



Stone Cold Savage (Stone Cold Secrets #2)

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Category: Horror

Description: Episode 2: Justice, Vengeance, and the Pursuit of Truth

The Stone family's world unravels as dark secrets and deadly threats emerge from a deep-seated vendetta with an unseen adversary determined to destroy them all.

Coy Stone and his family face mounting dangers when their mother's death exposes hidden bodies and cryptic journals. Their Texas ranch becomes a battleground as unknown enemies close in, bringing chaos and fear as they're thrust into a deadly game of survival in a maze of corruption.

In their quest to uncover the truth in their mother's writings leads them deeper into a web of crime, betrayal, and deception. Each revelation escalates the stakes—friends may be foes, and trust is a risk they can't afford. Murder and mayhem be damned, time is running out while suspense and danger grow closer to home than ever in their relentless quest for the truth.

As they fight to protect their family and uncover the sinister forces at play, one question remains: Can they survive the storm that's coming?

Total Pages (Source): 13

Coy closed the door behind him and flipped on the light to his old room where he was staying in the main house on the ranch while home in Coyote Creek. He sat at the edge of the bed and took in the space like it was his first night home. In some ways, it was. It was the first night they were all under the same roof since his return, and he couldn't help but sense some form of nostalgia when he thought about it.

There was comfort in being home and having his family so near, especially in light of all that was happening around him — or crumbling around him — depending on how you look at it. It had been a whirlwind of events, and even Coy, who was used to chaos and conflict, was having a hard time wrapping his mind around the events of late. Between the danger, imminent threats, and the secrets of his mother, it was almost more than Coy could process. Hunting and chasing bad guys was easy, but when they were in your own backyard and coming for your own family... you couldn't help but feel little bits of fear trickle in. Something Coy wasn't familiar with.

The only time he'd ever felt those tingles of fear before was when Emery went missing, and he knew who had taken her. Time worked against him then, and he worried that history was repeating its brutal ways and toying with him, threatening to take all he had left.

The worst part is he didn't even know where to begin. At first, it seemed logical to begin with the small marijuana plot Nash had planted. He'd been working with criminals, growing for them, and if they were capable of one illegal activity, they were certainly capable of more. Villains with no moral code tended to evolve and escalate in their crimes, so finding human remains under the plants that had been

plowed up almost made sense. It was a logical and reasonable conclusion to leap to, anyway. Until the attack on Devyn while driving home.

It wasn't just a random attack, either. It was targeted — happened on the road that led to the ranch. Nobody else drove that private road, so the hit was clearly for a Stone. Which Stone was still yet to be determined, but it wasn't looking good. Sure, he could rationalize why the activity was unrelated. After all, the sitting President of the United States was often a target of heinous acts and assassination attempts. This very well could have been that... except timing and the fact that it was Devyn behind the wheel suggested otherwise.

Coy began to pace the room. He was uneasy. Restless. And couldn't stop the wheels from turning in his mind long enough to feel tired or anything but on edge. Rest didn't come easy most nights. It wasn't coming at all this night, and morning would be cresting the horizon before he knew it. The anticipation, the anxiety, it was all billowing and taunting him as a distraction he didn't need. Coy needed clarity and solace if he was going to solve anything before it escalated to a point of no return full of death and destruction... destruction of his family.

Despite not having a single clue, Coy couldn't help but tap into his instincts and that all-knowing intuition and realize the attack on Devyn was nothing personal against her. It was simply a means to send a message. But to who? The President? Nash because of the fucking plants? Coy or Dillon, whose past never stayed dead? The Stone family as a whole? Or maybe the answer lay somewhere across the board, and it had more to do with whatever Delilah Stone had been up to in her final days.

Their mother was a good woman, a tremendous mother, and the strongest person any of them knew. She was well respected and a pillar of the community. Everybody liked and respected Delilah Stone. But what had she done? The information they found in the paperwork around the evening fire told a story of a woman they didn't recognize. They'd uncovered a tale that was a long time in the making — the kinds of

things they'd discovered, like random corporations — likely fake — didn't get tossed together overnight. The web they had to unweave was intricately designed and ironclad. Hard to decipher. All things above and beyond what their mother was known to do. She was a simple woman, and this was complicated.

Coy sat back at the edge of the bed and looked at the clock docked on a nearby bedside table. He should have been asleep hours ago. Long days seemed to be making for longer nights, and he was twitchy and full of unease. Something had to give. A break in the looming mystery? A break from his constant self-loathing and punishment? Hell, even a brief nap at this point would be something.

He stared out the glass French doors at the inky sky, peppered with twinkling stars and the light of an opal moon. Out there, under the same sky, he was staring back at, sat an adversary, an enemy, a foe... waiting to assail that which meant the most to Coy: his family. He'd failed his wife and would forever live in anguish for it. He couldn't let it happen again. Coy wouldn't survive losing another loved one. Not even close.

With a low, frustrated growl, Coy took to his feet, flipped off his light, and made his way through French doors to the balcony outside his second-story room that spanned across the back of the house, accessible by each of the bedrooms on that floor. As a child, he spent many nights out on the balcony, reconciling his thoughts and planning his adventures. There was comfort in sitting outside on a warm night, where the crickets sang, and the fireflies danced, and your thoughts could safely wander and sometimes drift off into a restful sleep under the stars.

He plopped in the same lounge he'd spent many nights figuring out life and relaxed into the familiar comfort of days of past, worn fabric, bumpy springs, and all.

"Couldn't sleep either, huh?" Kenzie said from the lounge next to him.

Coy jumped, “Jesus, Kenz. You scared the shit out of me.”

“To be fair, I was here first.” She shrugged. “I heard you grumbling and pacing across those squeaky wood floors in there. You okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t sound fine.” She prodded.

“Well, I am. Sorry to disappoint.”

“The only thing I’m disappointed in is the fact that you think it’s okay to lie to me.” She scolded. “I know you, Coy Stone, and you are not fine .”

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“Because you’re worried about your family. You haven’t fixed all the things that are wrong yet, and it frustrates the shit out of you.”

“Okay. So maybe you do still know me.” He grumbled.

“Some things never change — neither do some people, and you’re one of the most consistent people I’ve ever known. Complicated as you are, it makes you easy to read. At least for me.”

“Consistent? Why do I feel like that’s a nice way of saying boring?”

“You are anything but boring. You’ve never been that.” She extended her arm, offering a glass bottle of something amber in color that promised to be a drink of bliss, “Thirsty?”

“Wow. Some things really don’t change.” He chuckled, accepting the bottle and taking a pull from the bottle. “If you tell me this is the same bottle you and Dill used to sneak out here back in the day, I’m going to be equally disgusted and impressed.”

“Same label, different bottle.” She snickered. “Good memory, though. I think about those days every now and again. Sleepovers with Dillon, where we’d all end up out here on the shared balcony until the wee hours of the night, passing around a bag of corn chips and a bottle of the good stuff.”

“The corn chips.” He shook his head, “Booze and corn chips.”

“Teenagers.”

“Those were the days. Not a care in the world other than passing classes so I could play in the Friday night football game.” He shared.

“Remember how rough we thought we had it back then? If only I could go back and tell younger me to suck it up and be grateful that my only worry was whether or not you were going to ask me to homecoming or prom.”

“What? You wondered if I would ask you? We were dating. Who else would I ask?” He questioned.

“Precisely my point.” She grinned.

“I don’t believe it’s prom season, so what brings you out here tonight?” he asked, taking another pull from the bottle before handing it back to her.

