my knees right there in the reception area, tears pouring down my face.

Jessie knelt down next to me and put her arms around my shoulders. "The bullet hit her femoral artery. They've taken her into surgery."

My chin hit my chest as the tears continued to flow. I didn't care to stop them. Things were bad. Really bad. The only hope was that we had done enough before she got to the hospital to give Nancy a fighting chance.

A nurse ushered us out of the lobby and into a waiting room where two other families huddled together and waited for news of their own loved ones.

"I need to call your brother and my team," I told Jessie when I finally found my voice.

"Let me talk to Jimmy and explain what's going on."

I nodded, handing over my phone, secretly glad she was taking that responsibility off my plate. And rightfully so. Jimmy was going to be mad I hadn't kept his mother safe. Wes was also right to question me after what just happened.

I listened as Jessie explained the situation to her brother.

I tried my best not to listen to how he reacted, but it was hard not to hear the loud wail as Jessie had to pull the phone away from her ear.

I thought I felt bad before, but it was nothing compared to the guilt that tore through me at hearing that sound.

When she finally got off the phone, I called Wes.

He answered on the first ring. "Tell me you got the bastard?"

Nolen was keeping him apprised of the situation, so Wes knew when we got the call from Thomas.

"I did but . . ."

The words were stuck in my throat.

"But what?" Wes hissed. "Spit it out, Lex."

"Nancy was shot in the process." The words were like glass in my throat. I could feel

them shredding me from the inside out.

"Jesus fucking Christ. How bad? Tell me she's alive, Lex. Tell me she's not dead."

"The bullet nicked her femoral artery. She's in surgery now."

Wes cursed again. "Tell me which hospital she's in and I'll be there soon."

I rattled off the information and was about to hang up when Wes called my name.

"Yeah?"

"This isn't your fault. You're not cursed. Do you hear me? I was wrong for what I said. This isn't your fault and I know you did everything you could to take care of her."

I hung up without saying a word. The truth was I wasn't sure I believed what he had to say. I was cursed. Those I cared about always got hurt. Nancy was yet another person to be affected by it, but I was selfish enough not to want to give her up.

I was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Several hours later, the doctor finally came out to let Jessie know that Nancy was out of surgery but currently in ICU. She had lost a lot of blood and would need some time for her body to heal.

Wes and my teammates had shown up pretty quickly. Apparently Wes had several pilots in his employment who were more than happy to get him and my team here. Shortly after that, the men and women from Wes's employment also showed up. The waiting room was full of people who cared deeply for Nancy.

The only people we were waiting on were Jimmy and Nolen, who were forced to drive down.

I knew the moment Jimmy hobbled in on his crutches that things were about to get worse.

"You!" He headed straight for me. "You were supposed to keep her safe. Does this look like she's safe?" Jimmy yelled.

I flinched at his accusation knowing full well he was right.

Wes stepped in to defend me. "Back off, Jimmy. This wasn't Lex's fault."

"It's both of your faults," Jimmy continued to holler, turning on Wes. "You were supposed to protect her too. Where were you while my mother was getting shot, huh? Not protecting her like you always said you would."

"You know damn well where I was, Jimmy. I was with my family. They needed me."

"What about us?" Jimmy tapped on his chest. "We were supposed to be your family, too. But the one time my mother needs you, you're nowhere to be found."

"Jimmy, stop." Jessie pushed her way through the crowd of men and got in her brother's face.

Well, as close as she could to it considering she was nearly a foot shorter than him.

"No, I won't stop. Mom always told us we could depend on Wes, but look where that got us. Then there's this guy." He pointed to me. "Promised to keep Mom safe."

"I'm sorry." It was the best I could offer, because I knew he was right.

"No. Don't you dare apologize." Jessie looked at me and then back to her brother.

"Our father shot Mom. He had the gun trained on Lex and then at the last second swung it toward Mom and just fired.

No warning. No time for Lex to do anything.

This wasn't Lex's fault. He did everything he could to keep her safe. "

I watched the fight leave Jimmy's body. He physically sunk further down on his crutches. If it weren't for them, I was sure he would've fallen to his knees. Just like I did earlier.

