



Hemingway's Creed (Shiver of Chaos #2)

Author: *E.M. Shue*

Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Since the day she left me, I've believed that all women are users and deserters—a creed I've held to fiercely. Love is a luxury I've sworn off.

When Blythe and I are both named as guardians to our young godson, I find myself grappling with my emotions. I'm still drawn to the woman who shattered my heart. But the Blythe I once knew is gone. Transformed by tormenting hardship, she bears physical and emotional scars deeper than my own.

When her new job takes her to a book signing in Texas, I decide to follow along because something is in the shadows. Something dark and sinister is following my woman. I will obliterate those who caused her pain, and those responsible for the deaths of my closest friends. Amidst the chaos of retribution, questions plague my mind. Is it too late for Blythe and me to find our second chance? Are we beyond repair?

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PROLOGUE

Warm, sticky blood seeps from my body, trailing down my exposed flesh. I groan in pain as I lie on the cold, wet beach. I can feel my life—and my unborn child's—slipping away with each drop oozing from my wounds. My throat aches from where they choked me until I lost consciousness. It was their final act before leaving me here to die.

I look up at the sky, the sound of ocean waves crashing against the rocks in the distance filling the air. The surf washes over the sand as the tide comes in, and I feel the water creeping over my feet. I'm not going to make it, and that would be okay with me. I don't think I could live with the weight of my loss or the betrayal to the man I love.

I came to as they walked away. They assumed I was dead, but I wasn't. Not yet, at least. Blood loss, stab wounds, broken bones—by all accounts, I should be dead.

I want to be dead.

As I lie here, I remember the day Reed got on his knee and proposed to me on this very beach. That's why I came here tonight. I wanted to remember that day. I miss him so much. I've been so wrapped up in my emotions lately that I needed to remind myself that him being gone is only temporary.

I know he would have been happy with my news. We would have made a life for ourselves, even if both of our parents didn't want this for us. My foster parents and best friends constantly lectured me on being safe.

Safe?

That's a stupid thought. I wasn't safe, no matter what. Being safe didn't save me from this. I shouldn't have come out here after dark. I should have listened to Rika when she warned me it was too dangerous. Our small town has been growing, and with it, the violence that comes with growing pains.

Now, it doesn't matter. I let the waves and memories wash over me as I wait for death to take me. I just hope and pray that Reed doesn't blame himself, that he can learn to move on. I want him to have a new life. A life where he's happy and married to a woman who will protect his child. He'll make an amazing father. He has the biggest heart.

I've loved him since we were kids. He was my first kiss, my first lover, and the man I gave everything to. As I lie here in my final moments, I know I was loved beyond measure. Isn't that what all people want? To be loved so completely that, in the end, they aren't scared?

I'm not.

I'm ready to die.

"Blythe," Sam shouts.

I try to respond, but my vocal cords won't cooperate. I try to raise my hand so Sam will know where I am, but no matter how hard I focus, my arms won't move.

"I found her," Oliver, Sam's dad, yells. "Oh, dear God, call an ambulance." Something wet plops on my face, and when a shadow falls over me, I realize Oliver is crying. "We'll get you help, sweetheart," he says and touches my shoulder.

The contact is like a jolt of shock to my system, the pain too much to bear, the fear that he might hurt me too. I know it's irrational. I've known Oliver since I was a small girl. He'd never harm me. But I'm still scared of his touch. Of any touch.

I wish I can tell them to let me die, to tell Reed that I love him, and that it'll be okay for him to go on with his life. But all I can do is lie here, slowly bleeding to death.

Sam takes my hand, and I jerk and cry out from his touch. I force myself to calm and squeeze his hand, hoping he'll understand what I'm trying to say. He's always been more of a big brother to me than a best friend. Both he and Rika have been my closest friends for years.

When my eyes close and my hand goes slack, Sam cries out. "Don't do this, Bly," he begs me. "He won't forgive me for not protecting you. He'll never be the same."

It's out of my control. I drift off to a place where I don't feel the chill anymore. I don't feel the pain or loss.

I'm free.

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BLYTHE

NINE YEARS LATER

My phone buzzes from its spot on my notebook. My boss gives me the evil eye as he pauses his speech to the staff. I mute the call, letting it go to voicemail. It's the sixth time today that an unknown number has flashed across my screen. I don't answer calls from unknown numbers. I learned a long time ago not to trust the unknown. It's the only way to keep my secrets safe.

"Again, I want to reiterate that everyone needs my approval before you pursue any stories." My boss continues his reprimand.

Okay, so I was the one who went off the reservation and started researching my own story. It worked out. I didn't lose my job because it turned out to be a huge exposé on a corrupt politician with ties to a local gang. I'm good at uncovering lies. I have a knack for sniffing them out. Maybe it's because of my past, or maybe it's because I'm sick of liars hurting people.

My counselor says it's because of what happened to me. How I was never given justice or closure. She could be right. I couldn't get justice when I was hurt, but now, I'm ready. I'll make them all pay.

I dig for dirt on everyone involved. Each one of them will pay for what they did to Sam and me. No one knows the whole story of what happened that night except for

me and the men who attacked me. Not even my friends who found me know. But I'm a damn good researcher, and I've uncovered information on all of them. I'll end them, destroy their dreams like they did mine.

I wish I could hurt them physically. I've trained to fight and learned to use a gun, but I'm not sure I can kill them. I'm not heartless like them. They left me for dead, only to discover I survived. After that, I had to disappear.

My phone goes off again, breaking me from my thoughts, and again, I send it to voicemail. If it were important, they'd leave me a message, but they don't. I hate when people do that. Why can't they leave a message or text me?

"Hawksley, don't you think you should answer that?" my boss barks at me.

"No, sir."

I power off my phone and turn back to my tablet, ready to dive into my next story. I have several ideas, one of which I shouldn't even consider. I should let it go since it doesn't focus on what's happening here locally. But living in LA, where the latest gossip could be the next bestseller, it's hard to ignore. I've worked for this online magazine for years now, and one thing we're good at is sniffing out a story.

As the meeting concludes, my boss asks me to stay.

"What are you thinking of doing next?"

"I'm still deciding."

He knows I'm lying. When he hired me five years ago as a researcher, he watched me develop into the award-winning reporter I am today. I was a month away from graduating with my master's in journalism when he took a chance on me. At the time,

I worked remotely from Seattle while the business was based in Los Angeles. He knows I'm tenacious and hate to give up.

He just stands there, staring me down.

"Fine. I have a couple of thoughts." I give in.

"I heard you've been asking about some politicians in Rhode Island. Why is that?"

He doesn't know I'm from Rhode Island. No one here does. I moved to Seattle, changed my last name, and had an entirely new identity created to protect myself. Moving here only reinforced that new life.

When I left for Seattle, my doctors in Eastport didn't want me to go. They said I wasn't stable enough, but we had no choice. My attackers had killed someone close to me. I had to leave in order to protect everyone else I cared about. Shortly after we arrived, I met with doctors and surgeons to begin the many surgeries I would need for my recovery. I also learned how to be independent. The hardest part was leaving everyone I cared about behind. I let the man I love think I no longer loved him.

All to save them.

I only had Wayne, now a very good friend and father figure, to help me. He got me set up at a local university, arranging for nurses to take care of me while I healed. He also helped me to get to know the area and learn my new background. He still comes to visit me regularly.

It's taken a lot of therapy for me to learn how to care for myself, but I would still give my life to protect them all. I still put everyone before me. No matter what my counselor says, they will always be my priority. I love them all, and after Sam died, I felt the need to protect the others even more. I harbor so much guilt over his death. It

wasn't an accident that killed him. He died because of me. I took him away from the woman he loved and his newborn baby. Me. I did that. And I'll never forgive myself for it. All because I wanted justice.

Justice will never happen now, at least not the kind I craved. I'll have to do it the illegal way. I'll make them all regret killing Sam and hurting me.

"Well, are you going to tell me?" My boss interrupts my thoughts.

"Not yet. I'm still doing research and making comparisons."

"I've got you set up to attend that romance book signing in Dallas in March."

I start to protest, but he raises his hand to stop me.

"Now listen up. It's time you moved on from all the doom-and-gloom stories. The readers want something fun, and with Monica on maternity leave, you're up. I've already booked your tickets and hotel. Besides, it will get you out of town for a bit, let the heat with the gangs cool down."

"Fine." I turn and head back to my desk.

It's been a long day already, and it's barely noon. Time to turn my phone back on and wake up my computer.

The headlines for Eastport, Rhode Island, stare back at me.

Hometown boy goes big, running for governor at the ripe age of 29.

A full-body shiver runs through me, and the fear I've carried for years crawls across my skin. The anger is there too. I once thought I would settle down in Eastport and

have children after my husband did his stint in the military. But I was wrong. One night destroyed all those dreams and my life. It destroyed the woman I was becoming, leaving the one I am now.

I shake off the thoughts and get out of my head as my cell phone rings. It's an unknown number again.

"What?" I snap. I've had enough. "Can't you leave a voicemail?"

"I'm sorry. Is this Ms. Hawksley?" A woman's voice comes across the line. She sounds so formal, her speech slightly stilted.

"Who is this?" I don't give out any information until I know who it is. I have too much to protect.

"This is Loreen Ambrose with the Rhode Island Department of Children and Youth Services. I need to verify that I'm speaking to Ms. Blythe Hawksley before I reveal any more information."

Memories of DCYF flash through my mind. I remember them coming to check on me while I was growing up. Along with those memories come thoughts of Karyn and Clark. I was a lucky kid in the sense that my foster parents loved me and wanted to adopt me. But the state wouldn't let them. There was some issue with my father never signing off his rights, and he couldn't be found. I barely remember him. All my memories of fatherly love are of Clark. He would help me with my homework, giving me extra lessons so I was advanced in all my classes.

I didn't get away fast enough to protect them. I know their deaths are related to what happened to me. They had wanted to go to the police. They wanted to get justice for me. Instead, I got them killed.

They would never have driven as fast as the sheriff's department claimed. Karyn and Clark were sticklers for the law and rules. I was told their car rolled several times as it went off the embankment, and neither of them had their seat belts on. They had always believed in safety. I was still in the hospital recovering when they were killed.

"Ma'am, are you there?"

I shake off the memories and the pain. It's a pain I've learned to live with. I have to in order to protect all of them.

"Yes, I'm sorry. I am Ms. Hawksley."

"I'm calling to inform you that you've been named as guardian for Hartley Grimes?—"

"What? Where is Oliver?"

My body starts to tremble as the panic hits me. I stand up from my desk and glance around the room. I'm on the 20th floor of a skyscraper in downtown Los Angeles. There is no way they could have found me. Yet, I'm scared. I'm scared that someone I work with has betrayed me. That after all these years, I've finally been found.

People are starting to stare at me. I slowly sit down so they don't think I'm crazier than I am. I don't take my eyes off them or the exit. I need to get out of here. The urge to flee is overwhelming.

"The police were unable to contact you, but they will have questions for you. I'm sorry to inform you that Oliver committed suicide last night."

Her words don't make sense to me. Oliver would have never left Hartley alone. Hartley had already lost his parents. He wouldn't have abandoned his grandson.

“No,” I yell, gaining everyone’s attention again. “It’s not possible. He wouldn’t have done that.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am.”

“Give me your number, and I’ll call you right back.” My hand shakes as I grip the pen, not believing what I’m hearing.

She rattles off her number, and I hang up as she continues speaking. I have to verify if this is true. She could be fishing for information, trying to learn my location.

I move quickly back to the empty conference room, closing and locking the door for privacy. I walk over to the plate-glass windows and look out over the city that has almost become home to me. The sun is shining through all the pollution in the air, causing it to look foggy. I can just make out the ocean in the distance.

I clear my throat. The strain of the stress is causing my voice to get raspier. That wound never fully healed. My throat is permanently damaged from nearly being choked to death. My roommate, Sonja, jokes I could get a job as a phone sex operator, but I hate it. It’s a reminder of what they did to me. I try to calm my racing heart and dial the only number I can. The only person who will know if Oliver is really dead.

“I wondered how long it would take for you to call me,” Wayne says by way of greeting. He should have called me first to warn me. Why didn’t he call me?

“It’s true, then.” A sob rips from my chest. I scream as pain tears through my heart. “I did this.” I cry harder as pounding sounds on the door behind me.

The phone slips from my hands as I fall to my knees. I beat on the glass of the window and wish it would break so I could fall to my death. If I had died that night,

none of this would be happening. Sam would be alive. Oliver would be alive. Hartley would have never lost all his family.

Arms wrap around me, and I scream, jumping away. My body slams into the glass. I still don't care to be touched.

My boss picks up my phone and starts talking, identifying himself and questioning who's on the line.

"I n-need it." My voice cracks as I reach for my phone. My boss hands it back to me. "Please, D-Dad, tell me it's a nightmare. That I'm asleep. It's not real. Just fucking pinch me, already," I yell into the phone. Everyone knows Wayne as my dad, and even though I'm hurting and my mind is reeling, I have to continue our charade. He's now my only contact from my old life.

"It's real. He's gone. I don't believe it. I wanted to call you, but I've been on the line all morning, trying to get things taken care of. Now, get up and be the warrior I know you have become. Hartley needs you. We all need you. It's time." He's referring to the plan we started years ago. Not only have we dug up dirt on all four of my attackers, but we found a couple of other women they attacked too. One died from the attack, and the other ran. We suspect she's in hiding like me. We've found her, though.

"I can't. What if?—"

"You can do this. I know you can, sweetheart. I'm working on getting a private jet for you by the time you get to the airport. I'll protect you. I can hire a company. There's a really good one here now. Come home. Call me when you get a car service to take you to the airport. I'll pick you up when you land. I have to go. I need to find you transportation." He hangs up, and I try to calm my breathing.

I focus on the techniques I've learned to use when the panic sets in. Slowly, I brush myself off and stand up on trembling legs. I take several breaths. Each one is a painful reminder that I can breathe while two more of my loved ones can't.

"I'm sorry, sir. I just learned that a man I was very close to has died. I need to take some time off and go back home for a bit."

"Whatever you need, Blythe. Can I help?"

I shake my head and rush to my desk to grab my things. Once I reach the lobby, I dial the caseworker back.

"I'm so sorry. I'm on my way. Where is Hartley now?"

"He's staying with some friends of his instead of in a group home. The father is a paramedic. Trevor Myer."

Everything in my body freezes at the mention of that name. I stop dead in the middle of the lobby. Memories of the man flash behind my eyes. I couldn't see his face, but I remember his words. I remember his name. He tried to help me that night, but I was too far gone, praying death would take me.

"Ms. Hawksley, are you there?" The woman's voice shakes me from the memory.

"Yes. I'm here. There is a flight waiting for me. I'll be there as soon as I can." My voice is becoming more and more strained.

"Call me as soon as you land."

I add her number to my contacts before continuing out of the building.

The next person I dial is my best friend, Briar. I was seventeen and she was fifteen when we met in college. We were both advanced for our ages, but she's a genius. Now, she helps run a multinational company with another friend of ours back in Seattle. She is also the mother to a young boy. Briar won't tell me who the father is, but I have my suspicions.

I hated leaving Seattle and coming to Los Angeles. But my job brought me here, and I didn't want anyone else to get hurt because of me.

"Hey, girl." Briar laughs as she answers the phone.

I needed her when I didn't want her to be my friend. I had walked away from my best friends back in Eastport, and Briar forced her way into my life. She became very important to me.

"I need your help."

"Anything," she responds, her tone shifting to serious. "You know that."

I clear my throat, trying to calm my nerves. When I get stressed like this, I can sometimes lose my voice completely.

"I need you to do what you do best. Get me all the information you can on those names I gave you years ago. It's time. I'll be on a plane flying back to Eastport."

Briar only knows some of what I went through back there.

"Why? What's changed?"

"Oliver was killed. I need to get to Hartley."

“Get packed. I’ll have a car waiting at the curb for you. They’ll take you to the airport. You have an hour.”

“B-But Wayne is already working on getting me a flight.”

“I can have the jet there in an hour. Call Wayne back and tell him I’ve got this. I’ll get you the password to the online cloud where all the information is stored.” She hangs up.

Instead of heading to the bus stop, I order an Uber to take me to my condo. As soon as I step through the door, the last of my resolve shatters, and panic sets in. I drop to my knees and fall forward. With the little strength I have left, I dial my counselor’s emergency number.

“Blythe?” She answers on the first ring.

I try to speak, but my breathing is ragged.

“Okay. Let’s focus on your breathing,” she instructs, knowing exactly what I need.

I take a deep breath when she tells me to, then exhale. Slowly, she guides me through the anxiety, helping me regain control. When I’m finally able to speak, I pick up the phone and rise from the fetal position I collapsed into on the floor.

“I can talk now.”

“It’s been a couple of years since you’ve gotten that bad. What’s going on?” she asks, and I explain what happened. “Going back is going to be hard, but it’s time. You need the closure.” She pauses. “Closure of the loss of both him and the others.” She doesn’t say his name or anything more, but it still tears at my heart. “Use this number if you need me.”

“I will.” I hang up, then rush to get packed.

I glance down at my outfit and decide it will have to do. I’m wearing a black high-waisted skirt with a slit up one leg, a black silky tank top, and a white button-down shirt. A black belt cinches my waist, and the black high heels make my long legs look even longer. I should change into jeans, but I’m too focused on getting to the airport. I need to get to Hartley as soon as possible. My panic attack added a time crunch to everything. The car is probably already waiting for me downstairs.

As I race back to the elevator, I call Wayne to let him know Briar has the jet heading this way. He’s relieved. He was struggling to secure one on such short notice.

Once I’m settled on the private jet, I pull out my laptop and enter the dark web. Briar taught me how to dig for information here. I search each of the men who attacked me and find that most of them are still up to no good.

I access the cloud storage and read through the information Briar has been collecting. One piece of information shocks me. The corrupt sheriff who let my attackers get away with murder is in a special facility for people with severe brain injuries. He was attacked a few years ago by an unknown assailant and left for dead. His son is now the chief deputy sheriff. I briefly wonder if he’s as dirty as his father. It’s a valid thought. After all, he is working for another corrupt sheriff.

The current sheriff happens to be one of my attackers. I remember how he didn’t want to rape me, but he still did. He was also one of the men who held me down as the others beat me.