“I would imagine the same thing that has you out here. Can’t sleep. Can’t figure out the who and why behind everything happening these past few days. Wondering why Lilah changed her will and didn’t tell anyone.”

“You heard about that part, huh?”

“Dillon filled me in when I got back with my things.” Kenzie took pause, “You know, it’s odd and suspicious, but I can’t help but come back to the fact that your mother was one of the best people I’ve ever known. She was honest, loyal, trustworthy, and honorable. Not sneaky. This just doesn’t fit.”

“I couldn’t agree more. But then I remember how long I’ve been gone, and people change. Talking on the phone every chance you have isn’t really knowing someone. It’s talking to someone you once knew... She could have changed, and I’d never been the wiser.”

“I doubt that, Coy. You’re too attentive and intuitive. You’d have picked up on something.”

“She was sick, Kenz. Dying. And none of us noticed at first, not even my two brothers who lived here on the ranch with her. What does that say about us? What does it say about her?”

“That she was good at hiding it, protecting you from it. And you’re all busy building the lives she dreamed up for you, and she didn’t want to interrupt that. Besides, Nash did notice and figured it out. I think if you were here, you would have too. Whether it be from watching her or picking up cues from Nash... you would’ve known.”

“That in and of itself bothers me. You know, I always thought we were all close and stayed in touch, but I can’t tell you the last time I talked to Nash. I kept up with him through Mama, and he kept up with me just the same. Ending a call with everyone and telling them hello for me and that I’m thinking of them isn’t the same as telling them yourself, you know? That’s not a relationship, that’s...”

“Sad.” Kenzie deadpanned. “You all were so close, but it’s easy to get lost in a busy

life and keep up with each other through each other, but it doesn't mean you still don't love one another deeply. I think that's pretty common. I moved away and lost touch with my family here, small as it is, but I didn't realize just how much until I came home, and they felt like strangers. I talked to my dad at least once a week unless I was deployed somewhere I couldn't, and getting an update about what everyone was up to felt like I was keeping up with them directly, too."

"Growing up sucks." Coy reached for the bottle of liquor, and Kenzie happily handed it over.

"Amen to that. How did we get to this point? It's wild, right? One day, we're all down at the river eating junk food and drinking whatever we could sneak out of our houses undetected, having the best summer of our lives, and the next... well, we're here. Sitting on a balcony at an ungodly hour, pondering life and all of its new troubles."

"I think they call that the circle of life," Coy said, enjoying another drink from the bottle.

"I don't think that's what that is... or we'd be dead."

"What if we are?"

"I think you need to hand that bottle back. You're cut off." She teased, taking the bottle.

"I don't mean that literally. I mean, what if this is it? We've... peaked. These are our lives now and how it'll be until..."

"Don't finish that sentence. I refuse to believe this is it. It's too... sad. Lonely."

“And dangerous,” Coy added.

“And that. Yes. I guess that’s why we’re both up still and unable to sleep — trying to dissect the danger. I can’t let this leak into the town, Coy. I’m responsible for everyone’s safety here and trying to figure out just how to do that when we’re chasing... a ghost. At least your family is safe at the moment with everyone together in one house, and Ransom’s detail sure comes in handy, or as safe as possible, given the circumstances, but...”

“I know. I feel the same way. All we can do for now is try to see trouble before it gets here. Until we start getting answers, I don’t see how we break this thing open and stop it in its tracks.”

“So, what... do we pray? Cross our fingers? Dare to dance with the devil?”

“Pfft. Whatever it takes, I guess.” Coy crossed one ankle over the other and linked his fingers behind his head, “How did we get here? I know I sound like a broken record, but I really can’t figure that out. I came home for my mother’s funeral, and here we are, trying to figure out what she was up to and figure out who this new enemy is and if it’s all related. Or worse if I brought this here.”

“It’s hard to wrap your mind around because this isn’t just another case. This is your home. Your family. It’s natural to worry, Coy. I’d be concerned if you weren’t.”

“I suppose you’re right. It’s just... Dev. Of all people, the most fragile of us all, and she’s the one who gets hit like that. The rest of us have been through our fair share of shit, but we’ve always kept Dev safe and protected. She isn’t like us, ya know? She’s special. The smart one. All she’s ever done is be smart.”

“Oh, I think you underestimate your little sister. She may not have the experiences you all do, but she’s tougher than you realize. You forget she’s been watching the

four of you her whole life. She's tough. She's definitely the smart one. And she can handle herself."

"Maybe you're right. I just always see her as the little girl we all doted on, especially after Pop died because she was so young and didn't know him like we did. Cut grew up damn fast after Pop passed and took on the ranch. Dillon and I... well, you know what we did and what we've seen."

"That I do." She nodded heavily in agreement. "Our worlds weren't so different for a lot of years."

"Nash... somehow he's managed to come by trouble naturally, and though his choices can be frustrating, it's been good for him. He likes to learn and navigate life the hard way through tough lessons."

"He's definitely the free spirit of the bunch. The rest of you were ambitious and driven despite the differing courses you followed. But Nash... he just does life... differently. He lives by his own rules and doesn't seem to need more than what he has. He's satisfied with where he's at and being a rancher."

"He always lands on his feet. I used to think he was lazy and missing something, but maybe you're right. He's just content and doesn't need all the other stuff, like we all did. I suppose he had to grow up a little fast, too. When I left to serve, Dillon left shortly after. That left a pretty big and sudden hole, but Nash filled it, and he isn't much older than Dev, even though we treat him like he is. Maybe we made that decision for him, kind of like how we did for Devyn, the more I think about it. But Dev..."

"Is the best part of all of you. She'll always be the baby of the family, but she's a woman now who has the best role models and examples to follow. You know, she came to me when I was home on leave, my first-year in. She asked me what it was

like.”

“What do you mean? The military?”

“Yep. She said she couldn’t go to you or Dillon. You’d just tell her no and discourage her. She wanted to follow in your footsteps. So that apple didn’t fall far from the proverbial tree... or, in this case, the branches? Is that how that saying would go? You know, since you’re all siblings?”

“I don’t think that’s the saying at all.” He laughed. “Now it’s your turn to quit drinking. I had no idea she considered enlisting.”

“She said she wanted to do something meaningful that would change the world. So, I think it’s fair to say she thinks that’s what you and Dill do.”

“And now she wants to stay on here at the ranch, finish school, and be more involved here, and help run it.”

“She’ll do a hell of a job, I can tell you that. She’s just trying to find her place. I’d imagine that isn’t always easy for the youngest.”

“I imagine not. You know, Dillon and I enlisted because there wasn’t a lot of money back then for school. Our choice was to ranch or try to earn a new skill through the military that would ultimately land us back here at some point. It was a way to help support the family while Cut took the reins and worked to make this place what it is now.”

“I think that’s a common story around these parts.”

“Same goes for Nash. Though college was an option by the time he was of age, that kid was far too deep here and far too loyal to leave Cut. I think we all decided Devyn

was the one. She was the one going to college and becoming something more than a soldier or a rancher.”

“Hmm.”

“What does that mean?”

“Oh, nothing. Just thinking.” Kenzie shrugged.

“About?”

“That it sounds like maybe you guys wanted this school and career path for Devyn more than she did?”

“But she’s so smart? Always has been. Of course, we wanted her to use that and do something better with her life than any of us did.”

“But what’s better to you might not be better to her. Maybe Devyn was content being just like all of you.”