"This wasn't supposed to happen." A tear slid down Jimmy's cheek. "If I had just quit the team like he asked, this never would've happened."

"You don't know that." Maverick stepped up and spoke. "There's no guarantee your father would've accepted that. He didn't just want to ruin your life, but your mother's as well."

"He wanted to kill her in front of me," Jessie cried. "That was what he told her on the phone before she showed up. I don't think you quitting would've done any good."

"It's no one's fault but Thomas's," Falcon boomed. "May he rot in hell."

Everyone in the room nodded at the man. Even Jimmy seemed to bolster from the statement. Neither Jessie nor Jimmy appeared bothered by the fact that Falcon just said their father should rot in hell.

Silence fell throughout the room. We were all waiting for news that we could go back and see Nancy. It wasn't coming fast enough. I was starting to get antsy when

everyone's attention suddenly shifted over to the door.

"Lex Holland." A nurse in blue scrubs called my name.

"That's me." I pushed my way through the crowd until I was standing in front of her.

"Nancy's asking to see you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Nancy

My leg hurt like someone was stabbing it with a million little needles as I waited for the nurse to bring Lex to me from the waiting room. I knew as soon as I woke up from the anesthesia and remembered what happened that I needed to see him first.

Lex would be blaming himself. Re-erecting the walls I'd carefully knocked down when it came to him feeling like he was cursed. This wasn't his fault. If anyone was to blame, it was me. I never should've ignored his directive and gone into the house before him.

I knew better. Wes had taught me better. And yet, the first mention of my daughter being in danger, I threw all caution to the wind. I wasn't saying I deserved to be shot for my actions, but if only I'd listened, the outcome might've been different.

Something I fully planned to remind Lex of just as soon as he came in.

Seconds later, I heard the heavy footfalls in the hallway and knew without a doubt it was him. Sure enough, Lex walked in just shortly after that, and I made sure to hide the pain as he rushed to the side of my hospital bed.

"I'm fine," I reassured him as he laid his head on my chest. Running my fingers through his hair, I did my best to show him I was all right.

"You were shot. That's the opposite of fine," Lex argued, but he wouldn't look at me.

"I was supposed to keep you safe and look what happened."

I tugged on his hair until he looked up at me.

"This isn't your fault. Do you hear me? This didn't happen because you're cursed or because you think you deserve it after what happened to you while you were captured.

This is Thomas's fault, and maybe a little of mine.

I knew better than to run in without you, but I did it anyway. "

"Don't you dare blame yourself," Lex growled.

"Take your own advice," I threw back at him.

He had the decency to look ashamed at my remark. "I was so scared I'd lost you. I was worried I was going to have to watch you die like I watched my parents."

"Never." I knew I couldn't promise that, but in that moment, I was doing it anyway. Lex needed it, and I wanted to give it to him.

"You can't know that." He played with the thin hospital blanket. "Today proved that anything can happen."

I jerked my head back and forth, something I quickly realized was a bad idea when my vision swam and my stomach flip-flopped. Obviously it was too soon for such sudden movements.

"Yes, things can happen, but it also depends on how we react. I reacted badly when I stormed in. Jessie did an amazing job stopping the bleeding. The doctors said if it

wasn't for her putting a tourniquet on my leg, I would've died."

I regretted my words when Lex closed his eyes and shuddered at the thought.

"I didn't though. I'm alive and I'm well."

"You have a bullet hole in your leg," he reminded me.

I didn't have to look down to know that was true. I felt the pain despite trying to block it out.

"I'd like to think of it as a battle scar."

That got me a small laugh. "One hell of a battle scar, don't you think?"

I shrugged like it was no big deal. "I just wanted to be cool like the rest of you."

That time I earned more than just a little laugh. I got a full-blown belly laugh with Lex's head thrown back and all.

I waited until he was done before saying, "I like when you laugh. You need to do it more often."

"I haven't had a reason to laugh in a long time, but something tells me my future is going to be full of it."