Wayne and I have decided he’d be the first to fall. It will draw the attention of the state police and force an investigation into the department.

My fingers itch to search for information on Reed, to see what he’s up to, but I can’t.

I promised myself I wouldn't.

I told Reed to move on, but it still hurts that he never tried to find me. He was in the Air Force as a pararescue, but Wayne said he never mentioned me after I'd been gone for six months. Before that, I guess he had been searching, but he gave up. He didn't want anything to do with me anymore. I want him to be happy, and I know I can't be that woman for him. Too much has already happened. But if I found out he really did move on, it would hurt.

When this is all done, if this doesn't go the way I plan, I could face jail time for what I'm going to do. Well, what I want to do. I want these men to suffer the way I did. Just looking at their pictures causes my body to tremble in fear.

I can't stop the memory as it slams into my mind. I can still feel each strike of the bat, breaking my bones. Each one of them forcing themselves on me, penetrating my body. And the blood... The scent of coppery essence fills my nostrils as I recall the innocent life draining from me.

A sob cracks from my throat, and I take a deep breath, pushing down the pain. I close my laptop, feeling the weight of everything, and decide I need to rest. Sleep is my only escape before I get there.

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[2]

HEMINGWAY

I 've been riding for hours, but the winding road and the wind on my face have done nothing to soothe me today. I'm not only physically exhausted, but I'm mentally drained. I'm beginning to think it's time to leave Rhode Island behind. Some days, the memories are almost too much. The reality that my life isn't where I wanted it, where I dreamed it would be, hits harder than ever.

It's December, and I'm still able to ride my bike on days like today. But I can feel the winter weather creeping in. Ever since I shattered my back and hip on a mission, I've been able to feel the weather changing. The doctors said I was lucky to not have spinal cord damage, but sometimes I wish I hadn't made it out of that godforsaken country. Coming home has been the worst part. Everywhere I look, there's a memory of us.

I had to make a run up to another club in Jupiter. They want our club, Shiver of Chaos, to help handle some drug dealers in the area who are selling to kids. Jumper, our sergeant at arms, is at my side, and Grim, one of our enforcers, is bringing up the tail. I'm the acting treasurer, but my real position is secretary of our club. Shiver of Chaos is a bit of a fun name. People who don't know what a shiver is don't understand it.

A shiver is a group of great white sharks.

I get lost in my head for a bit as we ride along the winding back highway toward

Eastport. Normally, I'd have music blaring through my Bluetooth helmet, but today, I just want to ride in silence. Something feels off. It has since yesterday. When we took off on Saturday, I expected to be home by Monday, but now it's Tuesday.

My phone broke on Sunday, and I decided not to rush to replace it. I like the peace and quiet. The other guys have phones if the Prez or anyone else needs me.

Jumper signals for me to stop, and we pull over at the next turnout. He swings off his bike and hands me his cell phone.

"Yeah?" I bark into the phone.

I hate being interrupted. I've always been this way. I like to plan everything out, and when I'm on a task, I hate switching gears. But mostly, I needed the peace of the road to clear my head. This morning, I woke up seeing her face and feeling her body against mine. It's a nightmare I hate to relive. One that I loathe. The guys know to stay away from me if I'm grumpy.

"Don't get pissy with me, asshole. The sheriff and state have been trying to reach you. When I got the call today, they told me that if you don't show up Thursday at noon at the child services building, you will be ruled ineligible." Striker's deep, scratchy voice breaks through the line.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Don't you check your messages?"

"No. My fucking phone broke."

"Goddammit, you asshole. Oliver was killed last night."

The name stops me cold. It's a blow that almost has me staggering off my bike. I kick the stand down and push myself off. I put some distance between me and the guys before crouching down, facing away from them. I'm going to lose it. My throat's clogging up, just like it does when I think of her.

He was my last tie to her. He was all I had left of my old life. There were times when I would see him, and I swear I could smell her honeysuckle scent on him. Now, I'll never have that again. That little hit was like a drug, and I couldn't stop myself from taking it. I was an addict.

"What about Hartley?" I ask.

I grew up with my best friend, Sam—Oliver's son. When Sam died, I was still in the military. I came home after graduating from basic training to Sam's funeral. Hartley, his little boy, was still an infant at the time.

Oliver had waited until I got home to tell me about Sam's death and that she had left me. No one wanted to contact me while I was at basic. I wonder to this day if she left because he died. I knew they were close, but she loved me. She was supposed to be my wife.

I reach into my front pocket, feeling the ring that sits there every day. It never leaves my side. It's my constant reminder to never let my heart go there again. To never trust another woman. They are only good for one thing, and I make sure to wet my dick every six months or so. It's been longer than that recently, but I don't care.

I don't need no bitch. I don't need the drama, having them try to tie themselves to me by becoming my old lady. Nope, don't need that shit. That ring and the damn book are my reminders.

"Did you hear me?" Striker's voice breaks through my thoughts, and I shake my head

to get away from her. Away from the pain of the memories.

“No, what?”

“Hartley is okay. He wasn’t with him. The sheriff is calling it a suicide, but he’s got his second in command running a thorough investigation.”

“Where is Hartley?” I wonder if Wayne has him or if he’s with Trevor. Maybe he’s in a group home. I hope not. I’ve heard how bad those places can be.

“Wayne called me too when he couldn’t reach you. He said the other guardian will pick him up and not to worry about Hartley until he talks to you.”

“Fuck that. I’ll push through and will be there before dark. Striker, do me a favor.” I hate to ask, but I need to know if it’s true. No one will take care of Hartley but me. I owe it to Sam and Oliver.

“Yeah, what?”

“Have your friend do a check for me. I don’t believe Oliver would kill himself.”

Striker, like Gambit, our president, had been in the military too. Both of them were in a dark ops group. They still have connections on the inside, including a computer nerd who could hack the White House, or so I’ve heard.

“I don’t either. You got an idea who would do this?” Striker’s question has me thinking hard. Could she have done this? Is it some kind of revenge? But why?

Like me, Striker grew up in Eastport. We watched our small town transform into a bustling metropolis of crime and drugs. He’s a few years older than me and had already been in the military for a while when Sam died, but he came home for the

funeral. Everyone knew Sam. He was the son of a U.S. Marshal and also a football star. No one was a stranger to him. He's how I met her. She moved in next door to him, and he took her under his wing, like a little sister.

From the moment I met her, she was never like a little sister to me. I knew she was mine. Guess she didn't believe me, though. After she left, I learned about her attack. I've wondered for years if she blamed me for not being there to protect her. If that's why she ran after Sam was killed in a car accident. She's never been back. She didn't even return when her foster parents died in a car accident too. She professed to love a lot but didn't come back for anyone.

You'd think she would care about Sam's son. Hartley was left orphaned when his mother got addicted to drugs and overdosed a year after Sam's death. It's all so tragic. As I replay everything in my mind, I can't help but see the bad luck stacking up. There's too much of it. It's like someone was strategically getting rid of people, but doing it by accident. Could fate really be that big of a bitch? Is it just a cruel coincidence? Maybe that's what Striker's friend should be investigating.

An attack, multiple car accidents, drug overdose, and now suicide. How much can one group go through? What are the odds?

"Have him go wide. Like all the way back to Sam. Maybe this has something to do with Oliver's past in the Marshals."

"Want to go back to Bly?" he asks, and hearing her name is like a knife to my heart, twisted and black. It's been nine years, and I still won't say or think her name.

"Yeah."

"Get your ass home. We need to get this figured out."

Oliver had helped Shiver out several times when we needed it, so we will look into his death too.

“By the way, keep that fucking sheriff away from Hartley,” I growl into the phone.

I know his father was dirty, but I’m not sure about the son. So far, he’s seemed fair. But I don’t trust him. There is something about him I’ve always felt was off, like he’s hiding something. Even in high school, he was just a pretty boy who thought he could get by on his looks and his father’s name. It didn’t help that, even though he was older, he always had his eye on my girl. I didn’t like that. No one was allowed to look at or touch my girl except Sam, and that was only because he thought of her as a sister, nothing more.

“Wayne said he’s blocking the sheriff from questioning him until both guardians approve.” I hear something in his voice, but I ignore it.

“I’m on my way.”

I hang up and hand the phone back to Jumper.

This time when I get on my bike, I’m lost in the memories as I race along the roads toward home.

I remember the day I proposed to her. We were at our favorite beach, and I dropped to one knee. I couldn’t afford much, but I worked my senior year to be able to give her the best. When I slipped the ring on her finger, she looked down at me with those icy blue eyes, her platinum blond hair whipping in the wind. “Yes,” she said, over and over, and I jumped up to kiss her.

We made love in the back seat of my car after I proposed. I needed to seal her to me forever.

I should have married her before I left for basic. The note she sent me was a true Dear John . She said she was too young to get married, tired of living in Eastport, and wanted to move to New York to become a newspaper reporter. She didn't send back the ring until years later.

The day I got it, I was actually thinking about going to look for her. I had searched everywhere but couldn't find her. I'd already done a couple of tours overseas, trying to forget her. I'd tried to kill myself over and over on missions. Living life in extremely dangerous ways. Every jump from a plane into enemy territory felt like a chance, but it never happened.

She had her twenty-first birthday, and I missed it. It was like she'd disappeared off the face of the earth. Then, the ring came to my barracks a week later. It was in an envelope with a brief, typed letter. She'd felt I needed it back because she'd moved on.

It broke me. I was done with thinking of her, but I lied to myself. When I was injured and in the hospital, a nurse told me I was calling out for Bly in me sleep. Just thinking of her name hurts.

I smile as my bike glides around a corner. She loved riding behind me. Her foster parents hated it. Even Sam hated it, but I loved how she would giggle and wrap her arms around me. The first time we rode together, I pulled up to her foster parents' house and Sam stormed out of his house next door.

"Dammit, Reed, you're not really Buzz Lightyear and she isn't Jesse. You need to be careful with her and take care of her." He got right in my face, and for the first time, I thought about hitting him and meaning it. We'd fought before, but never to really hurt each other. He was like my brother. We didn't need to share blood; we just were.

"I know that. But she's mine." I shoved him back. Bly stepped between us, and my

hands went to her hips. “Bumblebee, I don’t want you to get hurt.” I pushed her aside, and when he swung at me, I blocked the hit and shoved him back again. It was his father and Bly’s foster dad who stopped us from really going to blows. She was a year younger than my sixteen, and I promised her foster parents that night that I would wait until she was sixteen before letting her back on my bike. And I did.

On her sixteenth birthday, not only did I take her for a ride on my bike, but I popped her cherry and claimed her as mine forever. I guess forever was only until I was out of sight. Sam’s death will always be wrapped around the fact that Bly left me.

“Hem,” the President’s voice cuts through as soon as I pull off my helmet and shut down my bike. “Get your ass in your truck and go get Hartley. I don’t like what’s going down. We owe it to Oliver to protect his grandson.”

Gambit is a big guy. We might be the same height at six one, but he’s wider than me. He’s got an imposing bulk to him that most men won’t challenge. I’m most men, so I just nod and flip my keys around as I head for my truck. He falls in step with me, matching my pace.

“What did you find?”

I’m gritty and dirty from being on the road, but I’ll go get the boy. It’s only seven in the evening. I know Hartley isn’t in bed yet because it’s winter break. But I still don’t know where he is, and I won’t bring him back here to the clubhouse, where chicks are roaming around.

“He’s staying at Trevor’s. He was there when Oliver was killed, spent the night with Trevor’s twins. But my friend, Browser, is finding some interesting shit. For one, Oliver has a safety deposit box that you are named on. Did you know that?”

I stop and face him. In the setting sun, I can see the questions in his blue eyes.

“I didn’t know. He’s never said anything to me about it.”

“Did you also know that the day after Sam died, Oliver was on a plane out of state? He was only gone for a day.”

“That’s when...” I pause, still unable to say her name.

“Your girl.” He finishes the thought for me. “Yeah, about that.”

“She’s not my girl,” I grit out the words and step toward him.

He doesn’t back down. Prez has been on a short leash lately, itching for a fight, and none of us know why. Striker, Cowboy, and Grim step in between us.

“Hey now, boys, no fighting. We need to think of Hartley.” Striker, the club VP, is bigger than both of us. Cowboy is not as big, but Grim is huge. He’s taller than all of us and lifts weights like he’s got nothing else to do.

Cowboy is currently a nomad and has been hanging with our group for a few months now. Grim is used to dealing with me when I get like this.

I hear the bark before I feel my dog slide into the mix. He’s been more than man’s best friend to me, he’s my PTSD dog. After I was out of the hospital, the nightmares from my captivity didn’t go away. That’s when a local organization helped me get Moose. He’s been by my side for a year and a half now.

As soon as I feel him press his head to the side of my leg, I start to calm. Anger has been one of my worst traits, and he helps me with that, along with the nightmares. I don’t have panic attacks, but I get so angry I don’t even realize what I’m doing.

I step back and take a deep breath. Everyone else stands down, but I can see in

Gambit's eyes he wanted me to lose control. He wanted the fight. Maybe he needs to spend some time with Moose too.

"Take him to Oliver's for the night. I'll send some prospects over to sit on the house and check it over before you get there." Gambit shakes his head.

I wonder what's got him so on edge lately. There have been rumors that he's found himself a woman, but he won't confirm it. I also know a good friend of his from the military is in a lot of trouble, and he's been helping her.

"Okay." I nod at him and open the door so Moose can jump into my pickup. As I close the door, I watch Striker say something to Gambit, who just shrugs, and a funny look crosses his face.

I need to get Hartley before more shit can go down.

Blythe

The plane touches down, and I wait for the doors to open. Nervously, I pull lint from my clothes and slide my hands down my skirt, pressing out the wrinkles. Looking through the window, I see the sedan waiting for me. Standing at the door is the man who's been there for me every step of the way over the past nine years. He helped hide me, was there when I graduated from college, celebrated with me when I got my full-time job, and cheered me on with every award I've received as a reporter. He was with me for every surgery I went through, and he held my hand as I learned to talk about what I went through.

When the doors open, I step out and try to give him a tentative smile, but the tears start. I move down the stairs toward him. It's been about six months since I last saw him. He's gotten greyer in his dark hair, but he's still handsome at fifty-one. His big body pushes off the car, and he takes me in a big hug. I've always felt the love he

feels for me. He never married or had kids. I'm the closest he's ever had to a family, and I was seventeen when he took me in.

"Hello, beautiful. Love you."

"Hello, Dad." I force out the chuckle through the tears. He knows I'm just trying to forget why I'm here.

Calling him Dad has been part of my cover, but it's also turned into a joke between us. He jokes all the time that he never thought he was father material until I came along and made him a girl dad. When he finally releases me, he grabs my bag from the crew and puts it in the trunk.

"Come on. I have a condo set up for you. I called in a favor from a friend at the practice. It's a rental that one of his clients normally uses, but he said it's available for you. It's in a new, secure building, and it'll be safer for you than a hotel. We'll get you a car in the next couple of days too. This year, you get to spend the holidays with me here."

"Okay." Normally, he comes out to see me when he can.

I slide into the passenger seat and pull my seat belt across my body, finally looking at what was my hometown. It's no longer small, though even back then it was growing. As Wayne drives, I see the new, larger hospital and the skyscrapers. Some of them were being built before I left, but now there are more. Another huge structure proclaims that it's the future home of the Eastport Ravagers hockey team. There are box stores and several outlet malls.

"Eastport isn't a small fishing town anymore."

"Nope. It's a metropolis now, rivaling Providence in size."

“A hockey team?”

“Yeah, we’ll see. The owner of the team is dealing with some medical complications. If his son comes home to take over, it will help. We could use it.”

Moving through the edges of downtown, we pass the old brick structures—factories, canneries, and more. Some are dark, others are thriving. A brand-new nightclub is under construction. As we drive through what’s now called the Art district, I spot a bakery being built and then a tattoo parlor. I love where the town is headed and wish I could have been here to see the transformation.

“Weren’t you and Erika Arnold friends? You knew her brother too, right?” he asks.

The memories crash through my mind, and I think of Erika. She was another of my best friends. She was very artsy and wanted to go to art school.

“Yeah.” My voice cracks as I think about hurting her too. I remember Leif was older than Sam, but Erika graduated with him.

“They’ve done most of this. Leif made a lot of money a few years ago and started buying up the old industrial park buildings, converting them into businesses. They are on trend now.”

I turn to smile at him before looking out the window again. I notice we are heading toward one of the neighborhoods that was upper-class when I was in high school. The lawns are large, with big lots and huge houses. Some of the homes sit on the cliffside, overlooking the bay.

“Where are you taking me?” I turn to look at him again, trying to pull myself out of my thoughts about everything I’ve missed.

“I thought you’d want to see Hartley right away. I’ve arranged for you to get him for the next few nights before you meet with the caseworker on Friday.”

“Thank you. Yes, I want to get to him and make sure he’s safe.” I start to settle, knowing I’ll have him close by and won’t have to worry about him.

“I assured her you were stable, that you wouldn’t have him in a hotel and that he knew you. Also, the Deputy Chief Sheriff wants to speak to you. I’ve tried to get him to wait a couple of days, but I can’t guarantee anything with him.”

I think about the fact that I’ve had to watch Hartley grow from a distance, always through Wayne, or when I would meet Oliver and Hartley on vacations. We made it look like we didn’t travel together or at the same time. They never came to Seattle. Instead, I met them at places like Disneyland and Disney World, once in San Diego, and more recently Hawaii. These were all spots no one would guess Oliver was meeting with me, just in case.

I hate that I could have put them in danger, but Oliver and Wayne both felt I needed it after everything else I lost or gave up. I needed some kind of family stability. Even though Wayne tried, he couldn’t always be there for me.

“I want you there if Hartley’s questioned. I don’t trust that department,” I say.

“I will be. Are you ready to start?” He doesn’t have to clarify what he means. I know what he’s asking.

“Yes.” I don’t elaborate further. The less said about the plan, the better. It’s for his protection. No one will know he’s involved too. I’ve done my best to scrub myself from everything, using some of the techniques Briar taught me.

We pull into a driveway with a ball hockey net set up with a trampoline on the lawn.

Bikes are scattered across the driveway, forcing Wayne to dodge them. This is a house made for kids. I wonder if I'll have to consider getting us a home like this too.