“What, you think she went on to school — law school — just to please all of us?” he asked.

“That’s a question for Devyn, but it’s interesting that you came to that conclusion without me pointing it out.” Kenzie winked. “I think you see the girl you want to see and not the girl standing right in front of you.”

Coy stared off into the night sky and pondered Kenzie’s words. “You might be on to something there. Why wouldn’t she just tell us what she wanted?”

Kenzie shrugged, “To please you all? Like you said, she’s smart. She saw all of you

working hard so she could have whatever future she wanted, and she didn't want to let you down. But if you were listening, I think she's telling you now."

"Hence, finishing school and studying for the bar remotely here on the ranch." Coy pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. "How'd I miss that? I read people and situations for a living and missed what was right in front of me."

"Think about it. You left and didn't really come back much. Maybe you just see them all exactly as you left them. You weren't here to see them all grow up, with the exception of Dillon."

"And that was only in the last handful of years. Man, you're right. I feel like I wasted so much time staying away like I was protecting them from something."

"You were protecting yourself, Coy," Kenzie said. "Speaking from experience. "Our capacity to handle bullshit, chaos, and crisis is limited. It's easier to deal with it in the field with strangers than with our own family. We leave whatever happens in the field right where we find it. Family... well, it's forever."

"I suppose you're right. When did you get so smart, Kenzie Gray?" Coy chuckled. "I think I'm going to look at my family a bit differently now, thanks to you."

"Sometimes it's hard to see unless someone who's gone through it too sheds a little light, that's all."

"I suppose you're right. I take it you're referring to your dad and... husband?"

"Yeah. Even my husband. We were apart more than we were together for the bulk of our marriage. It seems I figured it out when I retired early so I could be where my husband was stationed at all times and help him through everything he was going through. I realized it then. He wasn't the person I thought he was. I don't mean that in

a bad way, just that I was remembering him from before all of the trauma, so adjusting and helping him find his way was hard. I had to get to know the new version because the guy I married... well, he grew up. The hard way.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that. It must’ve been hard.”

“Excruciatingly so. Reconnecting after so much time apart and living with someone full-time again is one thing. Add the devastation of severe PTSD to it, and it’s a real rollercoaster. I didn’t know if I’d ever figure out how to navigate my new life with him, and I didn’t until I let go of the old life we’d both outgrown. But even then, it wasn’t enough to save him.”

“Jesus, Kenz. I’m so sorry. I can’t even imagine.” Coy’s eyes widened in shock and disbelief, a pang of sympathy tugging at his heart as he took in Kenzie’s words.

“Sure, you can,” Kenzie added. “You went through it too. Different circumstances, but loss is loss, and I think it’s safe to say we both experienced the most traumatic kind. But here we are. We survived it. We’ll survive this, too. You’ll see.”

“I’m really glad you’re here, Kenz.”

“Me too. Though I think having me stay here is a bit overkill. I don’t think I have the same target as all of you. I’m the town Sheriff... I’m seen everywhere and with everyone, so linking me here and to your family would be a stretch, given I haven’t spent a lot of time here regularly for years.”

“Nah. You’re right where you need to be. Until we know who we’re dealing with and for what, there’s no telling what they know and who is really in danger. I couldn’t live with knowing something happened to you, and I could’ve stopped it somehow. You’re too important to this family... to me.”

Kenzie sat up, swung her legs over the edge of the lounge, and faced Coy. "I am? To you?"

"Of course you are. You always have been. We went through a lot together growing up. Your mom passing, my dad... we grew up together. Leaned on each other."

"Now, here we are, adults, and I recently lost my dad, and you lost your mom, well... I guess we're able to lean on each other now, too."

"We may not have made it past the high school sweetheart years, or whatever they call it, but I've always cared about you, Kenz. I'm sure I always will."

"I... I don't know what to say to that."

"You don't have to say anything, Kenzie."

"I guess we're still just two peas in a pod, then. Truth is, I feel the same. I'll always have your six, Stone."

"Ditto."

"I'm glad you're back, Coy. Even if it's just for a while."

Kenzie propped her legs back on the lounge, relaxed into her frumpy seat, and yawned.

"Tired?" he asked.

"Finally." She chuckled and yawned again.

"Me too. Something told me a little fresh southern air and sitting under the stars

would do the trick.”

“Maybe it was the company.” She teased. “Sorry if I bored you to sleep.”

“Nah. Quite the opposite. It was a nice distraction and good to catch up.” He said.
“You going in?”

“Not a chance. I’m staying right here, so I wake up to that sunrise...” She looked at her watch. “In an hour or two.”

He chuckled. “Me too. Just like old times.”

“A few hours of sleep out here beats a whole night inside. Just something about this place.”

Coy sat for a moment and stared off, pondering the words they’d shared, then asked, “You said you were lonely earlier. That true?”

“Sometimes.” She said quietly, seeming to doze off a bit. “I miss being around people. I’ll let you in on a little secret. When you all decided we all needed to stay here until we figured things out, I wasn’t that upset. It’s been nice being around everyone again.”

“Yeah. Despite all of the chaos, it’s good to be around everyone.”

“Hmm.” She muttered. “Maybe being here is just what you needed.”

Coy watched her drift off to sleep and grinned as his eyes grew heavy and he craved sleep, “Maybe it is.”

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“Who ate all the strawberries? Was it... you, Mr. Beau Cutler?” Devyn asked while tickling the bellies of Coy’s kids. “Or you, Miss. Dally Lane?”

The children let out deep belly giggles as they sat at the table, being teased by their aunt, who was getting out the ingredients needed for breakfast. The rest of the family and guests trickled into the kitchen just as the sun was warming the sky for another full day of questions and very few answers.

“No, Aunt Devvy.” Dally laughed and pointed to the youngest of Cut’s children, who sat in his highchair, waiting for Nora to feed him. “It was Tuck. Tuck ate all the bewwies.”

“Tucker Benjamin?” Devyn playfully scolded. “Did you eat all the bewwies?”

The toddler grinned and squealed while clapping his hands at the attention.

“Welp, sounds like we know who did it. The one in diapers.” Devyn said, grabbing a large metal bowl from the nearby cabinet. “How are we supposed to have strawberries on our waffles for breakfast if Tuck ate them all?”

“I know. I know.” Beau jumped up and down. “We can pick some from the garden! I know the way!”

“Me too! Me too!” Dally said, dancing around, twirling her little sundress.

“You think we can pick enough for everyone and be back before Auntie Dill finishes making the waffles?”

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” the two tots said together.

“Looks like I’m on waffle duty.” Dillon snickered, plugging in the waffle maker. “Oh, goodie.”

“Sorry. You snooze, you lose.” Devyn shrugged and grabbed a can of whipped cream. “Unless you want to go berry picking with the four and under club?”

“Not a chance. Too much... energy. I haven’t had my coffee yet, and they’ve clearly had too much of something.” Dillon snorted as the kids were bouncing around. “You’re more their age anyway.”

“Ha ha.” Devyn put the can of whipped cream down, then shielded her hand with the bowl she held and flipped her sister off.

“Please do not do that again with those two within a two-mile radius of you.” Nora warned, waving between Beau and Dally, “Hiding it doesn’t help. They see, hear, and repeat everything.”

“Crap,” Beau said, when he noticed his shoe untied.

“Case and point,” Nora said. “Beau, is that a nice word or a naughty word?”

“I got it.” Cut knelt down and talked with his son as he tied his shoe for him.