I could feel the smile stretch across my whole face. He was seeing a future with me, which reminded me ...

"While I was bleeding out in that house?—"

Lex cut me off with a groan. "Don't remind me."

"No, I'm not trying to, but I thought I heard you say something to me and I wanted to know if you really said it or if my delusional mind was playing tricks on me."

"What do you think you heard?"

He was going to make me say it, the jerk. I could tell by the small upturn of his lips.

"Did you tell me you loved me?"

Lex gave me a serious look. "If I did, would you have said it back?"

My heart sped up.

Holy shit! I hadn't been hearing things. Lex really did love me. "Yes, I absolutely would've said it back to you."

Lex leaned in so his lips were just a hair's breadth away when he said, "I love you very much. And I'm sorry it took until you were lying in a pool of blood for me to tell you."

CHAPTER THIRTY

Lex

"You're supposed to be taking it easy." I rushed over to help Nancy get out of the chair she'd just sat down in barely ten minutes earlier.

"I can't just sit here and do nothing while you straighten up my house."

Since coming home from the hospital, I've spent every night at her house and in her bed. Most nights I barely slept. Sometimes because I was nervous about my night terrors, and other times because I needed to watch her breathe while she slept.

Ever since the shooting, I had the irrational fear that I would wake up one morning with Nancy lying dead in bed with me. I knew it was unlikely. The doctors expected her to make a full recovery, but the fear was still there.

My therapist said it was because I'd already lost so many people in my life that I was afraid to lose more.

That session had gone splendidly when I told the therapist, "No shit. Why the hell am I paying you to tell me what I already know?" If it weren't for Maverick and Nancy pushing me to attend the sessions and get help, I would've ended them that day.

Instead, I pushed on. Twice a week I was seeing the therapist. Until I got a handle on my sleep. I didn't know how long it would take, but I was determined to be able to sleep a full night next to Nancy without worrying that I would wake up with my

hands around her throat.

"You relax. I'll handle the cleaning," I said after I had her back on the recliner.

"Move in with me and I won't mind you cleaning the house."

I stopped in my tracks. This wasn't the first time we'd had this discussion, and I knew it bothered her that I was still living out of my backpack.

"I told you I'll move in just as soon as I have my night terrors under control."

I could see the agitation clear as day on her face. "How can you get them under control when you spend most of the night staring at me?"

I leaned the broom against the wall and plopped my ass on the edge of the recliner. "I watch you sleep because I need to know you're still breathing. You said you understood that."

Nancy sighed. "I do understand, and I know you're speaking to the therapist about it, but I'm worried about you. It's been two weeks. How long can you go without much sleep?"

I was wondering the same myself. I had to be hitting my limit soon though. It was getting harder and harder to stay awake at night. But every time I closed my eyes, my mind would start going a mile a minute.

"I guess we'll find out."

Nancy looked like she didn't much care for that answer, so I changed the subject. "How are Jimmy and Jessie doing?"

Jessie had decided to take some time off for the summer to spend it with her brother as he recovered. Luckily, the team doctor offered to let her continue her internship with the team.

"I'm pretty sure Jimmy is going to strangle his sister, but otherwise good. Jessie is getting along with the team—a little too well according to Jimmy—and he's healing nicely. It's going to be a long nine months if Jessie chooses to stay with him."

I made a mental note to give Jimmy a call and find out what Jessie was up to. I didn't care that she was going to be twenty-two soon, she needed to keep her head focused on school and less on the football players.

"Do you think she will?"

Nancy fiddled with the hem of her shirt. It was a rare act of nervousness, so I took her hand in mine.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm afraid she's going to follow in my shoes."

I gave her a questioning look because I truly didn't understand what she meant by that.

"Thomas wasn't always the asshole he turned out to be.

" She rolled her eyes. "Okay, he probably was, but he hid it well.

Especially when we first started dating.

I was convinced he was this amazing guy who loved me and wanted the same things I

did.

I had my choice to go off to college, but instead, I got married.