"Before you get out, he knows only that Oliver died, not how. Also, we need to decide if you are going to take him back or not. There's a second guardian listed who hasn't returned my phone calls yet, but you'll meet them at your meeting with the caseworker. There are stipulations to your guardianship for both you and the other party," he says in one breath.

The front door opens, and a handsome man steps out. A faint memory flashes, but I can't place him at first. I'm too focused on the way Wayne kept saying "other party." I'm really concerned now. I look between Wayne and the guy.

I open my door and shift my body, letting my heels hit the driveway before I stand up. I make sure the slit of my skirt doesn't show too much leg.

The man takes me in, his eyes moving over my body. I don't feel anything, and when he walks forward, I have another moment of déjà vu. I watch as a beautiful dark-haired woman steps out behind him. She stays back, just watching us.

"Hello, you might not remember me. I'm Trevor Myer." His voice is like a sledgehammer to my memories, and it hits me instantly. I reach for the car, gripping the hood for support. "Whoa, are you okay?" Trevor moves to my side and takes my other hand. It takes everything in me not to pull it away. It's him, the voice from the night the old Blythe died. The woman is now beside us too.

"Is she okay, love?" she asks Trevor.

"I remember you." I push back the tears and hold my head high. I'm stronger now. I give the woman a limp smile, then look at him again.

“It’s okay,” he says and steps back as another vehicle pulls in behind us.

I turn to see a lifted, blacked-out truck. It’s grown darker out, and the headlights are on. I can’t make out the driver.

“Fuck,” Trevor says. “Emmy, go back by the house. This might not be good.”

“Why?” she asks, and I’m distracted from his answer when Wayne blows up.

“What the fuck? I told him to call me,” Wayne exclaims and heads toward the truck.

“Auntie Bly,” Hartley yells, and I turn to see him flying out of the house. He’s tall for a nine-year-old. His blond hair reminds me of his father, and just like every time I see him, it’s a punch to the gut how much I miss Sam.

He plows into me and holds me tight. I’m glad Trevor is standing close enough to catch me, because Hartley almost knocks me off my heels. He starts crying, and I can tell he’s been holding them in when I look over to see the pity in Trevor’s and Emmy’s eyes. I crouch down and hug him back. He clings to me, and I do the same. It’s been so long since I just held someone, and I realize I like being touched by him. I’d do anything for him. Even if it means coming back here or going to prison to make sure he’s safe. He’s mine now.

[3]

HEMINGWAY

As I pull up to Trevor's house, I spot the other car in the driveway. I glance at the people, and my heart stops. It can't be. I can only see her from the back, but my heart knows her. She shakes her head. Her blond hair is loose around her shoulders. I open the door, and Moose barks, knowing the residence because he can play with Trevor's dog, Bane. As I step out of the truck, I hear her name yelled, and she squats down.

Hartley knows her. He's been around her. She's seen him. All these years, she's been in contact with Oliver and Hartley.

The anger is instant and all-consuming. Moose senses the change in my mood and tries to calm me down by pressing his body close to mine, but it doesn't work.

"Blythe." Her name breaks free from my throat, and her beautiful blue eyes flare wide when she turns and sees me. I watch as her hand rises to her full lips, and she gasps. Even in the dim light, I can make out some changes to her face. I don't know if that's from age or surgery.

"Hem, why are you here?" Wayne asks, but I ignore him and move toward her.

"Reed." Her voice is scratchy, husky. That's not her voice, but it's definitely her. I watch as her body sways and her eyes roll back. I dive for her as she starts to fall, but Trevor catches her first. Hartley is yelling for her, and Wayne is already by her side. I move faster and yank her from Trevor's arms.

“Mine,” I growl at him, and he nods, not wanting to fight me.

I hear their voices around me, but I only look down at her. Trevor’s girlfriend, Emersyn, is asking if she can check her over. Wayne is telling me to hand her over, but I won’t give her up.

The woman I loathe and love at the same time is in my arms again for the first time in nine years. I take in the subtle differences in her face up close. Her nose has been broken and reconstructed. I can make out the faint scars at her hairline where she had reconstructive surgery. Her jawline is slightly altered from the beautiful teenager I proposed to. Not that she isn’t still stunningly beautiful, but this woman isn’t the same as the girl I was in love with.

This woman has a dimple in her chin that I want to suck on and bite. Her darker brows, which made girls think she lightened her hair when she never did, are sculpted. She’s breathtaking.

I pull her into me and realize she still smells the same. Her honeysuckle scent blossoms through my body, and my cock presses into my zipper, marking it. I want her still. That thought pisses me off, because I know she’ll just leave me again.

Moose whimpers next to me as he presses his body in close to both of us, trying to calm my raging nerves and be closer to her. Even my dog wants to be near her.

“Auntie Bly.” Hartley’s voice breaks me from my daydream of taking her on the hood of Wayne’s car while she’s unconscious. It’s sick and perverted, but I need her. Bly has always made me irrational, but the need to get into her tight body has me reacting in a way I never thought I would.

She’s fucking unconscious, asshole.

That's when I notice the feel of her body against mine. She's got more muscles than she used to. She's trim but almost too thin. Her breasts are a handful and press into my chest. They're slightly bigger than they were before. Boob job, I wonder. I can feel her erect nipples through her bra and blouse. The wind blows across her delicate skin, and she shivers in her unconsciousness. A thin dusting of goose flesh pops up.

Her leg, partially exposed from the slit in her skirt, shifts as I hold her close to my body. This woman is dressed in a way my Blythe never would have. She's in a tailored, pressed outfit, like a sexy librarian. This isn't the sexy grunge look she used to wear. She now leaves it to the imagination of the viewer what they think they are seeing, instead of showing some of it. This woman is all professional, and a grease monkey like me doesn't belong in her world.

She starts to stir, and when her beautiful eyes open, I see the love before it's quickly covered up with fear. She pulls away from me, and I hold her steady for a moment before I step back. I lock my jaw, wanting to demand where she's been. Why she left me. What she's doing here. I want her back in my arms again.

"You had contact with him?" I point to Hartley.

I'm about to lose it, so I brush my hand through my hair, trying to calm myself. She watches me like a hawk. I can't tell if she's afraid of me or afraid for me. Doesn't matter. I'm going to walk away from her.

She looks to Wayne and then down to Hartley, who has a hold of her hand. From the looks of it, he's not going to let her go.

"Yes."

She doesn't offer me any more information, and just as she's about to say more, red and blue lights flash across the yard. I watch the sheriff's vehicle pull up behind my

truck. I'm officially blocked in by this asshole.

"Chief Evander, I told you we would set up a time soon for you to question my client. She's traveled a long way, and it's late."

"I see you already know Mr. Kantor, Ms. Hawksley," Chief Evander says as he walks up, his gaze locked on her. But when I hear the name, I realize she moved on without me. She's not mine anymore. She not only broke my heart but she also broke the vow that we would always be each other's.

It's like a bucket of ice-cold water over my body. I shudder, pushing everything I feel for her back down. I turn toward him to clarify.

"I used to know Mrs. Hawksley. I'm here to take my nephew with me." I'm not letting Blythe take Hartley from here. She and her husband aren't going to play house with my nephew.

"Yes, Reed and I know each other. But you know that already, Castor." Blythe answers in that husky voice that isn't right. Her voice used to be sweet, soft, and of a medium pitch. This one sounds too rough for her. She clears her throat and guides Hartley to the back door of Wayne's car. "As for Hartley, it's already been cleared with Child Services. He'll be going with me until Thursday." She helps him into the back seat, and I move toward her. All of us are crowding around her, and I watch as she starts trembling.

"As Blythe and Hartley's attorney, I've cleared up everything with the state, Chief. Hem, let's not dispute this. He'll be more comfortable with Blythe for a couple of days." Wayne steps between us, pushing us all back from surrounding her.

"Wayne, I told you I needed to speak to her immediately. I figured you'd have her flown in under protection, but I didn't expect the private jet treatment."

“Now is not the time for your theories, Chief. My daughter deserves to get some rest and time to process everything that has happened.” There is an undercurrent of tension between Evander and Wayne that I’m picking up on, but my attention shifts as Trevor hands Blythe a suitcase, which she places in the back seat with Hartley. I don’t miss the “daughter” comment, but I ignore it for now, deciding I’m going to get my nephew before she takes off again. Private jet? What the fuck? Castor? She calls him by his first name. None of this is making sense, and it’s frustrating me.

“I’m not letting you take him out of state. This is his home. Don’t think that just because you’re all happy and married that I don’t have grounds to keep him here with me,” I bark at her, and Moose pushes his muzzle into my clenched fist.

“I don’t want to move. My friends are here.” Hartley starts to fight her.

“Don’t worry, buddy, I’ll get us a place, and you’ll stay here with me,” I offer. I know I’m instigating the situation, but if this is the only way I can keep him, I’ll fight dirty.

“I’m in a condo nearby, where he can stay with me until everything is figured out. I’ll take him to school after winter break,” Blythe says.

Of course, she’s in a condo. I look up and down her body. She’s changed a lot. Private planes, expensive clothes, condos, and a husband.

“I’m not letting you take him from his home.” I cross my arms over my chest and square off against her.

She stands up, placing herself between me and Hartley, who has calmed down a bit. I watch as she pulls her shoulders back and lifts her chin. She’s sexy as fuck right now, but I need to stay focused and ignore my traitorous body that is obviously attracted to a married woman. Fuck.

“I didn’t say I was taking him from Eastport yet. I still need to figure out everything.” Her new voice is starting to wear on me. I want to hear her talk dirty to me.

“That doesn’t mean you won’t move him. Tell the boy the truth. Oh wait, truth is hard for you, Blythe.” I lean toward her and watch as her body trembles slightly. I still affect her. Interesting. Marriage must not be working for her. “You going to run off on him like you did after Sam?”

Her hand flies out and cracks against my cheek. Everyone jumps toward us. I’d never hurt her, but I press her into the car.

“That’s the only freebie you get, Bee. I hit back now.” I step back and turn away from her. My eyes remain on her, so I can’t dodge the fist when it comes at me.

“Leave my daughter alone, asshole.”

I turn to the chief and smile as I wipe the blood from my nose. Blythe is crying as Wayne helps her into the passenger seat. He shuts all the doors before moving back to me.

“You going to let him get away with that, Chief?” I ask before Wayne is standing in front of me.

“Take this.” He throws a key at me and slaps a folder into my chest. “Figure out your shit before I help her sue you for full custody and you really fuck everything up.” He then turns to the chief. “I told you to give me time to talk to her. You can wait.” He climbs into his car and slowly backs out, avoiding the two vehicles behind him.

“Don’t ever threaten her again,” the chief says as he turns away from me.

“What? Is she fucking all of you?” I storm toward my truck.

“No, asshole, but you are going to ruin everything she’s done for you,” he says cryptically before getting into his SUV. I stand there in shock as he leaves, not sure what the fuck is going on.

“If I were you, I’d take a chill pill or a shot of whiskey, sit down with that folder, and figure out what we aren’t telling you,” Trevor says as he leads his girlfriend back to the house.

Does everyone know shit that I don’t?

I decide to head back to the clubhouse and take some of Trevor’s advice.

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[4]

BLYTHE

I watch Wayne work his jaw as we drive through town, heading back toward the waterfront. He's working something out. I sit here quietly, unsure if I want to know what's on his mind.

I glance at Hartley, who looks like he's doing the Jell-O neck head bob as he tries to drift off. I expect he's exhausted, both physically and emotionally.

My gaze returns to the window. Again, I notice how downtown transitions from towering high-rises and businesses to what used to be the industrial park, now a retro neighborhood of art galleries and more. The old brick warehouses have been converted. I can't believe Erika's brother did all this. I should see her and visit my foster parents' graves while I'm here, but right now, I'm just trying to process everything that just happened.

As we get closer to the main boat harbor for smaller boats, I notice the buildings are becoming more condos and hotels. These weren't here nine years ago, and it reminds me of my place back in Los Angeles. Wayne pulls into a garage and parks the car in a slot.

"We'll get you a car tomorrow, but I—" His phone rings, cutting off the rest of his sentence. "Yes, we're here. I'm not sure that's a good idea after what just happened. Besides, I told you we would be in contact with you." He looks at me for a moment, and instantly I feel uncomfortable. "Castor, she's been through enough, don't you

think. Can we schedule an appointment for tomorrow? I understand the sheriff wants you to question Hartley too, but it's late, and he's trying to fall asleep." He pauses and looks back at Hartley. "Okay." He ends the call, looks back at me, then glances at Hartley. "Sorry. Before I continue with my thought from earlier, the chief would like to come talk to Hartley and you. He has orders from the sheriff. It has to be tonight, or they will take you in tomorrow for formal questioning."

"Can I refuse, as his guardian, to let him get questioned?" I don't want him to go through that. I remember what it's like to be questioned by them. I also know there's more going on than just the murder.

"You could, but the chief said that as his attorney, I can stop it if I feel it's too much. But also, Sheriff Baylor is itching to get you in their room for questioning."

We both know they will want to know where I've been for the last nine years. I also know that if the new sheriff gets his hands on me, I might not make it out alive. He doesn't want anyone to know what he did to me.

Hartley leans up between the seats. "I want to talk to them. Papa always said it's important to be truthful, and I don't believe what I heard."

"What did you hear?" Wayne asks when we're out of the car and heading for the elevator.

"I overheard Trevor telling Lorelei that they are saying Papa took his own life. He doesn't believe that, and neither do I."

I just stand there and listen, not wanting to add my thoughts on what happened to Oliver. I just don't understand why now. When the elevator stops, we emerge into a hallway with several doors branching off it.

“How did you get this place, again?” I ask as I notice two sets of stairs, one at each end of the hall. I like that we are high up, but I don’t like all the access.

“There is a doorman at the entrance,” Wayne says, noticing my concern. “And like I mentioned, I can arrange security if you want.”

“No, we’ll be fine. Security would only draw more attention to me.”

“Not this company, but okay.”

He stops at a door and enters a code on the keyless entry. The door opens into a spacious great room—a combination of kitchen, dining, and living room. Multiple windows on the opposite wall offer a breathtaking view of the water. Boats drift in the harbor, and I can almost feel the waves crashing onto the beach. I’ve always loved the water and the beach, even after everything that happened. Drawn to the view, I move closer, taking in the panorama. A scene I haven’t seen in years. Memories flood my mind. Reed down on his knee, telling me how much he loves me. The tears start, and I bite the inside of my lip to stop them. After everything he just said to me, the way he treated me, I still love him.

“Did you hear me, Blythe?” Wayne asks, and I turn around, blinking several times so he doesn’t know.

“Wh-what?” My voice cracks, and I hear the huskiness in it. I need to rest and stop talking soon. A cup of hot tea with honey will help a bit too.

Wayne knows as he moves to the kitchen and fills an electric kettle.

“An attorney at my firm has a friend who owns this place. Doctor Ryan moved into a home that was fully furnished, so there is plenty of stuff for you here.”

I nod and turn back to the view. I can't stop myself from looking down the beach until I find the exact spot. It's as if I can see the blood soaking the sand, even from here. I know it's not there, but I can still feel it as it seeps from my body to forever stain the pristine view. It's a stain that doesn't just affect my life. The people I love and care about were dragged into this too. A blight on the beauty, just like the scars on my body.

I jump when Wayne touches my arm. I was so lost in my head. I spin and almost knock the teacup from his hand. He gives me a soft shake of his head, and I see the pity in his eyes.

"Darling, I wish I could take away all the pain, but this needs to be done for you to completely heal. The truth needs to come out about every one of them. We also need to discuss Castor and his inquiry into you. It's not just about Oliver. He has some information he found from his father."

He hands me the cup, and I take a sip. The warmth and honey coat my throat and soothe the pain. I don't respond. For years, Wayne has wanted this. Wanted the men who hurt me to face justice. But because of who they are, we'll have to do it the illegal way. They are too influential now. They had power back then through their families, but now they are a force to be reckoned with on their own. Most of them are in positions of power.

"Why does Castor insist on talking to me? What is going on?" I ask.

Wayne looks down, and for the first time, I see a chink in his armor. I catch the tell he works so hard to hide as an attorney.

"He knows who your father is."

It's the one question that has always plagued me. My mother did everything she

could for me, but it was never enough. I never met him. He was out of our life before she left me. I remember a man coming to visit her, but I wasn't sure he was my father.

"Auntie, are you okay?" I turn to see Hartley, and that's when I realize I've been silently crying. I set the teacup on a nearby table before moving to a chair to sit down.

"Come here, little man." The words croak out, and he moves to me. I wrap him up in my arms and hold him to my body. "I'll be okay. I'm just sad."

"Me too," he says as he shudders, and I hold him for a bit longer.

When a knock sounds on the door, I let Wayne take care of it as I slip my heels back on. I turn to see Chief Castor Evander, the former sheriff's son. I knew him when I lived here before. There's always been something about him I can't quite put my finger on, like there's more to him than he lets on.

I take him in. He's handsome, but I'm not attracted to him. He's over six feet tall, with blond hair that falls over his forehead. His brows are dark, kind of like mine, and his piercing blue eyes meet mine for a moment. By the way he's fidgeting with his hands, I can tell he's working through something.

"I'm sorry I didn't quite get to introduce myself before. I'm Chief Castor Evander." He reaches out his hand, and I steel myself before taking it. His hand engulfs mine, his fingers long. But I don't feel the usual shiver of fear that comes when someone unfamiliar touches me. I look up at him as I pull my hand back and give him a nod.

"Blythe Hawksley."

He watches me for a moment before turning toward Hartley, who approaches him. I sit on the sofa, leaving space for Hartley to sit with me. Wayne takes the chair to the

side of us, while Castor sits across from us.

“Hartley, I’d like to ask you a few questions. Do you mind?”

“No.” He shakes his head as he takes my hand. I hold it and worry that they are pushing him too much. He’s just a little boy and shouldn’t be questioned as if he were older.

“Do you remember how your grandpa was the day he dropped you off at Trevor’s house?”

“He was fine.” Hartley pauses and looks up at me before turning back to the chief. “He was going to go look into something.” His answer is evasive, and I can see the moment Chief Evander is about to press him further. Hartley squeezes my hand tightly.

“What was he looking into? Was he on a case? What about Blythe? Was he looking into her? Did you see anyone threaten him?” As he fires off each question, he leans closer to Hartley, who presses into my side, trying to get away.