“Sowwy, Mama,” Beau said over his shoulder to Nora.

“That wasn’t my fault, was it?” Coy asked while filling everyone’s cups with much-

needed coffee.

“Nope.” Nora smiled, “You’re angel of a brother did.”

“Which one?” Coy, Dillon, and Devyn said in unison.

“Probably both of them.” Nora glared at Nash and Cut, who were standing side by side.

“Wasn’t me. I never say that word.” Nash said, grabbing a coffee cup and putting it under the stream of coffee Coy was pouring into Ransom’s cup. “I much prefer, shhh....”

“Nash!” They all said in unison.

“Shucks. I was going to say shucks.” He grinned.

“Sure, you were.” Devyn laughed as she grabbed the can of whipped cream again and held it over Dally’s mouth, “Open, kid.”

She pressed the valve, filled her mouth with whipped cream, and quickly had Beau standing at the ready, mouth open.

“Your turn, squirt.” She followed through and repeated the gesture. “Now, you two like that?”

The little ones nodded their heads vigorously.

“Good. You behave, pick all the berries we need for everyone, no goofing, and you can have more as soon as we’re done. Deal?”

“Deal!” they shouted.

“When they don’t go down for naps from all that sugar, you’re on duty, Aunty Dev .”
Nora threatened.

“Oh... and you have to take a good nap later or... no dessert tonight.” Devyn
bargained.

“Do we have to close our eyes?” Beau asked.

“Most people do when they sleep.” Devyn reasoned.

“Do we have to sleep?” Dally asked.

“How about this... you have to lie down and try to sleep, but if you can’t close your
eyes, you can quietly read a book and have a quiet time while Tuck naps and your
Mama takes a break. Can we do that?”

“Yep!”

“Yepper!”

“Someone has her negotiating skills down. Anyone who can reason with tiny
terrorists like that will have no problem in the courtroom.” Cut joked. “Good luck
with the quiet part.”

“Don’t worry,” Charlotte chimed in, jumping in at the stove and scrambling eggs. I’ll
jump in if they don’t hold up their end of the deal. Mama will get her break.”

“You don’t have to...” Nora started.

“I’m here for a while. Use me. I have all sorts of bedtime stories and songs my Mama used to sing to me growing up. It’ll be fun to share them with the little ones.”

Nash put an arm around her shoulders and kissed her, “You are going to fit in nicely around here.”

“You’re hired.” Nora teased, sitting back in her chair and rubbing her very pregnant belly.

Charlotte smiled, “It’s no problem at all. It’ll be fun.”

“Alright, squirts, let’s get to pickin’.”

Devyn marched out the door with Beau and Dally on her heels, heading to one of the gardens closest to the house.

“Last one there’s a rotten egg.” She announced playfully and skipped off, the kids running ahead of her to the strawberry patch.

Once there, Devyn made a game of it and a lesson in counting to see who could pick the most and the fastest. A regular activity during the season, the little ones knew what to do, which to pick, and which to leave. They also snacked on a few choice strawberries while hard at work picking enough for everyone.

“Our bowl is almost full,” Devyn said. “Let’s pick...”

A noise from the nearby tree line had Devyn’s attention. She’d been watchful all along but not worried as they had agents strategically placed around the property. Until now, when the hair on the back of her neck stood tall at the subtle sound of crackling branches in the distance. They weren’t alone. If it were an agent, he would have made himself known.

“Okay, guys, I think we have enough.” She said, guiding them away from the tree line and out of the strawberry patch. With her body strategically between the kids and dense woods, she focused on the area where the random and intermittent sounds were coming from.

Wildlife wasn’t uncommon for their area, but at that time of day and that close to the house, it was.

“Hey, Beau.” She said calmly. “We’re going to play a game, okay, buddy?”

“Yes! I like games!”

“Me too!”

“Good. Now, grab your sister’s hand and walk her back to the house as quickly and safely as you can so she doesn’t fall. Stick together. I’m going to stand right here and count to see how long it takes you, okay?”

“I can do that.”

“Good. You’re such—”

The crackling debris on the wooded floor was becoming more frequent and at multiple paces, causing her breath to catch as panic threatened to settle in. There wasn’t one predator. There were multiple. Coyotes weren’t uncommon in the area, and they tended to travel in packs, depending on the time of year, but they never saw them during daylight.

“Such a good boy.” She finished. “Now hurry. Safely.”

Devyn looked over her shoulder and saw the two little ones making their way toward

the house. Then, she began to slowly walk backward in that direction herself.

“Aunt Devvy, you aren’t counting.”

“Good catch, baby Beau. One, two...” she gasped when she saw a shadowy image move between the trees and the sound of movement growing louder. Her voice trembled, “Three, four...”

She looked back once more, and the kids were still too close to whatever — or whoever — was coming right at them through those trees. Devyn stayed put to provide a barrier or obstacle. She would use herself as a shield to protect her niece and nephew.

“Hurry, buddy. Keep going.” She hollered. “Quicker, okay?”

“Okay, Auntie Devvy.” The little boy yelled back. “We’re almost there.”

Devyn confirmed his report and picked up her pace, trying to keep the panic threatening to overcome her at bay. The last thing she wanted to do was frighten the children, much less put them in the line of fire. But just as she’d convinced herself that they were safe, that it was her overly active imagination and that nobody could get on the property without the agents interceding, a six-foot-something image breached the edge of the tree line.

Devyn froze in fear as he came out of the shadows and into the light. His hair was long but shaved on the sides, and tattoos covered any visible skin. His clothing was dark, hugging a larger-than-life muscular frame. His beard covered a menacing look, and sharp, piercing blue eyes fixed on her.

“No,” she said under her breath, noting he was wearing at least two guns, holstered under each arm, held a black bag and a knife and other tools that were strapped to his

waist.

She didn't recognize him from Ransom's detail, nor did he appear friendly. This was the shit that made the bumps in the night feel like a fairytale. He was the kind of vision everyone feared as they walked by a dark alley. Menace and mischief rolled off of him if his deep, penetrating stare was any indication of who Devyn was staring down. To make matters worse, a large dog was at his side wearing a dark vest with words she could not read, a cage-like muzzle over his snout, and a thick metal prong collar around its neck, staring her down. Devyn could almost hear a growl but wasn't sure if it was from the man or the dog.

"Beau. Run!" she dropped the bowl of strawberries and screamed. "Run, baby!"

When Devyn began to run, she first stumbled and then got back to her feet, only to see the man running right for her. Adrenaline replaced fear, and she ran as fast as she could toward the house, sensing him getting closer by the second. It didn't matter, though. She just needed the children to get to the house and for her to get close enough for her family to hear her and come running.

"Coy!" she screamed. "Help! Coy!"

Beau stopped and looked back, eyes wide, when he saw the scene behind him.

"Run, Beau! Run! Dally, go, baby! Hurry!" she screamed again, "Somebody, help!"

Beau held his sister's hand and pulled her along, making it the rest of the way to the house and up the steps just as Coy and Dillon emerged from the back door, weapons drawn. Cut and Nash scooped up the children and ran them inside, and Devyn could finally breathe. They were safe, even if she wasn't.

The dog began to bark, closing in on her, and she felt the man so close as if the

ground quaked with his every step from his sheer size, letting her know just how close he was. When the man's arm snaked around her waist and lifted her from the ground, the air in her lungs escaped her. He was still running toward the house, holding her like she was nothing more than a rag doll under his arm.