I don't want Jessie to make the same mistake.

If the only reason she's staying in Oklahoma is because of some boy, then I would rather she didn't."

Now her need to keep busy made sense. Even though she feared Jessie was making a mistake, she was trying not to interfere in her daughter's life.

"We don't know that's what she's going to do." I did my best to ease her mind. "And if she does decide to stay, then we have to hope she's got a good head on her shoulders. She was raised by you, baby. Jessie's smart. She's going to make a smart decision."

At least I hoped that was the case. Otherwise I would be kicking some guy's ass for hurting her. I didn't care that I'd only known Jessie for a few weeks, we'd bonded in that hospital while waiting for her mother, and that wasn't something that could be broken easily.

Nancy

"You know when you said you only had clothes, I didn't think you meant it would all fit in two drawers." I looked down at the large dresser I'd been prepared to clear half the space out of, but it turned out not to be necessary. "Your stuff doesn't even take up the whole drawer space."

It was a little sad to think that everything Lex owned could fit in one small backpack.

Lex barely looked at the clothes and shrugged. "I never needed more than that."

"And now?"

Lex was moving into my house—and not to sleep on the couch or to crash on a spare bed. He was permanently living with me, and I wanted to make sure he was still okay with it.

"I told you I want to be here," he was quick to reassure me. "Does my lack of a wardrobe bother you?"

"I wouldn't say it bothers me. I just want you to be comfortable here. I know you say you want to be here, but if you feel the need to change anything or add, all you have to do is tell me. I'm not attached to any of it."

That wasn't true. I was attached to plenty. But for Lex I would make a few sacrifices. If this was going to be the first home he ever lived in, I wanted him to be happy with it.

Of course Lex called me out on my bullshit. "That's not true at all. You love several pieces of furniture here. Especially the oversized lounge chair where you like to read at night."

He had me there. That lounge chair was the most comfortable thing I'd ever sat on. And now that I knew Lex could fit on it with me, it was even better.

"Okay, fine. I would be a little sad if that went, but this is your house now too."

He wrapped his arms around me and looked down into my eyes.

"I can't remember the last time I had a possession other than my clothes and my Jeep.

I promise, if I want to get rid of something or buy something, I'll let you know.

But please know I'm going to be fine. You need to stop worrying so much. "

Easier said than done.

"That's exactly why I want this to be perfect for you. I don't want this to just be another place you sleep but secretly take a bag with you every morning when you leave. Don't think I didn't notice you doing that for the first few weeks after I got out of the hospital."

At first it bothered me. Then his therapist explained that it was a habit Lex had to break and wanted to break. There were just other things he had to work on first. His nightmares for example. And, thankfully, he was doing better with them.

Like I suspected, the lack of sleep finally caught up to Lex one night and he passed out hard in bed. Slept the whole night without a single nightmare. That was the real start for us.

I was pulled out of my musings by Lex laughing at my absurdity, and really it was absurd. It wasn't like this was the first time he was leaving clothes here. It was just time we made this whole moving-in thing official. "This isn't just another place to rest my head. And you want to know why?"

"Why?"

"Because I'm falling asleep with you in my arms. I don't care where I sleep as long as I'm doing it with you."

I melted into him and rested my head on his chest. "And this is why I love you so much."

"I love you too."

Aaron

I walked by the clothing boutique on Main Street and looked to catch a glimpse of Valerie just like I'd done every day for months.

Ever since the town put on that stupid speed dating and I found out Valerie was actively looking for someone in her life.

I thought that night had been my chance. So what if I hijacked her date with someone else. I was so sure she would see how serious I was about her, but all I managed to do was blow it.

Again.

Forty-one years of loving that woman, and all I ever did was mess things up.

I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought giving her the chance to experience life before settling down was better.

I thought going off to serve my country and proving I could be a good man was the right choice.

I had hoped the continuous letters back and forth would be proof enough that I wanted her to wait for me.

I assumed wrong.

Now I was back in town and determined more than ever to get Valerie to see me. And I didn't care who I had to go through to make that happen.