We all know that Oliver became a private investigator after he left the Marshals. He could have been working on a case, but I worry it was the case I always told him not to look into that got him killed. I feel Hartley begin to close off, his body pressing deeper into my side.

“I think we are done for the evening,” I say as I wrap my arm around Hartley and pull him in tight to my body.

Without missing a beat, Chief Evander proves the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. “Where were you, Miss, or is it Mrs. Hawksley?”

“Now, wait a minute. What are you implying?” Wayne slowly stands. “Don’t do this, Castor.” His voice softens, and I look between the two of them.

“Sheriff Baylor is chomping at the bit to get her in the box. She has history with the deceased, and she’s from here. Am I correct in saying you’re Blythe Noble?” He ticks off each of his points on his fingers as he talks. But when he says my former last name, I freeze. I don’t know why. Maybe it’s the way he says it, or the fact I haven’t been called that in so long.

Hartley looks up at me in confusion before turning toward the chief. “She’s Uncle Wayne’s daughter,” he says with the certainty of a child who doesn’t question the truth, because it’s all he’s known. The chief looks between us, and I decide that I’m done.

I slowly stand and brush a hand down my skirt. I learned a long time ago that I don’t need to justify myself to anyone.

“Please let me get Hartley settled.” I lead Hartley by the hand out of the living room to the nearest bedroom.

“Did I say something wrong?” he asks before we reach the doorway.

“No, little man. I need to talk to the chief alone, and you need to get some rest.”

“But Papa didn’t kill himself. He was researching something. I know it.” He looks back at the chief and then to me. I pull Hartley into the room and take him in my arms.

“I know he was. We’ll discuss what that was later. I want you to get into a nice, warm shower, and when you get done, we’ll read a book together.”

One of the things we started a long time ago was reading together whenever I was with him. We were reading the Percy Jackson books by Rick Riordan the last time I saw him a few months ago, when we were all in Hawaii.

“I’m on Sea of Monsters now,” he tells me, letting go of my hand and rushing to his bag. He pulls out a book and shows me.

“Okay, you need to shower first, then we’ll read.”

He turns back to his bag, and I wait until he enters the attached bathroom before I open the door and rejoin the men. Forgoing my spot on the sofa, I stand in front of the window, facing the chief.

“My former name was Noble, but when I was adopted as a teenager, I changed it. As for my whereabouts, what time are you referring to?” I tilt my head, raising an eyebrow in challenge.

“Monday, between eight and ten p.m.” He stands and tries to be intimidating.

I raise my brow higher and cock a hip before brushing my long hair over my shoulder. “Chief Evander, that would have been between five and seven West Coast time. I was at the office until six researching an article. I’m sure I can ask my employer to provide my internet browsing history from that time frame. I also had dinner with my roommate before we went back to our condo. There is a doorman who can confirm the time I came in. Now, if you wouldn’t mind, I’ve been flying for several hours, and Hartley is tired. We’ll stop by in the next day or so.”

I walk straight to the door and open it, waiting for him to get the hint.

Once he’s out the door, I shut it and turn toward Wayne.

“You never fail to disappoint me, darling.” He walks over and kisses my cheek before I let him out too.

I make sure all the locks are in place before heading to my room to change into something comfortable, then wait for Hartley to come out so we can read.

Hemingway

Sitting at the table, I flip the key again and watch it bounce on the file. The file remains unopened, and I haven't even looked at the address for the safety deposit box listed on the piece of paper clipped to the front. All I have to do is look, and I'll know where it is, but I don't want to. I want to stew in this pity party for one I'm throwing. I tip the bottle, letting the warm, brown whiskey pour into my glass before setting it down and lifting the rocks glass. The key flips through the air, and I swallow back the liquid. It doesn't even burn anymore. I've been drinking since I got back from trying to get Hartley. I don't think any of the guys know I'm back. I'm sitting in the back corner, contemplating what the key and file could mean.

Do I want to know? Do I care?

The short moment I held her in my arms was not only peaceful and alluring, but also comforting. I've missed Blythe so much. She was my one true love, or so I thought. She's been the one I compare all others to. She was my first, and she was supposed to be my only.

“Hey, bro, thought you were staying at Oliver's place. Where is the kid?” Cowboy asks, swinging the chair next to me around and straddling it. He raises two fingers, signaling for one of the sweetbutts to bring him a glass. She sidles up and leans over, showing off her barely covered cleavage, and smiles at me. I ignore her. Cowboy swats her ass. “Get off, he don't want you, and you know it.” She turns and smiles at him, and he just shakes his head.

The reason Cowboy and I get along so well is because, like me, he doesn't take chicks from here. We know better than to sleep with sweetbutts. All they want are property patches, and neither of us want that. I don't know all of his story, but I know he doesn't do relationships. As a nomad, he's used to coming and going, but lately, he's been talking about sticking around. I don't know why. I've honestly considered going nomad. Now with Blythe back in town, I just might do it.

"You didn't answer me. Where is the kid?"

"With her," I growl, and pour another glass and shoot it back.

"What's this?" He grabs the file and flips it open. I reach for it, but his longer arms keep it just out of my grasp. I contemplate slugging him when Striker walks up and snatches it from his hands.

"Heard Evander made an appearance." It wasn't a question. As Striker looks through the file, I watch his eyebrow shoot up, and he quickly flips to the next page. "Interesting reading. You should sober up and figure this out. That key goes to the aforementioned safety deposit box. Maybe you can find out what Oliver was investigating. We can get some justice for him." He drops the file and walks off, his words hanging in the air like a challenge.

When Cowboy takes the bottle from me, I know I need to face it.

I stand and feel the alcohol's effect on my balance. As I grab the table for support, another sweetbutt slides under my arm. I reach for the key and slip it into my pocket. My fingers brush the ring, and for a moment, I think I should just say "fuck it" and take this girl up on what she's about to offer me. It couldn't hurt. Maybe I'll forget about the woman I held in my arms earlier.

"Let me help you, Hem," she purrs.

“Nope. I got him. Go away,” Cowboy orders, and I watch her prance off. “Dude, you’re highly intoxicated and don’t want to go down that road. If what I partially read is true, you’ll regret it.” He hands me the file, and I let him lead me to my bunk, where I fall asleep with the file clutched to my chest.

[5]

HEMINGWAY

I rush into the office building, knowing I'm a few minutes late as I glance down at my watch and shake my head. I hate being late, but for some reason, no matter how much alcohol I put into my system the last couple of nights, I couldn't sleep. When I finally did, I slept right through my alarms. I have my truck parked outside, sure I'll be taking Hartley with me. She's had him for the last two days. I should get him for the weekend. I still haven't looked at the file or gone to the safety deposit box. The bank that houses the safety deposit box hasn't been available for me to stop by. They told me the man in charge of that service has unexpectedly been out. According to Striker, he was killed.

I don't know if it's a coincidence or not, but it's kind of weird. Since Wayne gave me the file, everything has been strange. Just this morning, I noticed I was being tailed. Another reason I'm late. I decided to try to shake them before I came here. I didn't want to lead whoever it was to Hartley. I'm questioning everything right now. What was Oliver researching? Why did he want both Blythe and me to have Hartley? He knew I was pissed at Blythe for leaving me, yet he still insisted on it.

Now, I'll have to fight Blythe to get Hartley. I don't want to, but no other man is going to father him. Hartley's father and I were best friends, and he'd do the same for me. I've always made sure to make Hartley a part of my life.

As I step into the elevator, my phone rings in my pocket. I pull it out and answer, seeing Wayne's name on the screen.

“Yeah,” I say.

“I’m on my way. Don’t make any dec—” His voice cuts off as the elevator doors close.

“Fuck,” I exclaim as I tap my booted foot, hoping he’ll call back soon. We’ve been playing phone tag since the other night. I hate that he hit me, and I still wonder what he met by his words about screwing it up. But he got to be with my girl when I couldn’t. I’m angry about the betrayal, but I also want him to explain how he’s her father. That’s just not possible.

The elevator doors open, and I look around at several cubicles and closed doors. There’s a woman at a desk. She’s cute, in a girl-next-door kind of way. I walk up to the desk, smiling and making sure I project warmth. For some reason, people are often intimidated by me. Yeah, I’m large, with long, shaggy dark hair and dark eyes. Right now, I have a scruffy beard because I didn’t have time to trim it this morning.

“Reed Kantor.” I give her my name.

She types it into her computer and stands up, motioning for me to follow her. We round a corner into an open room, and I see Hartley sitting at a table, playing on his Switch. Then, I see her, the woman who has haunted my dreams the last few nights, sitting next to him. I hear her husky phone sex voice ask how much longer they will have to wait, and I want her to say my name.

Her blond hair is up in a bun at the back of her head. She’s dressed in navy tailored slacks, rolled at the cuffs, and sky-high fuck me heels in cream. A navy jacket covers her cream-colored lacy camisole. I don’t care that it could ruin me again, all I know is I want to mess her up and fuck her sideways. Her face has changed only for the better. She still takes my breath away.

“Mr. Kantor, I presume. I’m Loreen Ambrose. Have you met Ms. Hawksley?” A woman stands and introduces herself as the caseworker.

Blythe stands and holds out a hand, acting like I didn’t hold her in my arms a few days ago. Or that I said some mean things to her.

“I’ve known Blythe for years. When will I get to meet your husband? Mr. Hawksley. I don’t believe I got his first name,” I say, and her eyes drop. Hartley’s laughter distracts me. I glance over, and he’s staring at his game, laughing.

“I’m not married,” she says softly. Her husky voice sounds almost breathless, and I wonder if that’s what she’ll sound like when I pump my cock into her tight pussy again.

I look her up and down. The thought of her pregnant makes my cock even harder. She’s not married. If I knock her up, she can’t leave me. Ever. It’s a fucked-up thought, but I won’t take it back. I try to discreetly adjust myself as I take a seat.

“Mr. Kantor, Ms. Hawksley, I believe the attorney will be here shortly. As far as we are concerned here at Child and Youth Services, we’ll inspect both of your homes. We’ll also conduct weekly check-ins, both via the phone and through surprise visits. You will need to go through this process for about four months, after which the court will grant adoption rights, either as a couple or individually, depending on your decision at that time.”

“So, I’m to assume, based on that, we have to be here for four months?” Blythe asks.

“Yes, ma’am. You’ll have access to the Grimes’ home and will live there while you go through the process.”

“I have a condo I’m staying in. Reed can use the house. I’ll also have to travel for

work in March, but most of my job can be done remotely.”

“Sorry I’m late.” We turn to see Wayne joining us.

“Mr. Cabell, welcome. I believe we’ve made it to where you need to discuss the points with them too.” Ms. Ambrose moves away, and Wayne takes her seat.

“I need both of you to keep an open mind. Blythe, sweetheart, you’ll need to stay here for at least four months, which means leaving your life back where you were. You have a place to stay for now. Hem, you don’t have an adequate place to raise a child. That’s where I come in for both of you. Oliver’s house is paid off. You can either sell it to fund something else for Hartley, or you can use the proceeds to take care of him if you already have a place. But you must occupy it and raise him together for the four months. After that, we’ll meet to discuss how you want to proceed.” He pauses and looks at both of us.

“So, in other words, Blythe and I have to live together? Spend the holiday together?”

“What? No. I have the condo. You said I could use the condo.”

Wayne won’t look at her as he reviews the document. “It states here that you must occupy the house together. These were Oliver’s wishes if something were to happen to him.”

“I’m going to need some time to figure out if I can do this.” Her haughty tone pisses me off, but a part of me agrees this is a difficult decision to make. I haven’t spent any time with Blythe in nine years. We used to be inseparable. She was always wrapped around me on my bike. I doubt this Blythe will want to do that. She’s all dressed up, too fancy for the girl I once knew.

Blythe

I've been here for over two weeks now. It's been exactly two weeks since I found out I have to move in with Reed. Wayne told me today that I have to make a decision by Monday, or I'll forfeit my right to custody of Hartley.

I couldn't even spend Christmas with Reed. He's angry with me, and I know why. I broke his heart. I broke us. I just don't know if there is any way to repair what was done all those years ago.

After hashing out everything regarding Hartley, I felt like I'd been run over by a bus. I don't want to stay close to Reed because I still love him, and he obviously hates me. But he agreed to work with me in raising Hartley for the next four months. We'll live in the house in separate rooms and get through this.

I owe it to Sam to do this. He died for me. Same with Oliver. I have to do this.

After I called my boss back in Los Angeles and told him I'd have to stay here for several months, I decided I needed to get to work on my plan. I could try to do as much as I could without exposing myself, thereby keeping Hartley and Reed safe. I tried to quit my job, but my boss insisted that as long as I kept producing stories, he wanted to keep me on the payroll. So, I'll be working remotely until a decision is made about Hartley.

My boss also confirmed that I'd be in Dallas for the book signing. I don't want to go, but I have to. It's just a weekend. What could happen in a weekend?

In the meantime, Reed and I have split time with Hartley, doing a week on, week off. Currently, Hartley is with Reed, so I'm wallowing in my own self-pity. I'm not ready to face my foster parents' house, the one next door to Oliver's. I'm also not ready for constant contact with Reed, but I'm going to do it. I can put my feelings aside for Hartley.

Walking around the condo without Hartley here feels like I did when I was back in Los Angeles—lonely. I dial Briar, but she's busy and can't talk, so I continue to pace until I can't avoid it any longer. Today's the day to start my revenge.

The cursor bounces at the end of the post, and doubts begin to creep in again. I know there will be retaliation. Even though the article is anonymous and can't be traced back to me, publishing it will open up a can of worms that could make them come after me. After more research, I'm convinced that Randall, the leader of my attackers, is cleaning house. He's running for governor and eliminating anyone who could hurt him with the truth.

Not only was Oliver killed recently, but another detective with the sheriff's department who had wanted to help me was also killed. He had retired after my case because he didn't like how it was being handled, according to what Oliver told me during our last visit. We had assumed he died of natural causes, but when I read the autopsy report Oliver emailed to me before his own death, it was shocking. The report revealed that the detective had died from a fall down the stairs during the night, despite his wife claiming he never had any balance issues.

I click the enter button and watch the article go live. I've shared it across several social media platforms and sent copies to local and national news outlets. As I sit back, I stare at the screen for a moment, waiting. But it's like a tea kettle. Nothing happens right away. I can't take the stress on my body any longer, so I decide to go for a run.

I change into a pair of black high-waisted leggings and a matching sports bra, adding a jacket over it. I secure my hair into French braids and slip my ID and cell phone into my pocket. I only put one earbud in so I can still hear what's going on around me.

I run for several miles, avoiding the beach and waterfront area. I'm not ready for that

walk down memory lane. On the way back to the condo, I run through the art district. Maybe, subconsciously, I want to bump into Erika. I could use another friend, someone to talk to. But I know I can't bring her into my craziness.

I slow down to a jog, my pace easing when I come to a tattoo parlor. I stop for a moment, trying to look inside. My skin itches for another tattoo or even a piercing. I've always loved to mark myself. Before I was old enough for a tattoo, I would draw on my skin. It soothed something deep inside me.

A counselor had once suggested that my urge to mark myself was a form of self-harm, that I might want to cut myself as a coping mechanism. He said it was because I didn't have a father or strong male influence in my life. I wanted to tell him to go to hell because I had several good influences, and I never wanted to hurt myself. Well, not until they hurt me first.

After the attack, all I could think about was dying. I wasn't Reed's any longer. Four men had violated that. I was gang raped and beaten. I was left for dead.

"Hello," a soft, barely accented voice calls out, pulling me from where my mind had wandered to. I'm glad because I would have had a panic attack, and I don't want that to happen while I'm out and about.

I look up, and everything stops. My breath. The wind around us. There is no mistaking who she is, and as our eyes meet, her tears start to fall.

"Bly?" Her hand shakes as she reaches for me, her voice unsteady. A large man steps out of the parlor behind her, and I step back in fear. "Ignore him. I do." She chuckles as she again reaches for me. "Is it really you? They said you were dead. I didn't believe them. Are you okay?" She looks me up and down, and I do the same to her.

She stands there in a pair of black shorts, the hem just visible beneath a flowy,

layered gray tank top that drapes over her noticeably pregnant belly. Her long brown hair is pulled into a messy ponytail over her shoulder, and she is covered in tattoos. The man behind her looks like a giant blond Viking, with visible tattoos on his knuckles and the back of his hands. They contradict the fact he's in a suit. His hand wraps around her body, trying to pull her back, as I just stare at her longer.

"It's okay, Bly. I know it's you. I'm not mad at you. I figured after everything that happened you needed to heal." Her soft voice and words finally break the dam, and the tears roll down my face.

"Rika." I choke, and she pulls me into her arms. She's still so petite compared to me and my five-foot-nine height. "I'm sorry. I couldn't message you. I had to cut off all ties."

"I know. Wayne told me when I wouldn't stop looking for you. But with so many rumors spreading that you were dead, I just didn't know who to believe anymore. You didn't message me, and I thought you would." Her words wash over my body, and I instantly regret that I hurt one of my closest friends. I've hurt so many people by just trying to protect them.

The big guy stands there silently, watching over us both. When people start to stop to watch, I pull away, feeling self-conscious.

She pulls me into the tattoo parlor. Behind the counter is a young woman dressed in a grunge outfit similar to what I used to wear. She moves around the glass counter and takes a seat in a chair, while Erika plops down on the sofa and pulls me beside her. I can't help but look at them and their carefree style. It reminds me of the person I once was. I used to dress how I wanted, not caring what others thought. Now, I dress conservatively with a slight sexy edge to it. I don't advertise myself. It's a product of the attack. They told me I had asked for it with the way I dressed. For work, I keep my tattoos covered to look more professional, but I love that my dear friend expresses

herself in her tattoos and clothes.

Erika introduces me to Jaz and then to her husband, Grayson, who insists I call him Gray.

I look up as a man walks in, and I instantly recognize him.

Leif.

Erika had befriended me in high school. She was two years ahead of me. I was with her when her grandma died. She was with me when Reed left for basic training. She also came to the hospital to see me after the attack. She was the only person, other than Sam, who I allowed to see me. She doesn't know everything, just that I was attacked. When I ran, I didn't even tell her goodbye, and it's something I regret. I'm glad Wayne felt he needed to tell her.