A blood-curdling scream escaped her as her instinct to fight kicked in. Devyn put every ounce of muscle she had behind each punch and kick. Despite hearing the man grunt with each impactful hit, he continued on, headed straight for Coy and Dillon, unaffected by Devyn's assault.

Confusion set in when she looked out in front of her and saw Dillon and Coy lower their weapons despite her captor pulling his with his free hand. Were they afraid to fire and hit her? She didn't care about the risk and only wanted this man stopped before he could hurt their family.

"Shoot him!" She yelled. "Shoot him!"

But they didn't shoot. They just... stood there.

"Damn it!" she yelled, realizing they weren't going to sacrifice her even though she'd damn near said the words.

Devyn squirmed under his grip and reached across his body to pull the weapon from the holster under his opposite arm. He didn't try to stop her. Amateur, she thought. She aimed the weapon...

"No!" Dillon yelled, catching Devyn's attention as they approached.

The man sat Devyn on her feet in front of Coy and Dillon, turned his back to them, tucked Devyn protectively behind him, and raised his weapon as he scanned the area.

Devyn pushed Coy and Dillon toward the house, “Go!”

“Dev...” Coy hollered, but he was too late.

A loud BANG rang out, and the man fell to the ground, his face hitting hard at Devyn’s feet. He rolled to his back, gasping for air, staring up at the end of a barrel in Devyn’s grip.

“Shit,” Coy yelled as agents started to move in slowly, tactically. Coy waved them off and yelled, “We’re clear. All clear.”

“Don’t fucking move,” Devyn said, her breathing heavy and tone seething, unaware of what was progressing around her. His dog was at his side, barking incessantly.

When the man reached a hand in her direction and gasped, trying to mutter a word, she put a heavy foot on his chest, pressed hard, and said, “I said don’t fucking move, or the next one goes in your damn head.”

The dog growled with warning, then continued barking.

“I-I thought you said,” he gasped, trying to catch his breath, “A law-lawyer.”

Coy grabbed her hands and immediately aimed the weapon toward the sky before removing the gun from her grip. “What the hell, Dev.”

Dillon dropped to a knee right beside the man, brushing Devyn’s foot away as she felt around his chest, “How bad is it?”

When the agitated dog approached Dillon, she immediately returned to her feet. “Can you deal with your friend before he takes a bite out of someone?”

“He’s just being protective and doesn’t know who he’s supposed to protect.” The man said, “Diesel, leave it. Easy.”

Diesel sat at the man’s side. Though calm and not snarling, he didn’t miss a single move made by anyone in his view.

Tucking Devyn’s weapon in the back of his pants, Coy reached a hand down and helped the man to his feet with Dillon’s help. Finally standing again, the man hunched over, bracing himself, hands on his knees as he tried to take deep breaths.

“Just knocked the wind out of me.” The man said. “I thought she didn’t serve.”

“She didn’t,” Dillon answered. She stood behind the man, lifted his tight black t-shirt, revealed a flak jacket, and plucked the bullet Devyn had fired from it. She held it up, analyzed it, and shook her head. “She grew up a Stone.”

“Paranoid?” he asked.

“Paranoid?” Devyn clasped her chest as if she was suddenly offended. “Someone please explain to me what the hell is happening here?”

She turned to see the back patio hosting an audience of onlookers who’d rushed out at the sound of the commotion, Kenzie standing among them.

“Kenzie? Aren’t you going to cuff him?” Devyn asked, “Why are you all just standing there? Coy? Dill? What...”

“He’s a friendly.” Coy interrupted, “A damn friendly.”

Confusion filled her expression, “Friendly? Hardly. He literally came from the woods and...”

“And what?” he said, still hunched over.

“You look...”

“Uh-huh? I look?” Rip’s eyes widened with surprise as he waved his hand in a rolling motion as if to tell her to continue.

“Well, like... that.” She waved her hands in front of him as her eyes filled with emotion. “Can someone please explain what’s going on here before I lose my damn mind?”

Kenzie stepped forward and extended a hand, “I take it you’re Rip.”

Diesel let out a warning growl.

“Diesel.” Rip scolded, calming the dog, accepting the handshake. “Sorry, he’s working right now, and though I have a profile on everyone that’s supposed to be here, Sheriff, he doesn’t.”

“Understood.” Kenzie nodded.

Rip looked to the rest of the family, standing near, and offered a quick nod acknowledging them.

“A profile on everyone? You knew, Kenz?” Devyn looked to Coy, “What the hell?”

“Sorry. I was just briefing everyone on his arrival, but you were out here with the kids. I didn’t expect him to emerge from the damn forest like some kind of savage outlaw looking for trouble. What gives, man?”

Rip stood taller, stretching his back, finally able to catch his breath, “I just finished a

perimeter check and got the lay of the land, is all. I placed a few new cams in blind spots, too, while I was out there. Met a few of Ran's agents..."

"Am I invisible?" Devyn asked.

"Not even a little bit, ma'am," Rip said with a piercing stare.

Diesel laid down and put his head on Devyn's feet.

"He doesn't seem to think so either," Rip added. "Just tell him to leave it if he bothers you, and he'll go away."

Devyn reached down to pet his head.

"Don't..." Rip tried to stop her, "I was going to say not to pet him yet. He still thinks he's working, but I guess he's already picked his person."

"His person? Wouldn't that be you?" Devyn took to her knee to scratch his ears, and Diesel licked her through his muzzle. "Can we get this thing off him? He looks like a serial killer being moved to a supermax prison."

"Yes. I'm his person, but like I said, he's a working dog. He's trained to protect just like a human operative would. He's choosing you. And no, we can't take that off of him. It's how he knows he's on duty. The gear comes off, and he's just a regular dog. Just the muzzle comes off, and he thinks he's supposed to take someone down, and you don't want to meet his bite."

She rested her forehead against his and rubbed his ears, "Aww. You gave me quite the scare, but you're forgiven."

"Thank you. I assumed you knew who I was and took your reaction as a sign that you

were being threatened in some way.”

“Not you.” Devyn glared at Rip before turning her attention back to Diesel. “I forgive him. He didn’t know. You, on the other hand, should never assume anything. Who trained you?”

Devyn looked between Coy and Dillon, who shrugged.

“He came to us that way.” Coy chuckled.

“Not funny, brother,” Devyn warned, taking to her feet.

“I forgive you for shooting me... in my back,” Rip said, full of snark.

“Okay. Whatever makes you feel better. I’m fine with my decision.” Devyn admitted. “You’re lucky you had that vest on under there.”

“Are you kidding me? While I was protecting you, you stole my gun and shot me.”

“You picked me up and ran two acres with me under your arm. That can be classified as kidnapping, and you’re lucky I’m not pressing charges.” Devyn warned. “You do realize you were protecting me from... you, right?”

“Pressing charges? You’re lucky I don’t press charges for attempted murder.” Rip fired back. “And theft for stealing my gun... and it looks like my dog is next.”

“It would never stand.” Devyn rolled her eyes. Texas is a stand-your-ground state, and I felt threatened. I had every right to protect myself with any weapon of my choosing, and I can’t help it if your dog agrees with me.”

“With a stolen gun?” Rip snorted.

“Can you prove I stole it? I’d just argue it was readily available, and I used it.”

“She really is a lawyer.” Rip sneered, surprised by Devyn's sharp words, but couldn't help but engage in the banter as they exchanged pointed jabs back and forth. “Look, it isn’t my fault that you...”