Leif walks over and doesn't say anything but slowly pulls me up into a tight hug. It takes a moment for my body to calm down enough to relax in his embrace, and he must sense it because he whispers softly in my ear.

"Relax, Bly, we are family."

His words make the tears come again, and I feel Erika's hand on my back. There is a calmness I haven't felt in a long time from just the simple act of letting them hold me.

"You look as beautiful as ever," Leif adds.

I push up my jacket sleeves, feeling hot from my run and being inside the parlor. I want to shed the top layer, but I don't want my scars to show, so I keep my jacket on.

When Leif notices the ink on my arms, he pulls them up to look closer. I want to pull

away so he can't see the scars from the surgery to repair my arm, but I don't.

"Thought I would get to tattoo your skin first, not a stranger." He chuckles.

"No, I get to mark her before you." Erika jumps up, and I smile between the both of them. Erika looks at the Jesse tattoo on my forearm and nods. "Good work, though."

"I was just thinking another tattoo would be nice."

"Really?" she asks, excited.

"Yeah. My boss might frown on another facial piercing." I swipe my hand over my nose piercing. "I've wanted to do my eyebrow but can't, so tattoos it is. As long as I can cover them with a jacket when I'm on assignment."

"Where do you work?" It's an innocent question, but I'm not sure how to answer it.

"Um..." I pause for a moment. "I work for a popular celebrity and investigative magazine." I decide to keep it vague. If I share too much, they'll know where I've been, and I can't give them that much information. Not yet. Not until I know what happens after my revenge is all done.

"That sounds good. Which one?" Jaz asks. I look at her and bite my lip. "It's okay. You don't have to say," she adds when she notices my nervousness.

I nod and sit back down next to Erika. Leif stands next to the counter.

"How long are you in town for?" Leif asks, and I turn toward him.

"I'm not sure yet. Both Reed and I were named as Hartley's guardians. I have to be here for at least four months. After that, I'll have to see." I don't explain further.

“Oh?” He tips his head to the side as he leans against the counter. He’s muscular but still trim and handsome. His dark hair is long on top, with the sides trimmed close, similar to Gray’s. But where Gray’s hair is in a ponytail, Leif’s is shorter, not quite long enough for a ponytail. “Where are you staying? We should have dinner sometime while you’re here.”

“I’m in a condo by the water. I can’t believe how much has changed in nine years.” I sweep my arm toward the window.

“Yeah, it’s been growing like crazy. Which complex?”

“It’s over off of Bayshore.”

“Oh, wait,” Jaz says. “The tall building with the garage underneath?”

“Yeah. Wayne found it for me. Something about it belongs to a partner at the firm’s friend.”

“I think that’s my husband’s place.” Jaz laughs as she stands. “Speak of the devil.” I turn as the chime rings on the door, and in walks a man. I don’t know what’s happened to my hometown, but several of the men I’ve met are hot.

Jaz introduces her husband, Dr. Ryan Richards. We find out that I am staying in his condo, and after visiting for a bit longer, they decide we all need to have dinner together tonight. I tell them I need to run back to the condo and get changed, and I’ll meet them at Erika’s place. Now that I have a car, getting around is easier.

The longer I visited, the darker it started to get outside. I keep near the public areas as I run. But as I pass a dark parking lot, a shiver races down my spine. I glance over my shoulder as a piece of wood swings toward me from the alley. I dodge the hit, taking it to my shoulder. I scream as I fight my attacker.

“You shouldn’t have come back,” a deep, male voice growls, and I’m transported back to that night. “We would have found you and ended you, just like everyone else.” The voice is unmistakable. Even with the black clothing and the mask, I know exactly who it is.

Elliott.

He’s Randall’s muscle. The dumb idiot follows along no matter what. He bullied and beat everyone Randall ordered him to. My research shows that he’s barely scraping by, running a struggling gym, trying to relive his past as a wrestler. From his size, it’s clear he’s still using steroids.

He comes at me again with the 2x4, and I dodge it. I kick his knee, and he falls, but I’m not fast enough to get away. He grabs hold of me and squeezes me to his chest as he stands up and drags me into the alley. I scream again, hoping someone hears us.

He throws me to the ground and kicks me in the abdomen. I roll as he stands over me.

“I’m going to fuck that cunt again before I finally end you.”

I don’t think; I just react. I lift my leg up and nail him in the groin. He falls to his knees, and I stumble for the entrance of the alley.

Arms wrap around me, and I start to fight.

“It’s me, Bly.” Leif’s voice registers in my brain before the pain takes me under, and I collapse in his arms.

I slowly come to, hearing voices around me. I’m on a gurney, being loaded into an ambulance, and the memories wash over me.

“Someone needs to call Hem and let him know,” Leif says, and I try to turn, but my head is swimming.

“I don’t know if she’ll want that. They weren’t getting along so well at my place a couple of weeks ago,” Trevor says.

Who is Hem?

“Doesn’t matter. He deserves to know. I’d want to know if it were Ridley. You’d want to know if it were Emersyn.”

“Fine.”

I fade back into unconsciousness, unable to argue with them.

[6]

HEMINGWAY

Hartley is sitting on the couch, watching one of his favorite shows. I got him pizza for dinner, and now I'm walking around the house cleaning up the mess we made. Blythe called earlier and said she'd be moving in this weekend. I'm going to give her the master bedroom. It's the nice thing to do. I don't want to be that close to her, but I have to for Hartley. Christmas was extremely awkward, and I'm glad it's over. We are going to get this taken care of soon. Hartley deserves to stay in the home he was raised in.

When I moved in two weeks ago, there was evidence that someone tried to break in. The prospects cleaned up the glass from the shattered window. The person didn't get in. A neighbor called the police as soon as the alarm went off.

I enter the room Oliver used for an office. I glance around but don't see anything obvious. When I flip back a board attached to the wall, I find several pictures and notes. I've avoided coming in here over the last couple of weeks, but it's time to try to make this place a new home and not a mausoleum for the dead.

"That's Auntie Bly's case," Hartley says from behind me. "Papa said that until he figured out how to close it, she wouldn't be able to come home."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I don't know anything else, other than it's about Auntie Bly. I only know that

because I saw one of the pictures once. Why would someone hurt her like that?” His words make me take a closer look at one of the pictures. It’s Blythe, lying in a bed. She’s been beaten so severely, and I’m instantly angry.

I leave the office and head for my bag in one of the spare rooms upstairs. Pulling out the file, I flip it open. It’s a medical record. As I read through the injuries she suffered, my eyes lock on the SART report, and I can’t breathe. I rush to the bathroom between Hartley’s and my room, where I drop to my knees and vomit.

Blythe was raped and beaten. Her voice is altered because of the damage done to her vocal cords from being strangled.

My phone rings in my pocket, and I fall back on my butt and lean my head against the wall. I don’t want to answer it. I want to know why she never told me. Did she blame me for it because I wasn’t there to protect her? I let the call go to voicemail and stand up on shaky legs.

“Are you okay, Uncle Hem?” Hartley knocks on the door.

“Yeah, buddy.” I choke as I brush my teeth and splash water on my face, trying not to cry and get upset over everything I saw. Her face was so beaten that her jaw, nose, and orbital socket were all broken. Whoever attacked her didn’t want her to live.

My phone rings again, and this time I see Wayne’s name on the screen. I also see a text from Leif.

“Yeah,” I answer.

“Emersyn is on her way to pick up Hartley. Get to the hospital as soon as you can. Blythe was attacked.”

My knees lock, and my body wants to crumble.

“Again?” I can’t believe this is happening to her. “Blythe,” I growl her name, upset and hurt that she’s going through this again.

“Yeah. I’ll explain when you get here.”

I open the text message.

Leif

Blythe was attacked. Get to the hospital. If you still care, she’ll need you. If you don’t, find a new tattoo artist.

He always cared about Blythe, and I get why he said that, but it still bothers me.

Me

Go to hell. I’m on my way.

Leif

Don’t be a fool. She needs a friend to protect her.

Me

I know.

I pull up to the hospital twenty minutes later. I have the guys waiting, and I’m ready to go after whoever it was who hurt her this time.

I'll kill them.

I walk through the doors, and Wayne is up and walking toward me. Gambit, Cowboy, and Butcher are behind me, ready to cover my back and help where they are needed.

“What happened?”

Wayne looks at the guys and then glances around us before turning back to me. Whatever he wants to say, he doesn't want said out loud.

“Spit it out, Wayne,” I growl, upset that bringing her back here has obviously put her in danger. I didn't get to where in the investigation Oliver was, but I'm going to assume they never caught her attacker.

Wayne steps closer and lowers his voice. “She was attacked when she went for a run. I haven't been able to see her, so I don't know all the details, but I have a feeling I know what it was about.”

He hands me his phone, and I see an article from a news organization based in Providence. It's about corruption in the sheriff's department here in Eastport. How the current sheriff buries reports of rape, and how he has been grooming an underage girl. It goes on to explain that the previous sheriff's own attack was buried and closed because the current sheriff is covering it up. The article mentions that in the past, before Baylor became sheriff, he and some of his friends raped and beat several girls. Those cases are also unsolved and buried because influential people are pulling the strings of the department.

The article ends with the reporter asking how anyone could trust their safety with such a corrupt department. A comment left below states that the current sitting governor is calling for the state police to investigate, while Senator Randall Manos Jr., whose son is running for governor, asserts this is nothing but false reporting,

trying to smear the town where his son was raised.

I hate politics. I hate the lies that come from politicians' mouths, and I especially hate the Manos family. I always have. Randall III and I never got along growing up. We got into several scuffles. He tried to have his friends jump me once, but I was able to hold them off with Sam's help.

I hear the swish of the doors and glance over to see Castor Evander step through. He looks pissed as he approaches our group. I hand the phone off before turning to punch him square in the face. He sputters, not expecting my assault. He quickly shakes it off and comes at me. Gambit grabs a hold of me, while Butcher stands between us, stopping Evander's forward progress. He's one of the deadliest enforcers of our club, if not us all. He doesn't look intimidating, but that's the problem. With his auburn hair and lean six-foot frame, he doesn't have the bulk of me or Gambit. He's the silent, deadly type. If he has a knife in his hand, be prepared to give up. He'll have you diced in pieces before you can fire a bullet from your gun.

I see the moment the chief discounts him. Evander goes to push past Butcher, and Butcher spins around and drops him on his ass.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing here? Why would she want to see you?" I bark at him, and he immediately yells back at me as he gets to his feet.

"I'm the only one here who wants to help her. She's my fucking sister, asshole. Where else would I be?"

His words stop all of us.

"You said you would tell her first," Wayne says, shocking me.

"You knew?" I swing around to face Wayne. "She'll never forgive you for keeping

this secret from her.” Blythe has craved family and a connection to someone by blood since she was a little girl. It’s why we had planned to start a family right away after we got married. “How is this possible?” I look at the chief, and he shakes his head.

“I need to tell her before I tell anyone else, but I know now. My father found out, and we think that’s why he was attacked.” Evander points to Wayne.

“I love that girl as if she were mine. I didn’t tell her because she was still processing everything. You read that file yet?”

“I’m still reading it. You called and interrupted me.” I don’t tell him I bitched out when I got to the part that said she was raped.

“Family for Hawksley,” a doctor calls out, and we turn to see a physician standing there.

“I’m her father,” Wayne says. We all follow behind them when the doctor directs him to a room. “They are with me,” he says, permitting the doctor to speak freely in front of us.

“She’s bruised badly, and her shoulder was dislocated. We were able to put it back in place. She’ll need to rest for several days. She’s refusing pain medications. She said she had a bad go of them before and doesn’t want to risk it. I told her if she can’t sleep because of the pain, then she should take one. If you monitor her taking them, it shouldn’t be a problem. She’s asking for you.”

“Was she raped?” Wayne asks, and I lock down my emotions, afraid of the answer.

“No. A friend heard her screaming and came to help. She’s upset and angry, but other than that, she’ll be okay.”

“I want to see her,” I tell him.

“She’ll be upset you’re here,” Wayne says.

“I don’t care. I need to see her.” I’m not taking no for an answer.

[7]

BLYTHE

I lie back in the bed and close my eyes. I don't want to look at the ceiling. I'm scared that I made the wrong choice. If Leif hadn't heard me, I'd be dead. Elliot's threat of finally ending me echo in my head.

"Bumblebee." I hear his voice, and my eyes fly open to look at him. I can see the hurt in his eyes. "I know," he says. "I'm sorry I wasn't there to protect you before or now."

"What do you know?" I pray he doesn't know everything. He couldn't. Only the medical staff and counselor know that. No one else knows how much I really lost that night.

"I only got through part of the file. I know that you were attacked, and..." He can't say it.

"Raped." The word tastes bitter as I spit it out. He sees me differently now that he knows. "I'm not good enough anymore. Just leave. Get out of here." I turn my head away and let the tears flow silently down my face.

"Bee, I swear I'll never let that happen to you again. We'll find out who it was and kill him." He takes my hand, and I jump from the pain in my knuckles from fighting back.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I do. If I had known back then, I would have come straight home. It wouldn’t have changed my mind about how much I loved you.”

“I had to leave.” I don’t explain further.

“Let me give you a ride back to the condo. Hartley is worried about you.”

“He’s not here, is he?” I sit up in the bed and look over Reed’s shoulder.

“No, he’s with Emersyn and the boys.”

“Thank goodness.”

Trevor was the responding paramedic who came to my rescue again. This time I didn’t fight him and let him help me. He was shocked and pissed that I was attacked.

“Okay,” I tell him, not wanting to fight anymore.

He stays with me, even when a nurse comes in and helps me get changed. I keep my back to him and hear his intake of breath when my naked back is exposed. He finally grumbles and turns his back on us. He wanted to help me get dressed, but that would have been too intimate. He says he wouldn’t have changed his mind about me, but I don’t want to risk it.

He walks next to the wheelchair as I’m pushed through the doors and out into the lobby. Wayne and a couple of other men are there, along with the chief. I was already interviewed by a deputy, who said it would be hard to identify my attacker. When I told him I was sure I knew who it was, he told me I was probably wrong. I’m pissed and ready to expose Elliot next.

“I’ve already been questioned, and I know that your department won’t be investigating my attack. You can leave. I don’t need you here,” I snarl. My throat aches. All the emotions today have put a lot of strain on me.

“I need to talk to you,” Evander says.

“I told you to leave. I’m not interested in hearing you say I don’t know who attacked me, because I do. I know his name and even gave your deputy his address. But he told me I was mistaken. So no, thank you.”

“It’s not about that. I’ll get that information and continue the investigation, but I really need to talk to you.”

“I’m not in the mood.” I drop my head, the aching pain is almost too much, but I can’t take the medications to relieve it. I almost became addicted to the pain medications before. I took them so often and tried to overdose once, just to end the pain in my heart.

“I know who your father is,” he says.

I lift my hand to stop the nurse from continuing to push the wheelchair. I want to know, and Evander knew that would get me to talk to him. I don’t know how he knows, but I’ve always wanted to have a family.

“Meet us at the condo,” I tell him, then let them continue pushing me out. When I see Erika and her husband, along with Leif and a woman I don’t recognize, I nod to them. “Rain check.”

“You bet. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Can’t. I need a new phone.” I shrug. “I’ll message when I get one. Your number was

saved on my cloud.” My phone was shattered in the alley as I fought back.

I’m not shocked that Elliot was sent after me. I’m just confused that it was done in such a public area. Either he or Randall is getting anxious to get rid of me. I didn’t name him in the article, but soon, I will.

“Darling, I’ll get you a new phone in the morning.” Wayne carefully takes my hand. “If you don’t want to deal with Evander tonight, I can tell him no.” I look up at him, and that’s when I see it. He already knows.

“No. Maybe I should have known before you, Father ,” I sneer. It’s funny that he’s supposed to be my father when he knows who my real father is. The whole reason I couldn’t be adopted was because my father never signed off his parental rights.

When we get to Reed’s truck, a large dark-haired man following along opens the door for me. He’s extremely intimidating, but when he smiles at me, I see a gentleness in his eyes. Standing with him are two other men. One is wearing a cowboy hat and smiles. He’s handsome, and again I wonder about this town now. There’s something about the other man, who is not quite as tall as the others, that scares me. Maybe it’s his nearly black eyes or just how quiet he is.

“I’m Gambit, Hem’s President. I was wondering if I could ask you some questions later, after you rest.” His voice is deep and ragged, almost like mine.

“Why?” I ask, distracting myself from the pain I’m in and the fact I’m going to have to pull myself up into that truck. I look at the lifted truck and see a dog waiting.

“I got you, Bee,” Reed says, and he steps around the wheelchair after the nurse locks the wheels.

I try to brush his hands away, but he’s stronger and lifts me up. My ass is planted into

the seat before I can argue. Reed pulls the seat belt across my chest, and my traitorous body reacts to his touch. My nipples become hard, and my breath catches.

“I’ll see you later,” Gambit says, then turns to the other man. “By the way, this is Cowboy. He’s a brother too. This is Butcher. He’ll be your protection for a bit. Don’t get freaked out if you see any of my guys keeping an eye on you.”

“She will have a security detail before the night is over,” Wayne says as he pushes through all the intimidating bikers and reaches my open door. “Bly, darling, I didn’t want to keep the secret from you. I wanted to see the proof first. He’ll meet us at the condo, where we can discuss everything. I’m sorry. I just do what I can to protect you. You know that. I love you.”

I lean forward and press my forehead to his. “I love you too, Daddy.” He kisses my cheek and then steps back as he closes the door.

“I wish you had told me,” Reed says quietly as he pulls away from the hospital.

I can’t answer him because there is too much. Too many secrets. I keep my eyes closed, pretending I’m sleeping, until we pull up to the condo.

“Thank you for the ride. I’ll see you in the next few days.” I reach for the handle with my left hand as it was my right shoulder that was dislocated.

“I’m not leaving you, Bumblebee,” Reed says as he gets out of the truck.

The dog jumps out with him, and I watch him as he comes around to my side. His body moves with the grace of a lion. Confident and unafraid of anything. He opens my door and helps me down.

I watch Chief Evander’s SUV pull in, followed by Wayne’s car, along with a

motorcycle. We all walk to the building, and I try to ignore all of them. When we get on the elevator, Reed presses his hand into my lower back. It's intimate and controlling, and it reminds me of when we were together. Evander clears his throat, and I'm brought back to the reality of my situation. I step away from Reed. I can't do this. I would be putting him in jeopardy.

When the doors slide open, I'm the first one off, rushing to get away from all of them. As I approach the unit, an uneasy feeling trickles down my spine. I notice the door is slightly ajar. Butcher races in front of me as both Reed and Evander push me back and draw their guns. They enter the condo, leaving Butcher with Wayne and me. He's so quiet I almost forget he's there, until he moves to put himself between me and the stairwells. I stand there with Wayne, my legs trembling as reality sets in. I've been back here for two weeks and have only published one article. I'm already putting my friends and family in danger.

"Everything is destroyed," Evander says as he steps out. He looks at Reed. "You better be licensed to carry that."

"Do I look stupid?" Reed snaps. Evander is about to say something when Reed adds, "Except for where she's concerned. I know I fucked up, but I had my reasons."

I step past them to see the damage.

"I'll get someone in here to clean as soon as I can. Your security detail and company will be here soon," Wayne says as he comes up behind me.

"She already has protection, the best. Besides, she'll be staying at the house now," Reed says with a slight smile on his face. He's pleased that I'm going to be there. I'm not.

"I can't. This is proof that I can't stay near Hartley. I don't want anyone else hurt

because of me. Too many have died so far.” I can’t stop the words. When Reed freezes and stares at me, I quickly look to Wayne for help.

He slowly shakes his head. “He needs to know, my love.”

Reed picks me up and carries me to my bedroom. There is so much destruction. I notice my laptop is gone, but before I can say anything about it, he sets me down and presses me into the now closed door.

“I’m only going to ask this once, Bee. What did you mean?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m a little concussed.” I shake my head and play it off.

“I said. Once.” His tone is firm, his voice deeper than I’ve ever heard it. I look into his eyes that are so close to me, and my heart rate accelerates. I lick my dry lips, and he groans. “Don’t distract me. Explain, now.” He raises his voice, but I’m not afraid of him. He’d never hurt me.

I look deep into his eyes, trying not to give too much away. I can’t stop myself from leaning forward and softly pressing my lips to his. When I pull back, he steps away and stares me down.

“I’m sorry. I had to?—”

He presses into my body, lifting me up, and takes my lips in a deep kiss. His tongue seeks entrance, and I can’t stop him as I open. Our tongues duel for dominance, and I finally give in to him. He presses into me harder, making me groan from the pain against my ribs.

“Sorry.” He pulls back. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

A knock sounds on the door, and we both just continue to stare at each other. He was clean-shaven when he left for the military. I've never kissed someone with facial hair. I reach up with my good arm and touch my lips where they tingle from his kisses.

I have to get him back to hating me or not wanting me, because now I know I can't stay here. I will be arrested for murder when everything is done. I will kill them for what they did to me. What they took from me. From us. For those they took.

"If you know, then you know I was gang raped. You don't want me."

He shocks me when he leans back into my body and whispers against the shell of my ear. "I'll never stop wanting you."

A knock sounds again, and we step back before opening it.

"I can't have you disturbing any more evidence. I have techs coming to dust for prints."

I shake my head at Evander. "They won't let you do that. Your sheriff doesn't want anyone to know what happened to me or who did this. Don't you get it? You work for a dirty man," I shout, beyond frustrated.

"I fucking know that, Blythe. Don't you think I know. I joined the force to find out who attacked my father. I joined to find you," he shouts back.

"Why?" I yell. Moose, Reed's dog, tries to step between Evander and me. I notice Butcher has worked himself closer too.

"Because you're my sister." He freezes as realization fills his face.

I shake my head. "No. No. No." I step back as the betrayal washes through my body.

“He didn’t care that they gang raped me. He didn’t care that I was left for dead.” I turn to Reed. “You don’t get it. None of you do. I died that night. I tried to kill myself so many times afterward. I can’t have anyone close to me because they are cleaning house.”

“You promised it would only be the articles, nothing more,” Wayne says.

“Ha.” A defeated laugh bursts from my body. “I lied. I’m going to kill them all. They won’t get away with hurting anyone else. I won’t be responsible for any more innocent deaths. Sam should have been enough. But then it went on and on. I’m done. There are too many of us that they got away with raping and killing. I should have died that night, like the others. I can’t live like this anymore, Wayne.” I turn back to Reed. “I can’t be a lover or someone’s forever. I’m broken. Damaged.” As I talk, I step further away from them.

Hemingway

She’s retreating, but I won’t allow it. She was alive and passionate in my arms a moment ago. But her words hurt. Sam was killed by the same men who attacked her. I need her to understand that she’s not going to do this, though.

I advance on her as I wave my hand behind me. “Out, now. Moose, go,” I order Wayne and Evander. Moose follows them.

I hear the door close and continue until I have her pressed against the glass, overlooking the beach where I proposed to her. I read the first notes in her file. She was attacked there.

“I won’t let you walk away. You go ahead and bury these men in public opinion with your articles, but you will not kill anyone unless it’s in self-defense.”

She scoffs. “I can do whatever I want.”

I decide to play dirty. “Then Hartley will be raised by the state.” I know she doesn’t want that. She hated never knowing if she was going to be in the same home. She worried all the time that she would lose the Montreys. “If you go after these men with the intent to kill them, I’ll go to prison right along with you, because I want revenge for Sam and Oliver too. I want revenge for what happened to you.”

She drops her head, and it falls to my chest. “There were so many more victims than them. Karyn and Clark. The original detective on the case, and even Hartley’s mom. She got a loaded dose from Elliot.”

“Then let me take care of them while you raise Hartley. He loves you and needs you. I’ll do everything I can to make sure I don’t go to jail too.”

“Okay.” She gives in. When she looks up, I see the tears swimming in her eyes.

“I’m here now.” I wipe away the tear slowly sliding down her face. “I should have been told. We still have so much to discuss.”

“There is so much more that you don’t know yet. Let me finish talking to Evander,” she says as I step back.

We walk to the door together. I have my hand against her back. She isn’t running this time.

She and Evander talk for a bit while I stand there and watch with Wayne.

“She has my mother’s maiden name to protect her. She never moved on,” he shares.

“I’m an idiot.” I let my head fall back on my shoulders and look at the ceiling. I see

the note stuck with a knife over my head and reach for it.

“Hey, Chief.” I point to it as I pull my jacket sleeve over my hand, making sure to grip it with the fabric. I open the letter and know my brothers and I are going hunting soon. Butcher grumbles behind me. He doesn’t talk much and is usually very quiet.

Evander and Blythe walk toward us. I turn it so they can see. It’s a picture of a younger Blythe. She’s bloody and naked, lying on the sand. A broken doll, barely clinging to life. The words “You’ll die this time” are written in red marker across the top.

“Fuck,” Evander says, and Blythe shakes her head.

“Tomorrow, I’ll post more proof of the dirty sheriff.”

“Where’s your laptop?” Wayne asks.

“Missing, but everything is on the cloud. I made sure they couldn’t access any of it. I need your phone.” She holds her hand out to Wayne, and I watch as she dials a number.

“Wayne,” a feminine voice says over the line.

“It’s me, Briar.”

“What’s up, chickee poo?” Briar laughs.

“I have you on speaker. I’m with Wayne, Reed, Chief Evander, and another friend.”

“Reed? As in the Reed.” Something in my chest swells at the thought that she must talk about me to this woman.

“Yes. Focus. I was attacked tonight, and my condo was broken into.”

“What? You said it wouldn’t be dangerous. They wouldn’t recognize you or attack you again.”

“Sorry. You wouldn’t have helped me if I’d been honest.”

“Damn straight, girl. I’ll get a team headed your way.”

“No need, Briar. Between the team I’m hiring and Reed’s brothers, I think we got her now.”

“Good. What else?”

“Track my laptop.”

“Okay. I’ll call you back.” She hangs up, and we wait for the forensic team to arrive.

After an hour, no one has shown up, and Evander calls the station.

“Yes, sir,” he says, and hangs up. “You were right.” He looks at Blythe.

“Let me call someone,” I offer as I step aside. Moose stays with Blythe.

I call Gambit and tell him what happened. He says he’ll have a couple of prospects and his computer guy, Browser, show up.

“Okay, it’s all set. Some prospects will be here in a bit to watch over everything until our guy can get here.”

“I’m going to call the security team I hired,” Wayne says.

“Good. The more eyes, the better. I’m going to get Blythe to the house to rest. I’ll have the prospects grab things after everything is checked out. Butcher, are you coming with us?” I turn to him, and he nods. I then look over at Blythe, who is almost falling over from exhaustion and pain. I help her out of the condo and into my truck. Moose won’t leave her side.

When we pull up to the house, I watch her glance toward the darkness of the Montreys’ old house. I can see the hurt and pain in her eyes.

“Come on. Emersyn texted and said they’ll keep Hartley for the night.”

“Okay.”

I park in the garage, and as the door goes down, I notice a car in the distance with its running lights on. I send a quick text to Butcher as I walk around to Blythe’s side of the truck. I help her out, then follow her into the house. Both of us grew up coming to this house all the time, so we aren’t strangers to the floor plan.

“I’m staying in Sam’s old room. You can have the master.”

“Are you sure?” Her ice-blue eyes stare back at me, filled with torment.

“I’m sure, Bee. Come on.” I lead her upstairs and stop at my room to grab a shirt for her to wear. “You go lie down. I’ll grab you a cup of chamomile tea.” I hand her the shirt, and she nods. I kiss her forehead before she turns and heads for Oliver’s old room.

Once I have her settled in the room with tea and a piece of toast, I head back to the office where I left her file. I start to go through it thoroughly. Flipping back and forth, I notice a chunk of her medical records are missing. I’m confused and run my hand through my hair, messing it up, as a scream rips through the house.

[8]

BLYTHE

Pain radiates through my body as I stare up into the eyes of the man who is going to kill me. His blue eyes look dead and cold. His grin as he squeezes my neck is almost too much. He spits on me, and I feel the saliva slide down my cheek. He releases my neck as I start to feel myself letting go. I take a deep breath, pulling in the air I need, and scream. My voice is scratchy, and it comes as gurgles. He laughs as he squeezes and twists my nipple. I pull in more oxygen, and this time, I scream long and loud.

Light bursts around me, and I come up in the bed, looking at the shadow of someone standing in the doorway.

“Bumblebee, it’s me.” I hear Reed’s voice.

I’m still caught in the nightmare. “No, you can’t be here. I failed, and you can’t see how bad.”

“Blythe, you didn’t fail.”

“I did. Look.” I reach down, feeling the sand and blood in my fingers, and hold it up. “I couldn’t protect our baby.” I cry, the sobs wracking my body as I show him my failure. “You have to hate me now.”

“Oh my God, Bumblebee.” He walks toward me, and I push away from him, feeling something against my back. He touches my leg, and my breath whooshes from my

body. The trembling stops, and I'm no longer there in that place that still haunts me.

"Oh God." My head falls back as I realize it was all a nightmare.

"Blythe." His voice cracks, and I see the horror on his face.

The dream comes back to me. What I said. What I thought.

"A baby." He chokes, and I see the tears in his eyes. He drops his head, and his shoulders shake. My horror is known.

"It's why I was on the beach that night. I was trying to figure out how I was going to tell you. They attacked me, and I lost the baby. I'm no good." I cry harder. "I—" My voice cracks, and I press a hand to my throat. "I tr-ried. I fought."

Reed slides next to me and pulls me into his arms. "You did fight. I believe you. I don't blame you. I blame them."

A shadow appears in the hall, and I jump into Reed's arms, screaming.

"It's just me," a soft, gravelly voice says from the doorway.

"Butcher, we are okay," Reed says as he holds me tightly to his body.

"I'll be back. I'm securing the house." And he's gone.

I realize, minutes later, as I watch where Butcher was just standing, that this is the first time I've heard him speak. And then I realize I'm in Reed's arms, his chest bare and hot against my skin. I start to push away, but he holds me tighter.

"Don't," he says before he leans against the headboard and adjusts me into his side.

I start to drift off again, but when I shift into a more comfortable position, I groan from the pain.

“Do you want a pain med?” Reed whispers into the top of my head, his breath brushing against my forehead. His musky scent and warmth surround me, and it’s like coming home after so long.

I know he’s different, and I’m definitely different, but I don’t know if I have the strength to pull away from him again. It almost killed me the last time.

“Blythe, did you hear me?” Reed’s fingers dance along my chin and lift my face up to look at him.

In the dim light, I see they are still shiny from his loss. I can’t help myself. I’ve always comforted him. I’ve always been there for him.

I slide up in the bed and throw my leg over his lap, straddling his hips. Taking his face between my hands, I feel the tickle of his beard against my palms. The sensation makes me tremble. His hands grip my waist, and I know he’s going to be a gentleman and push me away. He thinks I’m too lost for this. I might have been, but I’m not that woman any longer. I’m tired of waiting for what I want and denying myself.

I take in his chest, covered in tattoos and muscles. He didn’t have those when we were together.

“You don’t have to do this, bumblebee.”

I cut him off as I lean forward and kiss his lips. I’ve missed them for the last nine years. His arms wrap around my body as he groans and pulls me closer to him. I moan into his mouth when I feel his hard cock through his jeans against my core. His tongue slides along mine, and we get to know each other again. It’s a heady mix of

bliss and aching need all at once. My hands are in his long hair, and I pull on it before scraping my nails along his scalp.

He rips his mouth from mine.

“I want you. Fuck, I want you so much, Blythe, but I also just want to hold you and comfort you.” His voice is thick with emotion.

I moan and grind myself down on him. He throws his head back and slams it into the headboard.

“Blythe, I can’t.”

I shake my head, refusing his words. “Please, Reed, it’s been so long since I felt you inside me,” I beg. “I swear, other than that night, I’ve never been with another man. Please.” I lean forward and kiss his nipple, slowly sucking it between my lips.

He moans and buries his hands in my hair.

Hemingway

She’s fucking undoing me. Her words about only ever being with me hit hard. She’s still mine. She never stopped being mine. I drag her up my body, bringing her face to face with me.

“Blythe, if we do this, it’s a second chance. I’m not going to sleep with you if you’re thinking about heading back to wherever it is you were. You also got hurt earlier tonight. You are still raw from that.” I cup her face, and I see the tears in her eyes. She thinks I’m going to turn her down. I know her actions are partially from the adrenaline pumping through her, the need to prove she’s alive after the attack and nightmare. “But, bumblebee, you’re going to be on top, because if I roll you under

me, I'm going to pound the fuck out of you." I pull her lips to mine and kiss her softly, wanting to cherish her in this moment. She needs to know I don't see her any differently after what she went through.

I kiss down her neck, dragging my tongue along her skin. She still tastes the same. Honeysuckle bursts on my tongue, and memories of before flash through my mind. My hands slide down her body, and I drag the T-shirt over her head and toss it aside. Her beautiful ivory skin glows in the backlight from the hall. Her nipples are pierced, and I lean forward, taking one in my mouth and sucking it deep. Her hips rock against me, and my cock is so hard, I feel like I'm going to burst in my jeans.

Blythe's hands and nails drag down my chest as her head drops back, and she moans. When she reaches the waist of my jeans, she moves to my buckle, pulling away from me and taking her nipple with her. She shifts back to unbuckle my belt. Pulling it free, she tosses it to the side before unfastening the button. I lift her off me and roll to the side of the bed, where I strip off my jeans but leave on my boxers. Blythe is kneeling on the bed in her panties. She has tattoos on her arms, her belly button is pierced, and her body is lined with lean muscles and curves. It's the tattoo under her right breast that stops my heart. Before we continue, I need to ask her a question.

"Bee, I need to know something."

"I need you in this bed right now without those boxers." Her eyes move up and down my body, stopping at my erect cock pressing against my boxers, the head weeping and leaving a wet spot. As she stares, the more it weeps.

Her fearless, sexual aggression turns me on. My old Blythe could barely ask for what she wanted, but this woman knows and isn't afraid to demand it.

"Fuck, baby, I want you too, but answer my question first."

Her eyes flash to mine, and for a moment, I see the worry in their ice blue depths before she blinks and covers it up. I step closer and lift her chin so she's looking at me. She's unable to lie if she's looking me in the eye.

“Why did you leave me? Was it the rape? Were you embarrassed? Or were you trying to protect me?”

She tries to pull away, but I won't let her go. She looks over my shoulder for a moment, but I squeeze my thumb and finger to get her attention back on me.

“Tell me,” I say, and she pulls her lip between her teeth. I pull it out with a touch of force on her chin. “Please.”

“I can't.” She takes a deep breath.

“I will always hurt for the baby, but you are the most important person in my world.” I give her some truth. “I did everything I could to end my life after you left.” I take her hand and drag it to my hip. Shifting my boxers aside, I trace her fingers along the scars from the bullet, surgery, and fall.

“I know.” She drops her eyes to look. “Wayne helped me keep up on your progress. I also have a hacker friend who helped me. I cried so hard when I found out you were hurt.” Her delicate fingers trace the scars, and for the first time in years, it's as if she's healing me. Acceptance washes over me, knowing that my scars don't turn her off. “I left because I knew I couldn't stay, not after Sam was killed and they threatened to kill you too.” Her voice is so soft and quiet, I can barely hear her. I lift her face back up to me and take her lips in a soft kiss.

She wraps her hand around my cock and starts pumping. My knees almost buckle. I push her onto the bed and slide a hand into her panties, where I find her wet and ready for me. My mouth waters for a taste, and I slide down her body, making her

release my cock that was about to burst.

I rip her panties from her body and drag my tongue up her core. She bucks her hips when I reach her clit. Her hands bury in my hair, and she pulls me in tighter. Opening her lips up so I can see her pink pussy, I groan with how sweet her taste is on my tongue. I can't control myself any longer and dive into her, eating her as if she's my last meal, and she will be my last. I'll kill every man who hurt her, and I'll be the only man she'll ever have between her legs again.

I fuck my tongue into her, over and over, feeling how tight she still is. Moving up to her clit, I suck it deep as I insert two fingers in her. She screams, and I know the intrusion was almost too much, but I can't stop myself. I need her to feel me there afterward for a while. Her words that I've been the only man to make love to her roll through my mind, and I know I have to make this special for her. I get her off, then roll us so she's over me as I slide my boxers off.