Devyn put up a hand to interrupt Rip, “I know you all think I’m fragile and just a kid because I am and always will be, the baby of the family, but I really need you to trust that I’m none of those things. I’m a grown-ass woman who can handle herself pretty damn well, given my latest performance. When you just stood there, I shot the bad guy with his own gun... or, perp, or... unsub. Whatever it’s called. You know what I mean. So, I’d appreciate it if you’d stop protecting me, babying me, placating me, and be straight with me from now on. Understood?”

Devyn scanned the group, and they all nodded, “Good. Now, I’m going to go sit on the patio, by myself for a moment, and get my ever-loving shit together because this has not been my week, in case you haven’t noticed. Feel free to fill me in on who Rip is, and why he’s here, when you get your shit together. M’kay? Come, Diesel.”

Devyn walked off, Diesel at her side, as she made her way to the covered patio. She plopped on an outdoor sofa and buried her face in her hands while Diesel sat in front of her and rested his head in her lap.

“She’s right,” Dillon said as Cut and Nash approached. “She’s tougher than we give her credit for.”

“She grew up watching all of us.” Cut shrugged. “Of course she is.”

Nash extended a hand to Rip, “Nash. Nice to meet you. Welcome to Stone Valley Ranch. My place is set up for you to stay. I’ll show you the way when you’re ready. And, uh, sorry, my sister shot you. She’s a little feisty.”

“I can see that.” Rip’s focus never left Devyn. “She just stole my dog.”

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“I have the first analysis on the body.” Coy held up a large manilla envelope and announced to everyone while they were finishing making breakfast.

“Is this really appropriate breakfast conversation?” Dillon nodded to the children.

“It’s okay. These guys have full bellies now, especially after all those berries they picked. I think we’ll head upstairs for some quiet time. They’ve had quite the morning already. Thank God they thought it was all part of Dev’s counting game and are unfazed.” Nora stood, placing her hand on her back as she did. “I think I have too.”

“Everything okay?” Cut asked with concern.

“Oh, it’s... fine. Just not used to all this action-adventure behavior. Mama needs quiet time, too.” Nora smiled. “It’s certainly been an exciting morning, but this baby is reminding me I don’t have the energy for exciting and that I need to rest.”

“I’ll come with you,” Charlotte said. “We can check on baby real quick, and I’ll take care of the little ones so you can put your feet up.”

“I don’t want to put you out...”

Charlotte took Tuck from his highchair and placed him on her hip while Nora reached for Dally’s hand. “You aren’t. I’m offering, remember? Take the help while you have it. You’re about to be outnumbered times four.”

“Don’t remind me. I’ve already forgotten what sleep is.” Nora teased. “Let’s go upstairs, Beau. Miss Charlotte wants to have a playdate with you.”

The little boy jumped up from his seat with excitement and grabbed Charlotte’s hand, pulling her along behind him. “C’mon Miss Char… Char…”

“You can call me Char, buddy.” She smiled.

“C’mon, Charlie.” He said.

“Charlie works, too.” Charlotte giggled.

“I’ll bring you a plate,” Nash said as they left the room.

“I’ll be fine. I’ll have something later.” She said over her shoulder before disappearing around the corner.

“Isn’t she perfect?” Nash asked the remaining family.

“She is pretty great,” Dillon admitted. “I keep looking for things… wrong with her, but nothin’.”

“Yep. Perfect.” Devyn chided. “Can we discuss this analysis on the human remains found on our property, or are we going to start Charlotte’s fan club first?”

“Someone’s having a bad morning.” Nash ranted.

“Actually, yeah. I am. And maybe whatever information is in that envelope might make things a little less stressful around here.” Devyn took a seat at the table, a stack of waffles in front of her, and groaned, “No strawberries. Great.”

Rip walked through the back door, holding the metal bowl Devyn had dropped earlier. Diesel ran to Devyn's side, as soon as he and Rip breached the door, and sat obediently. All eyes were on Rip when he approached Devyn and sat the bowl down in front of her. To her surprise, it was full of berries.

He looked around the room, noting they were sitting down for a meal, "Sorry to interrupt. I thought maybe you needed these for something since you were out there picking them so early. Guess I was right."

"Have a seat, fix a plate," Dillon said, grabbing the bowl and taking them to the sink. "There's plenty."

"I, uh, don't want to intrude," Rip replied, eyes fixed on Devyn.

"You're not," Coy said. "Sit. Eat. I'm sharing the analysis you brought down with you. Thought maybe you'd like to be part of the conversation."

Rip turned his attention back to Devyn.

"For God's sake, sit." Devyn grabbed a plate, covered it in a stack of waffles, and slid it in front of him. "There. Eat."

Rip took a seat across from her and nodded, "Thank you."

Dillon put a bowl of quickly sliced strawberries in front of Devyn, who proceeded to cover her waffles with scoops of the berries. She held the bowl up in front of Rip and raised her brow as if asking if he would like some as well, to which he nodded. Agitated as she was, Devyn was attentive to Rip, even if it was in a less-than-friendly manner. After topping his waffles with berries, she then topped both of their plates with whip topping.

“How do you know I want whipped cream?” he asked.

“Because you said yes to strawberries. Everyone knows you can’t have strawberry waffles without whipped cream.”

“I actually eat mine with just berries and syrup.” Rip was challenging her.

Devyn stared him down, then grabbed the syrup and poured it over the top of his plate, “There you go. Syrup. Everyone good?”

“I don’t know if I’m supposed to say thank you or gross,” Rip said, reaching for the syrup and pouring it over the top of her waffle stack.

“Why did you do that?” Devyn asked calmly.

“Same reason you did it to mine. Just being helpful.”

“That’s... disgusting. Syrup over strawberries and whipped cream?”

“Yet, you thought I should eat mine that way.” Rip rebutted.

“You said you like syrup.”

“No, I said I preferred syrup with my strawberries.”

“And I gave you syrup.”

“Only as part of a tantrum after taking it upon yourself to add whipped cream to mine.”

“Everyone likes it that way.” She shrugged.

“Sorry, but that’s an assumption. And rather than say sorry or offer syrup, you just... doused it with syrup. So, if I’m eating my waffles with strawberries, whipped cream, and syrup... you should, too. After all, it was your idea, Princess.”

“You chased me with a vicious dog at your side.” Devyn reached down and patted Diesel’s head, “No offense, handsome.”

“You shot me!”

“You had your gun drawn.”

“To protect you. You were screaming for help.”

“Help to get away from you.”

“I didn’t hurt you.”

“Don’t call me Princess.”

“Don’t put whipped cream on my waffles.”

“You’re ungrateful.”

“You’re spoiled.”

“You’re... big.”

“I don’t think that’s an insult.” He grinned. “But thanks for noticing.”

“Are you two done?” Coy asked. “Or do we need to send you two over to the children’s table?”

“I’d say put them in the corner together until they can get along like Mama used to do, but somethin’ tells me that’d be a bad idea.” Nash snickered.

“Eww.” Devyn sneered.

“Eww?” Rip flexed his pectoral muscles, making them bounce, and winked at her.

“That’s enough, you two,” Coy warned. “Dev, it isn’t his fault you were scared. It was mine. I didn’t tell you he was going to be here because you were outside with the kids when I got word he was on his way up to the house.”

“You should’ve told me, Coy.”

“You’re right, and I intended to. But to be fair, I did let everyone know I had help coming in, and Rip is the help. He is much needed around here and will be an asset while we get to the bottom of this shit. So, play nice.”

“Fine,” Devyn said, glaring across the table at Rip. “Just stay out of the woods next time — I won’t aim for the jacket next time.”

“You only get to shoot me once before I shoot back.” He warned.

Her brow raised, “Noted. Let’s eat.”

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“The body isn’t in the system.” Rip shared with the group as they finished up their meal.

“That’s a good thing, right?” Nash asked.

Coy shrugged, “It depends on how you look at it. If they were a known criminal, we probably would have had a match. They’d be in a database somewhere, and fortunately for us, our resources have us linked internationally.”

“The downside,” Kenzie chimed in, “Is we are back to square one, and just because they weren’t in a database doesn’t mean they were a well-intentioned individual. There’s a reason they’re dead, and their body was buried here.”

“It doesn’t mean they were ill-intentioned either, though.” Coy shared. “They could have been a victim of a crime.”

Nash let out a low and slow whistle, “Buried here? That means whoever did it...”

Coy nodded, “Likely had, or has, ties here.”

“So, we could be looking at a ranch hand?” Kenzie asked as an explanation. Or, a family friend?”

“Or family member,” Rip said. “I mean that respectfully, of course, but we can’t rule out anything without more information.”

The family traded looks of concern.

“My money is on our sharpshooter over there.” Nash winked at Devyn across the table.

“Not the time or place, Nash.” She fired back with a glare. “You’re lucky he was friendly, and you should be thanking me because if he wasn’t... I was the only one stopping him.”

“Because everybody else knew he didn’t need to be stopped.” Nash snorted. “You really freaked out.”

“You haven’t seen shit yet, brother,” Devyn warned. “You’re next if...”

“Told you she wasn’t to be underestimated.” Kenzie grinned and said to Coy under her breath.

“Yeah, I see it now.” He replied, then turned to his younger siblings, “Knock it off, you two. She’s right, not the time or place, and Dev... reel it in. Whatever you’re feeling right now, take it out on me. Otherwise, pipe down.”

Devyn crossed her arms across her chest and leaned back in her chair, splitting her glare between both Rip and Nash.

“It’s been determined that the deceased was a young male, possibly in his twenties or thirties. It seems he had suffered a broken or fractured arm at some point, along with a GSW — gunshot wound — likely to the chest, evidenced by missing bone fragments. Additionally, another gunshot wound was found in the pelvic region. However, it’s challenging to ascertain when these injuries occurred due to advanced decomposition. The gunshot wound to the head, on the other hand, is likely the fatal shot, based on our examination..”

“Advanced decomposition?” Cut asked. “Does that mean...”

Rip bobbed his head, “Yes. He’s been buried there for some time, and there’s confirmation to support that.”

“Though dental records couldn’t be matched, a dental repair on an upper molar of the deceased consisted of material that hasn’t been used in decades. There needs to be further soil and debris analysis to confirm this, but as of right now, based on the dental material and other analysis, we know the body has been there around... twenty... maybe thirty years.”

“Thirty years?” Kenzie guffawed. “How do we trace that back to a missing person or cold case of any kind? I can search files, but they aren’t necessarily going to be digitized that far back. The computer age hasn’t been around that long in police work, at least not like it is now. We’ve been creating digital records for old files for some time, but that’s like hunting for a needle in a haystack. We will likely be digging through old bankers’ boxes from the jail basement, reading files one by one.”

“We’re already running through your digital files,” Coy confirmed. “One of our operators at headquarters built a program to search your system simultaneously with those within a fifty-mile radius. Once that’s complete, he’ll expand to a hundred miles if we don’t get a hit. Being surrounded by rural counties means this could be local, but sometimes local is still three counties over.”

Kenzie rolled her eyes, “I’m sure all of this is legal, right?”

“Not the way they do it.” Devyn shook her head, “Not. At. All.”

“Certain laws and rules don’t apply to us when it has to do with the greater good,” Rip said. “We have access and automatic immunity, making us not prosecutable . Charging us would mean admitting we exist and we’re a well-kept secret to the most

powerful people in the world — nobody will come for us.”

“You aren’t protected for personal matters,” Devyn argued. “This isn’t one of your government-backed cases. Hell, it isn’t even a local legal case. It’s an in-house vigilante bullshit kind of case. How do we solve this one — whether it be an accidental death or a homicide — when the remains are older than everyone in this room? You realize that the deceased would be anywhere from fifty to sixty years old based on those details, right?”

“If we are unable to connect the dots, nobody will be able to. Remember, we’re the people they call in when they draw a blank and exhaust every avenue. If we turn this over to the local agency, Kenzie will ultimately run this thing up the ladder until the feds finally call us in as their saving grace. So, it lands back with us regardless.” Coy informed.

Devyn stood and began to pace, thinking through the limited details, “Something about this doesn’t feel right.”

“I would hope not. It’s a dead body on our family land.” Nash said.

“No shit.” She said. “There has to be something else. Something we haven’t found yet that will give us a jumping-off point.”

“Our associate, Killion, is building a program that will take images of the remains and rebuild them based on the remaining detectable features to create an image of what the Vic may look like then and now.” Rip shared. “Once he gets that up and running, he’ll take the images his program generates and run them through another program that’s much like facial recognition but uses different measures, including unique biometrics to find potential matches in the same databases he’s looking through now.”

“That’s both interesting and disturbing to think about. I didn’t know the technology to do all of that existed.” Kenzie chuckled.

“It doesn’t.” Coy said, “He’s building as he goes with parameters he’ll need to make it work. It’s still a shot in the dark and searching for a needle in a haystack, but it’ll be much faster.”

“Killion is good. If anyone can narrow this down and find us that extra piece of anything, it’s him.” Coy shared.

“In the meantime?” Kenzie asked.

“We stay vigilant. Hold things down here. Hope and pray Killion gets us something we can work with.” Coy said, “Until then, I guess we go grab some of those banker’s boxes you mentioned and start sorting through them.”

“While you do that, I’m going to see that lawyer that signed off on Mama’s new will,” Devyn said, clearing plates from the table.

“You’re not going alone.” Rip scolded.

Coy and Dillon shared a surprised look.

Devyn turned and leaned against the kitchen counter, “So, that’s why you’re here. My babysitter since I got the last one shot.”

“You don’t need a babysitter from where I stand. Seemed to handle yourself just fine today.” Rip said. “But it isn’t safe for anyone to go anywhere alone. From what I understand, there’s a lot of bad shit happening around here.”

She nodded. “But like you said, I can handle myself.”

“Coy?” Rip said, his gaze fixed on Devyn.

“He’s, uh, right.” Coy looked between Rip and Devyn. “You aren’t going alone, sis.”

When neither said a word, Coy turned back to Dillon, who shrugged, letting Coy know he wasn’t the only one stumped by the interaction between Rip and Devyn.

“Oh, come on. Just say it.” Nash chimed in. “Coy. Dill.”

“Not the time, little brother.” Coy got up from his seat and stood in front of Devyn, blocking her from Rip’s view and vice versa. “I’ll go with you, Dev. It won’t be suspicious if it’s the two of us, especially since you wrote the original. It’s reasonable for you to question the new one.”

“I’ll go, too,” Kenzie said. “While you work the will over with the guy, I’ll look for anything else that may be out of place.”

“Will it seem off if the rest of us aren’t present?” Cut asked.

“No. Your wife is about to have a baby, so you’re staying close by. Dill has an entire detail that follows her everywhere, so not exactly practical for her to join us either. Besides, I don’t want to leave the ranch vulnerable, and we need those agents here.” Coy shared.