"Take me in, baby," I order her, and she rises up over me.

Her skin is flushed from her orgasm, and my beard and mustache smell like her. It calms me for a moment. She grips my cock and pumps it a couple of times. When precum glistens at the top, she bends down and sucks me deep.

"Blythe, I'm going to come inside that pussy. Ride me, Bee," I command and watch as her eyes flair. She likes when I tell her what to do.

She positions herself over my cock and slowly slides down it. It takes some time. Fuck, she feels virgin tight. By the time her ass is flush with my groin, we are both breathing hard. I'm doing everything I can to not come, but she's perfect. She arches her back, and my grip on her hips tightens as she starts to move over me. My fingers dig into her flesh, and something inside me snaps. I'm marking her. I rise up and take the edge of her nipple between my lips and suck. I move to the other and do the same.

Everyone is going to know she's mine, and I'll kill for her.

I'm no longer afraid of what the future holds for us because I'm never letting her go again. I'll chase her ass down.

My goddess moves, circling her hips as she rides me. I slam up into her every so often, giving her a bit more. When I feel my spine tingling, I slide a hand to clit and thumb it. She screams as she comes, and I slam into her, over and over, until I come deep inside her. Something primal inside me howls when I realize I didn't wear a condom.

She falls to my chest, and I wrap her in my arms, letting her rest for a moment before I slide out of her body to clean us both. She falls asleep in my arms, and for the first time in years, I sleep through the night.

[9]

BLYTHE

I stretch, my body aching in places it hasn't in a long time. Reed woke me up a couple of hours ago and made love to me again. I wanted a one and done, but now I know I can't do that to either of us. I roll to the side and stand from the bed. The door is closed, and Moose is lying next to it as if he's protecting me. I wonder where Reed is for all of two seconds, until I smell bacon and coffee. I find his shirt and slip it on. My panties are ruined on the floor, so I drop them in the trash when I go to the bathroom. Pulling my hair up into a messy knot, I notice all the love bites along my neck. Lifting the shirt, I see the hickeys on my breasts and at my thighs. Reed marked me.

My hand goes to my stomach as I think about the fact we didn't use condoms. I'm not sure I'm ready to get pregnant again, but I guess we'll have to discuss that.

When I finally step off the last step of the stairs onto the main floor, Reed is standing at the stove with his back to me. I see the large tattoo on his back of a shark. I notice the scars peeking out of the top of his jeans along his hip. He must sense me because he turns and gives me a slow smile. He crooks his finger at me, and I scan the great room to make sure we are alone before I move toward him.

He pulls me in as soon as I'm close. I wrap my arms around him and kiss his chest before looking up at him.

"Bumblebee, are you hungry?"

I nod, not wanting him to hear my morning voice. I try to pull away, needing some tea to help soothe my throat so I can talk.

“Nope, you aren’t leaving until I get a kiss.”

My lips tip up as I feel warmth burst through my chest. I lean up so he can kiss me, and as soon as we part, I’m breathless and needy for him again.

Moving to the pod style coffee maker, I set it up for a cup of tea. I can hear the news in the background as I wait for the hot beverage.

“In today’s news, Sheriff Miles Baylor has been removed from office. His deputy chief has stepped in as his replacement. Sheriff Castor Evander is following in his father’s footsteps as the new acting sheriff. Several deputies were also removed from their positions by the state police. This all stems from an article stating Sheriff Baylor had been using his office to groom young girls and cover up crimes. The state police came in today and cleaned house.” The news reporter goes on to explain that Baylor’s house was searched, and evidence was retrieved of several sexual assaults done by him and a group of other men. I know pictures of me will be in the collected evidence. I stand there, staring off, thinking about how that one article has already started a ripple effect. I focus on the television, waiting to hear if Randall is finally going to pay for his crimes. “Other names have not been released, but the state police are investigating the allegations.” My heart drops. His father is going to get him clear of this. I know it. I wish I had my laptop to publish more articles. There is a pause in the report as the woman looks down and holds her ear as she listens.

“We have a live report coming from across town now. Let’s head to the correspondent.”

The screen changes to a woman standing in front of a car wash across town. A car in the background is surrounded by police, and I see Castor standing there. I know I

need to address what he told me, but it's something I can't focus on right now. It hurts that his father never acknowledged me, and now, it's too late. He helped bury my rape so Randall and his friends wouldn't be caught.

"Hello, I'm coming to you live outside the Sudsy Fresh Car Wash on Eighteenth Street downtown. The body of a man was found inside this car." She points to the vehicle. "From what I've been able to glean, it appears to be a suicide. The victim drove into the car wash and then shot himself while going through." She stops, and sirens can be heard over the screen. The camera pans out as state police vehicles pull into the lot. The men get out and walk to Castor, and he talks to them. "This is interesting." The reporter walks over to the tape and holds her mic up to a deputy. "Can you identify the victim? Why are the state police here? Does this have anything to do with the former sheriff?" She peppers him with questions, and he doesn't respond. A woman in a suit is walking up from behind the deputy and steps to the tape.

"No comment at this time. A press conference will be held in a couple of hours in front of the courthouse. Thank you," she says and turns away. I feel Reed's arms around me.

"Do you know whose car that is?" His voice is husky, and I place a hand to my throat, trying to clear it and speak, but nothing comes out. He unwraps himself from around me and hands me the tea, as if he knows. He doesn't say anything, just watches as I take a sip and sigh.

"No. Do you?" My voice is huskier sounding, and I know it's from all the screaming I did when we made love.

"It's Doore's." I turn back to the screen, my eyes locking on the classic car, with its pristine body and shiny paint job. The technicians working the scene have sheets covering the front so we can't see the blood and gore inside. I tremble at the thought.

“That’s Elliot’s car? How do you know?”

“I ran a check on him last night to see what he drives.”

“Did you have something to do with that?” I wave my hand to the screen.

“No, Bee. I was with you, remember?”

“Yeah.” I nod, feeling a bit punch-drunk. Elliot, the man who attacked me yesterday, is dead.

A couple of hours later, after we’ve eaten and another round of sex, we’re sitting on the sofa, watching the news again. A live press conference identifies Elliot Doore as the victim who took his own life. His car was full of evidence and proof that he’s sexually assaulted underage girls. I’m in shock as the report continues. Authorities searched his house and found further proof of cash payments from the former sheriff and a member of a political figure’s team. They don’t identify who, but Reed and I know. He pulls me closer, his arm draped over my shoulder.

The front door opens, and Reed, as smooth as can be, has a gun in his hand and pointed at the entrance.

“It’s me.” Butcher’s deep voice comes from the entry.

I pull the lap blanket covering my legs up to hide the fact I’m only in a T-shirt.

Reed tucks the gun back into the edge of the sofa, and Butcher steps into the room.

“Got some clothes for Blythe.” He tosses a bag onto a chair, and I jump up, keeping the blanket wrapped around me to grab the bag.

“When is Hartley coming home?” I ask before I step out of the room.

“I’ll set him up to be here later.” Reed’s voice has a distracted sound to it, and I turn to find him in a staring contest with Butcher.

“Everything okay?”

“Yep. Go take a shower, baby. I’ll be up in a bit.”

I smile and head up to my room, where I take a long shower, hoping Reed will come join me, but he doesn’t.

Hemingway

I wait until I hear the door close upstairs before I confront him.

“You did it, didn’t you?”

“I’m not going to lie to you, so don’t ask me questions that could make you an accomplice.”

“Why?”

I don’t know why Butcher would put himself into our situation like this. I know he could do it. Not only was he a part of an organization that trained people to be assassins, but he was contracted to the government to get rid of people. As the term goes, he had a license to kill.

“I heard what happened to her. I’m not into her like that, so don’t get all hot and bothered like Gambit does for his girl. I don’t like men who abuse women. But like I said, don’t ask me a question you don’t want to be involved in. That’s the other

reason. You deserve a chance with her.” He waves his hand toward the stairs. “I don’t have a future, but you do.”

“Don’t say that, man.” I thump him on the arm. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. Ever.” He raises a brow, and I know what he’s trying to convey.

A few hours after having dinner, my cell rings, and I see Striker’s name.

“What’s up?”

“Come in now. All hands on deck.”

I look at the clock and notice it’s late. “Can’t, bud, I have Bly and Hartley.”

“Bring them in. They will be safe at the compound. There was an attack this evening. I’m clearing out the clubhouse now.”

“Okay.”

I don’t question him further but gently wake up Blythe, who fell asleep on my shoulder as we watched a movie. I look over to where Hartley is cuddled into her other side.

“Time to go.” Butcher walks into the room.

“What’s going on?”

“We have to go. Club business.”

“Okay. Hartley and I will be okay here.”

“Hell no, baby. Come on. You are coming with us. Get dressed.” She’s in a pair of pajamas that hang from her hips, and the tank top shows her pebbled nipples. I toss the blanket at her so she doesn’t show Butcher all her sexiness.

We pull up to the clubhouse as several cars are leaving, but I know it’s going to take time to get everyone out. I circle to the side entrance, where all the private rooms are located. I help her out of the truck, then open the back door for Hartley.

“Okay, they are still getting people out that were here partying. I don’t want either of you outside my room. Got that?” I wait until they both confirm. I slip off my cut and hand it to Blythe. “When you are in here, you need to wear this, just in case.”

“In case of what?”

“It’s so everyone knows you’re mine.”

She smirks and raises a brow. “Yours?” she asks in her husky voice, and I realize I better get her some tea to help soothe her throat.

I want to fuck her hard as I watch her slip into my cut but can’t with Hartley here.

I direct them to my room and leave them there while I go find out what’s going on.

[10]

BLYTHE

I wake up and see that Hartley is still sleeping. I don't see Reed. He never came to bed last night, and I'm worried this has something to do with me.

I'm glad the men who hurt me are finally getting justice, but I don't want anyone else to get hurt. I promised Reed I'd stay in the room, but I'm tired of sitting here without him. I leave a quick note beside Hartley, letting him know I'll be right back, and then slip out of the room.

Following the long hall, I hear voices and make my way to the front of the building. The hall opens into a large bar room. There are tables all around, and I see couples lying on sofas and a couple half dressed women on tables. The reality of what Reed had before I returned hits me for a moment, and I stare at the woman nearest to me. She's in a tiny leather skirt that barely covers her ass. She doesn't have a top on, and her overly inflated breasts are on display. I had to have breast augmentation with implants after the attack, but mine don't look anything like hers.

"What you staring at, bitch? You into chicks?" she slurs as she sits up.

I start to step back, but then decide to stand my ground.

Reed chose me.

"Trying to figure out why you're still here when I heard they were clearing the

tramps out.”

She jumps down from the table, and the others start to stir. She walks toward me, but I don’t back down.

“Tramp,” she says, then stops as she stares at me. I look down and realize I’m still in Reed’s cut. “What the fuck are you doing wearing Hem’s cut?”

“Hem?” I’m confused. I’ve heard that name referred to him a couple of times, but I don’t know why. I look down at the vest again and take in the name tag. Hemingway.

The name hits me, and my gut twists.

“I asked you a question, bitch.” She moves closer to me, and on instinct, I bring up my elbow, biting my tongue when it causes a pull in my chest. I shift to the side so if I have to defend myself, I’m prepared. I hear a bark before Moose is between the woman and me.

“Candy, get the fuck out. You were already told twice.” Reed’s voice echoes through the room. I don’t take my eyes off the woman because she’s still close enough to attack me.

She huffs and steps back. “Put a leash on your bitch, Hem,” she says as she turns to grab a shirt and slip it over her head.

“I’m not a bitch.”

“Come here, Bly,” he orders me, and I move around her. He takes my hand and leads me from the room. Reed pushes the door of the first room he comes to open and drags me inside. “I told you to stay in the room.”

“I’m getting hungry, and I need some tea. Plus, you’ve been gone a long time.”

“I’ve been in meetings and keeping an eye out for trouble.”

“Is this because of me?”

“No, babe. Someone went after Gambit’s girl and her adopted family. Leif and his girl, Ridley, were both shot.”

“Leif! I need to go.” I head toward the door, but he stops me.

“You can’t.” He pulls me into his body. “It’s too dangerous. Castor called and said the state police searched Randall’s house today. Nolan disappeared. He’s worried about you.”

“But Rika could need me.”

“Nope, her husband has her on lockdown with his brother’s guards on her while he helps Ridley.”

“I’m confused. Guards? I just met Ridley.”

“Ridley is Grey’s sister. Their other brother is the head of the Vegas Bratva. Rika is under heavy guard, so you won’t be able to get to her. She’s not at the hospital. The group that is after Ridley is also after her adopted daughter, who is here on the compound in hiding.”

“That’s a lot,” I croak, the stress causing my voice to crack. “Tell me why your road name is Hemingway.”

Reed pulls me into his arms and kisses me.

“I always carry a book with me.” He doesn’t have to explain further. I know what book he carries. I gave it to him.

“You still have it?” I can’t believe he didn’t destroy it after how bad I hurt him by leaving. He told me he was angry, but now that he knows why, he’s not anymore.

“Kept this too, even though you sent it back to me.” He reaches into the front pocket of his jeans and pulls out the engagement ring I haven’t seen since the night of the attack.

My tears start flowing, and he holds me tighter.

“I didn’t send it to you. They took it from me that night.”

We both look down at the small, simple diamond ring, and I can’t believe how badly we’ve been manipulated. Randall has been watching both of us.

“This means we are both loose ends. You can’t leave either.” The fear is instant, and my chest aches.

“I’ll be okay, baby.” He leans down and kisses my lips softly, but as usual, our kisses turn steamy, and he’s angling my head to the side.

My hands grip his sides when a voice ricochets off the walls.

“Where is he?” a woman with a slight accent yells, and we jump apart.

“Hem, she won’t stay put. I tried,” another guy says, looking at Reed.

“I want to know where Gavin is right now.”

We all look at her. I don't know who Gavin is. I glance at Reed, who looks confused for a moment until recognition dawns on him.

"Gambit! Where is he?" The angrier she gets, the thicker her accent becomes. She's tiny, with blue eyes and brown hair streaked with lighter caramel highlights. Her skin is pale, and she looks like she isn't out of her teens.

"He's out looking for Crank," Reed says in a calming voice as he pulls me close again and wraps an arm over my shoulder.

"I need a phone," she says, and neither Reed nor the other guy hand her one, so I give her mine.

She dials a number and speaks to someone for a bit before telling them she's on her way.

She looks at me with a soft smile before saying, "I'll owe you."

She opens my car service app and orders a ride before handing my phone back to me. She then takes off out of the room.

"Stay here," Reed orders as he runs after her.

Moments later, he walks back in, talking on the phone.

"He's got her, Prez. She ran to an Uber, and it was him. He took off with her. She was trying to go to the hospital," Reed says. I hear the person on the other end yell, then silence. "He'll call back." Reed pulls me toward the kitchen area. As we pass the main room, I notice it's cleared out of women, and the drunks are awake, moving around.

Before we get to the kitchen, his phone rings. He answers it, and I can hear a man yelling before he hangs up on Reed.

“Okay, Bee, I’ll have a prospect get Hartley and bring him in here. You’ll have to make breakfast. Stay here. I have to go help Gambit get his girl back.”

“Wasn’t she a teenager?” My voice rises in shock.

“She’s an adult in college.”

“Okay, we’ll stay here.” I know he needs to focus on his task so he doesn’t worry.

After he leaves with a kiss from me and a hug from Hartley, I make breakfast for everyone, not just us. Not all the men left with Reed. Butcher is standing in the corner, watching me as I work around the kitchen.

[11]

BLYTHE

I hold Reed's hand with one of mine and Hartley's with the other as we walk through the doors of the care facility. I don't want to be here, but over the past two months, Castor has bugged me repeatedly to do this. With a week left before I leave for the book signing in Texas, this is the best time to finally do it.

Since Elliot's death, the state police have continued their investigations. Now, the former sheriff has also been found dead of an apparent suicide. I should find it odd that both of them died by self-inflicted gunshot wounds, but I don't. As far as I'm concerned, it's karma. There are only two of them left, and I don't see Randall swallowing a bullet. He's too egotistical for that.

Wayne walks behind us, wanting to see if Castor has more information on the investigation into Max's attack. I still don't know why Castor's father chose to go against me before, but now wants to treat me like a daughter.

We move as a group past the nurse's station, and I spot Castor standing outside a doorway, talking to a doctor. He turns to me as we approach.

"You came. Thank you." He pauses, running his hand through his brownish-blond hair. His hair is a shade darker than mine, but he and I have the same eyes. "They don't know how much longer his heart can keep going."

We enter the room, and I'm immediately drawn to the bed where he lies, staring at

the ceiling. He doesn't acknowledge our presence. Castor mentioned he's been like this since waking from the coma after the attack. His eyes will sometimes flick around, but he doesn't speak and seems trapped in his mind. I know Castor is hoping that by some miracle my being here will pull him from his vegetative state.

"You can take his hand," Castor says as he moves to the other side of the bed. I stand with Reed for a moment before I approach the bed.

I lean over him to see if he'll look at me, but he looks right through me. It makes my heart hurt that he's suffering, but I can't help but think this is karma. I take his hand and lean close to his ear.

"I survived. I'm stronger than all of you," I whisper. "I already have a father and don't need you." I stand up straight and release his hand, but he squeezes mine, holding me in place. "He won't let go of my hand." I look to Castor in shock.

"What did you say to him?" he asks, his voice trembling.

"I told him I was stronger than all of them." I don't share the rest.

"He's never responded to me like that. I told you it would work."

I can't deceive Castor. "I'm not the hero here. I'm not going to save him. I don't need him. He left me for them to kill. He let them kill Sam, my foster parents, and Oliver. I won't let any of them hurt anyone else I love." I pull my hand from Max's and turn to see Wayne and Hartley remained by the door. Reed takes my hand, and again, as a group, we walk out of the room.

I try not to think about how sad it was to see him like that. Instead, I focus on the pain of what he did to me. I still have enough hate in my system for him.

By the time we get back to the house, I'm itching for a run. I change and am about to head out when Reed stops me at the door.

"You can't go out there. They're still out there."

"I don't care anymore." I huff, knowing I'm being emotional, but I'm tired of living a life under constant protection. I'm tired of hiding. Why do I have to change my life for them? They should be the ones suffering now, not me.

I turn back toward the door, and before I can get it opened, I'm thrown over Reed's shoulder. Moose chuffs, letting him know to be careful with me. We dropped Hartley off for hockey practice, and he'll be dropped off here afterward. Sometimes I stay to watch him with the other mothers, but today I was too upset after seeing Max. Emmy said she'd bring him home for me.

Reed carries me up the stairs and throws me down on the bed. In the time since we first slept together, he's been gentle with me, but this time he's not. He grips the waist of my running tights and yanks them down my legs. I'm naked from the waist down. He unfastens his belt and opens his fly. He doesn't even drop his pants completely before entering me in one long thrust.

"I'll fuck this mood out of you, Bee," he growls as he pulls my top up over my head and throws it aside. "I don't like seeing you leave the house in these tight as fuck running clothes for one. For two, it's time I fucked my baby in you again. I'm tired of waiting."

I stare up at him in shock. We talked about waiting to have a baby. That I wasn't ready. I've been making him wear a condom, but he's in me bare again. He pumps into me in hard thrusts, and before I can get mad at him, I'm lost to the sensations. He grips my breasts in his hands, taking me harder than he's ever before. There is a slight bite of pain and fear, but I'm not scared of him. I'm afraid that I actually like this.

Moaning, I grab his wrists and look up at him. “Fuck me harder,” I demand, and his eyes flare wide as he starts moving again, over and over.

I’m climbing, and that anxiety attack I could feel coming on is no longer there. It’s just him and me. Our bodies moving. I meet each of his thrusts, so he practically bottoms out inside me.

My orgasm hits hard, and I scream, my voice cracking. Reed groans as he comes too. I feel him ejaculating inside me and instantly regret it. I’m scared to be pregnant again when there is still danger out there.

“Take it all, baby,” Reed demands as he continues pumping into me.

When he finally pushes me up the bed and climbs in with me, we both lie there for a bit. I’m trying to process everything that just happened.

“I’m tired of us living our lives in fear, but I still can’t let you out to run without Butcher going with you, and he’s on an assignment right now.”

“I’ll run on the treadmill,” I concede.

“Take a nap. I’m sorry I was so rough with you, baby.” He leans in to kiss me, then rolls out of bed.

I think about his words for a bit. He wants to get me pregnant. He’s not scared, but on top of all that, he’s worried about being rough with me. I loved him being rough. I want more of it. I’d love more of it, but will he always fear I’m going to break?

I roll to the side, feeling the edges of the panic attack coming back to me. Tears start to roll down my face. I’m not strong enough to carry his baby if he’s afraid of fucking me hard.

I know what I need to do. I quietly move around the room, gathering everything I need.

Hemingway

“Hem, why does Auntie Blythe only call you Reed? Why doesn’t she call you Hemingway like the rest of us?” Hartley asks, dipping his French fries into the ketchup.

I look toward the stairs and wonder if she’s sleeping well. It’s been a couple of hours since I fucked her so hard I brought tears to her eyes. It killed me, and I’m still mad at myself for losing control. It’s why I went straight to the gym downstairs and worked off the anger at myself on the machines. When Hartley came home, I avoided going back upstairs to check on her. I made him dinner without her.

I think of his question for only a moment. “Buddy, when you find a woman who’s yours, you only want her to call you by your name. Not a road name or a nickname that everyone calls you. You’ll understand when you’re older.”

“Oh, okay.”

He eats more of the hamburger and fries I made. I glance over at the patty waiting to be cooked for Blythe when she comes down.

Hartley looks down at his plate and huffs for a moment. “When you and Auntie Blythe get married and have kids, will you send me to foster care?”

“What?” He pulls me from my thoughts of Blythe. “Why would you think that?”

“Billy said I was going to go into the system because I have no family.”

I reach across the table and take his smaller hand in mine. “Buddy, I’m never sending you away, and neither is Auntie Blythe. We are yours now. Got it?”

He nods his head, and I fluff his hair.

Moose comes in from outside and lies by my feet. I look at him, then the stairs. Normally, he’ll go right to her side if she’s here. In an instant, my gut rolls, and I jump up and run for the stairs. I take them two at a time as Hartley yells for me. I swing the bedroom door open and see the empty bed.

“Fuck,” I roar and slam my fist into the wall next to me.

She ran away, and I don’t know why. That’s why the house was so quiet. I remember coming up from the gym and thinking about that, but I thought she was just sleeping soundly. I glance around the room and notice some things are missing, including her new laptop.

“Where is Auntie Bly?” Hartley asks from the doorway.

“About to get her ass in trouble is where,” I say as I pull out my phone and dial the one man who can help me.

After the situation with Gambit’s old lady, Franci, being taken, I did the same thing Gambit did and put a tracker on my girl. He gave me the number for his hacker in case I ever needed to find her.

“Hey, Hem, what’s up?” Browser answers the phone.

“Blythe is on the run.”

“Okay, let me look.” I hear him typing away, then he laughs. “How long has she been

missing?”

“Why?”

“Well, dude, she’s on a plane.”

“Fuck.” I can’t believe I was giving her time to herself, and she was running from me.

I hang up after asking him to track her and get the flight information. I need to have someone stay with Hartley while I go get my wayward woman.

An hour later, I have everything arranged, including the next flight out to Dallas. Butcher is going with me, and Striker is going to hang out here with Hartley at the house. We need to keep him under protection, just in case they try to come after him. But I worry they’ll go after Blythe now that she’s out in the open.

“Come on, Butcher.”

[12]

BLYTHE

As soon as the plane landed, I headed to the luxury hotel where the Motorcycles, Mobsters, and Mayhem author event was being held and checked in. I was a couple of days early, but I didn't care. I used an alias so that no one can find me. Part of me thinks Reed will wash his hands of me, and the other part hopes he'll come to me. But I don't really know. I want him to. I want him to chase me this time.

I keep telling myself I need this time to figure out what I want, but I already knew before the plane landed. I want to be home with the man I'm still in love with. I want to raise Hartley, and God willing, someday I want to have another baby. I want to experience life. I want to stop hiding from it and pretending.

Last night was the meet-and-greet dinner, and I had the chance to meet several authors I'm hoping to connect with today. I've got a great start on my article, and I'm actually enjoying myself more than I expected. When I met Sapphire Knight, the organizer of the event, she invited me to stop by her table to check out her books and swag. At the table I sat at, I found out how many authors write across multiple sub-genres of romance. This event specializes in motorcycle clubs, mafia, and mayhem or suspense.

I learned that several of the MC authors did extensive research to make their clubs as realistic as possible, without falling into the clichés we see on TV. I didn't mention that I'm currently with a man who's in a club.

A few of the authors told me they even dress up in their leather vests or mafia attire. Liberty Parker shared that she and her husband both have vests with patches on them. I told her I'd stop by her table and grab some if she had any available.

I wait outside the doors with the other readers, listening in on their excitement as they talk about their favorite authors. Some of them discuss preorders and special exclusive covers they can't wait to collect.

When the doors open, I'm shocked. It's like walking into a massive comic con event, minus the costumes. Authors are stationed at tables arranged in rows, filling the expansive ballroom. Their banners are raised high so readers can easily find them. I scan the sea of decorations and names. Nikki Landis, Penny Anglene, Winter Travers, and so many more. I decide to do a lap first, taking it all in before I start stopping at tables to inspect the books and swag. I ask if I can interview different authors, telling them it's for my magazine. Several agree and open up, sharing their stories and the reasons they write romance.

By midday, my feet are killing me. I glance down at my red heels and cringe. I've noticed that several of the authors are wearing more practical footwear since they're constantly on their feet, taking pictures with readers. Some are in tennis shoes, boots, or other comfortable options. They must be more accustomed to this than I am. I wear heels all the time at work back in LA, but I don't stand in them for as long as these people do.

Stopping at DM Earl's table, I look at her swag and pick up a book about an all-women's motorcycle club in Montana. I turn when I hear a murmur ripple through the crowd, and my eyes almost pop out of my head. There are plenty of sexy cover models walking around, but stalking toward me is the sexiest man I've ever seen. I feel my blood pump faster through my veins.

His dark hair is tousled, telling me he's been running his fingers through it. He's

wearing his cut with a T-shirt underneath, the sleeves of his tattoos peeking out. When I got my latest tattoo on my upper chest, just below my neck, he got one on his neck too. The angel wings spread from his Adam's apple and stretch down along the sides. He said he got it for the baby we lost.

I feel my knees weaken for a moment. He doesn't stop until he's standing right in front of me.

Hemingway

Walking through the crowd, I notice all the women looking at us, but I only have eyes for one woman. I followed the tracker straight to her. She's standing at an author's table. From behind, I see she's in a deep gray pantsuit that molds to her ass, and I plan on having those red high heels digging into my back later.

When she turns, I'm not only pissed but turned on. Under her jacket, she doesn't have a shirt on, only a vest. Her beautiful bumblebee tattoo with roses is on full display, and so is her cleavage. I glance around and see the attention she's getting from both men and women with how beautiful she is. Her long blond hair is down in waves, and she has minimal makeup on, except for the lipstick that almost matches her heels.

I don't stop until we are toe to toe. Reaching out, I pull her into my body.

"Bee, what are you doing here without me?" I watch her breathing pick up, and she pulls that full bottom lip between her teeth.

"I'm working." She tries to brush me off, but the huskiness of her voice gives her away. She wants me here.

I lean down to her ear, making sure I brush my beard along her cheek. She trembles in my arms.

“Baby, you left without saying goodbye. I wanted to fuck you again.”

That’s the sentence that breaks her out of the fog, and now I know what set her off.

She turns and whispers in my ear, “I thought you didn’t like to fuck me. You only want to make gentle love to me.”

“Is that what you want? Hard, deep, and commanding, or do you want it slow and sweet?”

I hate having this conversation with people around, but I know my girl. She won’t go anywhere with me until I address everything with her. It also turns her on that others can hear what I’m telling her.

She leans back and looks me in the eye. “I want it all with you.”

Her words mean so much more than what we are really discussing. I take her mouth in a deep kiss and hear people cheering around us. When I pull back, her lips are fuller, and she’s flushed, just like I love to see her.

I gently pull her off to the side to tell her what’s going on. “Babe, you are in danger, and we need to keep you safe.”

“But I have a job to do, and I’m tired of Randall dictating what I can and can’t do.”

“We are all tired too, but Nolan was found dead yesterday. He hung himself, leaving Randall holding the bag with evidence of his and his father’s illicit deals.”

“Shoot. Did they arrest them?”

“Randall Jr. was arrested while trying to flee, but they haven’t been able to locate

Randall III at all. A friend of mine, who's better at computers than me, found he boarded a private jet, destination unknown. No flight plan was registered."

"Okay. I promise I'll stay with you and Butcher." I pull her into me by her neck, and she rests her head against my chest. I'm finally at peace for a moment. I've been worried about her since Browser told me Randall was missing.

"Come on." I take her hand, and we walk around. "I'll stick with you while you finish up, then we'll get something to eat." Butcher hovers behind us.

We walk up to another author's table, and I step back as Blythe asks her questions and chats with the author. When the author turns to me and asks if she can get a picture with me, I chuckle and move toward her, letting her assistant take our picture in front of a banner. I hate stepping away from my girl, but I know this is her job, and I won't ruin it for her. Other women start asking for pictures with me, and before long, I realize I'm surrounded. I can't see Blythe anymore. I turn and see Butcher looking for her too. Last I saw, she stepped back from the crowd, and now she's gone.

I move through the crowd, looking for her but don't see her. I know she didn't just walk off. She said she wanted it all. She's ready to stop running and pushing me away.

Butcher is looking down at his phone and gestures that he's heading off in the direction it gives. I continue to push through the crowds, trying to be respectful. Before I breach the doors into the lobby, a gunshot sounds, and people scream and run in panic. I rush into the lobby, heading toward the sound. Butcher is sprawled on the floor, and I kneel to check him as I glance around for where the shot came from.

He pushes me away. "I'm good. They went that way." He points to the stairway, and I rush after them. It's Texas, so getting a sidearm after we landed wasn't an issue. I

push through the door with my gun at the ready. I'll kill this motherfucker now.

I hear a scream above me and then a scuffle. But the gunshot has me running full tilt into danger. I don't care. I must be there this time to save her.

[13]

BLYTHE

I fight Randall as he drags me up the stairs. He grabbed me and shoved a gun into my side. I didn't want anyone else to get hurt, so I allowed him to lead me from the room. But when we reached the lobby, I tried to reason with him. His eyes were wild, and he didn't listen. When he shot Butcher, I knew I needed to do something.

So here I am, trying to figure out what to do and how to save both Reed and myself, because I know he'll be coming after me without a second thought for his own safety.

"Let me take off my shoes so I don't trip," I say, stalling for time.

He turns to look at me. The gun wavers in his hand, and I know I'll only have one shot at saving us.

I slip off my shoes and grip one in my hand like a weapon. Randall is distracted, listening as the stairwell door slams open a couple of floors down. I swing my arm without the shoe, deflecting the gun. It goes off, and I stab the heel into Randall's side. I hit something hard, and I wedge it in as it slides between his ribs. He screams and tries to shoot me again, but this time I get the gun away from him as he scrambles to remove the shoe. I turn the gun on him and start firing, not caring.

He will never touch me again. I will no longer be his whipping post or victim. The gun starts to click, and when I feel someone behind me, I turn, ready to kill them too. My arm goes slack when I realize it's Reed. He pulls me into his body, and I start

shaking and trembling. I can't talk, but I scream and cry into his chest. The fear overwhelming me.

Neither of us let go of the other, even as security bursts into the stairwell and Butcher comes hobbling toward us.

"Might want to call an ambulance now." His voice is struggling and laced with pain. We turn and watch as Butcher slides down to the floor. "Knew you had it in you, girly." He coughs, and I see blood seeping between his fingers over his chest.

Sitting with Reed, we watch as the nurse checks Butcher's vitals. He was in surgery for a couple of hours to repair his lung after he was shot in the chest. He has a collapsed lung, but his heart is good, and they said he'll survive but must be in the hospital for a while.

Randall was dead, but I'm not in trouble for killing him because it was self-defense. Reed won't let me get far from his reach, and I know he was afraid I had been shot, just like I thought it was him that Randall had shot before I turned and saw it was Butcher.

"Reed." I look up at him from where I'm cuddled into his lap on the chair.

"Yeah, Bee." He stops texting and looks down at me.

"I love you. I never stopped."

"I love you too, Blythe." He leans down and kisses me, slow and deep.

A groan comes from the bed, and we both turn toward it.

"Don't be doing that shit while I'm lying here. Get a room." Butcher's voice sounds

gruff.

“We can’t leave you.” I stand from Reed’s lap and move to the bed. “Thank you for trying to help me. Sorry you got shot.” I take his hand carefully in mine.

“It’s all good. I can relax. I’ll meet you back in Eastport as soon as they discharge me.”

“We aren’t leaving until you can come with us,” I tell him. “You’re family now.”

“Don’t make me laugh.” His eyes droop for a moment. “You don’t want me in your family.”

“Yes, I do.” I lean over and kiss his cheek.

“Hey, my woman,” Reed grumbles as he playfully pulls me back. “But thank you for taking a bullet for her.”

“Least I could do.” They bump fists, and we tell him we are heading back to the hotel so he can rest.

Hemingway

A week after the shooting, we’re loading into a car for the over twenty-hour drive home. Blythe’s friend, Briar, offered her company’s jet, but Butcher can’t fly, and Blythe won’t leave him.

Stopping for a break in Tennessee, I decide now is the best time. As Blythe takes pictures in the Daniel Boone National Forest and Butcher is asleep in the back seat, I move toward her.

“The last time I did this was on a beach.” I take her hand and get down to my knee. “This time, we’ll do it with this view and hope it gives us better luck.” Her other hand moves to her mouth, and her tears start. “I’ve loved you since we were kids. Will you be the Jessie to my Buzz Lightyear? You know we have to give this baby a daddy.” I press my hand to her stomach. She’s been emotional and getting car sick, and her breasts are sensitive too. I know she’s pregnant.

“Yes, Reed.”

I stand up and take her lips in a deep kiss before sliding the eternity band diamond ring on her finger, then I kiss her again.

EPILOGUE

BLYTHE

FIVE YEARS LATER

I watch as my son slides across the ice, scoring a goal. Jumping up, I hold my stomach, where our fourth child is currently growing. Once I told Reed I was all in five years ago, he's kept up his end of the bargain and keeps me well-loved and pregnant. I look over to where Reed and Wayne are playing with my four-year-old son, Aston, named after his Uncle Butcher, who saved us both that day he delayed Randall from dragging me away. My two-year-old son, Samuel, is also toddling along with his daddy.

Today is all about our fifteen-year-old son, Hartley. We officially adopted him as soon as the courts allowed us to. We've been raising him and his little brothers in a new house out of town, on the Shiver of Chaos compound. We sold Oliver's and my foster parents' homes, which they had left to me. With the money, we had our dream home built. Hartley is currently on the comp team, playing hockey with his friends Sebastian and Holdyn. Trevor's family and ours are always together.

"Keep jumping around like that, and you're going to pop that baby out." Rika laughs as she helps me sit down.

I love my life in Eastport. All my friends and the club make it whole. I still write for the same magazine, but now I do it remotely, and I barely travel unless I have to. Briar and I still talk every other day. I was happy when her true identity was finally

revealed, and she started being completely happy, like me.

Castor and I talk, but our relationship is still hard. Max passed in his sleep a few weeks after Reed and I tied the knot. I never went back to see him because the hurt and pain from his betrayal were too much. Randall's father had revealed that Max didn't know about me until after the attack, and he was attacked because he threatened to turn Randall over. Elliott was the one who had beat him. It was little consolation as I know that Max was seeing my mother before she left me. So, he knew about me, just not that I was his daughter.

Reed walks over to me, holding Samuel in his arms, while Wayne is holding Aston's hand. My husband's sexy body turns me on, and the pregnancy hormones are making it worse. I shift on the bench before a whistle on the ice has me turning to see what the ref is calling.

"I'll take care of you when the boys are down for their nap, Bee," Reed whispers in my ear, and I shiver from the dirty thoughts. He kisses my neck and whispers he loves me, and I turn to smile at him as I mouth the same words.