“I’d rather be here anyway. I’ll work with Rip to hold things down while you’re gone.” Dillon said.

“Or, I follow in a second vehicle and watch your six. Nobody here knows me, and I won’t be familiar.” Rip insisted. “Play this right.”

Coy turned around and looked at Rip, “You aren’t going to take no for an answer, are

you?”

Rip took his plate to the kitchen sink and handed it to Devyn, who'd started rinsing dishes. “Not a chance,” he said.

“It's a good idea,” Kenzie said. “It can't hurt to have another set of fresh eyes on the lookout.”

“Done,” Coy said.

“Then I guess I'll ride with the big guy?” Nash asked.

“No.” They all said in unison, catching each other off guard.

“Then, what am I supposed to do?” Nash continued, “Or is this a case of leave Nash behind so he doesn't screw shit up.”

When nobody spoke, Nash got up from the table to leave the room, “Got it. Leave the screw-up here so he can only screw shit up on the ranch.”

“That's not it, and you know it, Nash.”

“Then what, Coy? What is it? Am I still paying for the damn pot plants? Did that really cripple your trust in me that much? Or maybe there wasn't any trust to begin with. Wouldn't be the first time.”

“I need you here,” Coy said. “Cut's going to be close to the house. Dillon is going to oversee security. I need someone to cover for me. Keep me updated if anything happens. Run information between us as needed. Can you do that?”

“So, I'm the hub.”

“You could say that. You kept your cool and jumped right in when shit hit the fan. You didn’t even flinch when all that went down with Devyn and Ran’s agent.”

“So, what I’m hearing is... you need me.” Nash grinned.

“Yes, Nash. I need you.” Coy rolled his eyes. “We all need you.”

“Well, big brother, you got me. I’ll do whatever it takes to help get us out of whatever it is we’re stuck in the middle of.” Nash vowed stoically, “I always knew I was the heart of this family.”

Coy shook his head, “Pfft. I wouldn’t take it that far, but yeah, if that’s how you feel. You’re the heart.”

“You can count on me. I mean that. I won’t disappoint any of you again.” Nash said. “We’re a team. A family. If we can’t count on each other... who can we count on?”

“Like I said, Mr. Stone,” Attorney Ellis Steele spoke from behind his dark mahogany desk, encircled by matching bookshelves adorned with stacks of law books and gold-framed degrees and awards. It was evident the space was meant to appear rich or elite, but it was merely dark and musty and gave off a cold and eerie vibe. If walls could talk, this place would surely tell tales of misdeeds and mayhem.

“Like I said... it’s Coy .” He scolded, seeming unimpressed.

“Right, Coy.” Ellis said in a smarmy manner, “I cannot discuss the details outside of whatever is already in writing. Attorney Client privilege exists, even out here in the middle of nowhere, small town USA.”

“The client is deceased,” Devyn interrupted. “By law...”

“I am quite aware of the law, young lady.” He sneered, “And the law says I am in no way obligated to share anything, even if the law says I can. I took an oath. I have morals and ethics that forbid me from saying another word on the matter. I’m sorry. I simply cannot help you.”

“But Mr. Steele,” Kenzie added from the back of the room where she stood, studying this character and the space he operated in as if it held the key to the vault where all the secrets went to hide.

“Sheriff, I don’t see how you have any influence on the matter, so we’ll just leave it at that. No law has been broken, and you aren’t family.”

“She’s family.” Coy interrupted.

“Interesting. Delilah didn’t mention you as such.” Ellis stood from behind his desk and looked to his watch, “If you don’t mind, I have clients due who actually have appointments. I’m sorry this will come as a surprise and that your mother hid it all from you, but perhaps you need to look a little closer to home to find out why. I am certainly not the answer or the problem.”

Coy and Devyn stood and turned to leave, but Coy stalled and turned to Ellis. “Oh, Mr. Ellis...”

“It’s Mr. Steele. Ellis is my first name.”

“Riiight.” Coy sneered with a wicked grin over his intentional insult, “Are you new around these parts? I know I’ve been gone for quite some time, but surely I’d remember you.”

“Fairly new. A little over a year maybe, give or take.” Ellis answered suspiciously. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no reason. Just like to know our neighbors. Small town, USA, and all...” Coy’s mouth curled at the corners, “You have yourself a great day.”

“Prick,” Coy said as they exited Ellis’s office and passed the empty reception desk.

“Did anyone else feel...” Devyn began.

“Like we were being lied to? Of course.” Kenzie said. “The whole thing was a lie.”

As they reached the lobby exit, Coy stopped and noted the photos on the wall. “This guy is either really smart or really dumb.”

“You see it too, huh?” Kenzie added. “While you guys were bantering back and forth with that asshole, I was taking a mental note of everyone he’s pictured with on that wall in there.”

“Quite the socialite,” Coy added, pointing to select pictures on the wall. “Governor, head of the... Well, head of everything. Look at that.”

Shaking her head, Kenzie sighed, “Head of the livestock commission, the actual commissioner, ranchers coalition, builders coalition. If there’s anyone elite down here in our neck of the woods, it’s all of these guys.”

“Judge Adams, huh? This guy a politician looking to run for something?” Coy asked.

“Anyone want to bring me up to speed?” Devyn asked. “Or are we going to play a round of Clue again?”

“If this guy’s only been here a year or so...”

Kenzie snorted, pointing to one of the pictures, “Then how was he rubbing elbows with my deceased father?”

“Shit, Kenz.” Coy sighed. “What the hell is this guy into, and how do all of these people factor in?”

“Anyone going to fill me in, or am I really supposed to guess at this point? Remember, I’m not a fancy bad guy hunter like you two. I’m just a fricken lawyer.”

“Sis, I think this guy is in deep pockets,” Coy said. “That’s what we’re getting at here. Anyone and everyone with influence or an ounce of power is on this guy’s wall.”

“And that means?” Devyn shrugged.

“It means everything and nothing.” Kenzie went on. “Dev, this guy is either full of ego and showing off his friend roster to intimidate people or elevate himself. And by intimidate, I mean, don’t come for me — I know people type.”

“You think he’s dirty.”

“Simply put. Probably.” Coy said.

“All because he knows influential people.” Devyn surmised.

“That’s usually how it goes. It’s a big assumption, but one we didn’t come to without knowledge and experience.” Kenzie said. “And also, because you can see the random men we photographed the other day in the background.”

Devyn rolled her eyes, “Seriously? You probably should have started with that. Here I thought, knowing the governor made you dirty. Mama knows him well. And just about all of these people pictured.”

“Wait. She does?” Coy asked.

“Mama was on just about every committee and board in these parts. Of course, she knows them.” Devyn walked closer to the wall and pointed to one picture in particular, “There she is. Looks like the Texas Ranchers Foundation Fundraiser if I’m reading that sign in the background correctly.”

“And she’s standing with my father,” Kenzie said quietly. “Coy? What the hell were they into?”

“I have no fucking clue, but the timeline is starting to line up, isn’t it? He arrived here

a year or so ago?” Coy questioned.

“That’s about when the cancer hit hard. Nash figured it out, found out about the bank loan, and everything else went downhill,” Kenzie said. “Am I missing anything?”

“It’s also when Nash and Mama met Charlotte,” Devyn added as she scanned the wall of pictures. She stepped closer to one and pointed, “And isn’t that her father?”

“Sure is. In uniform, even.” Kenzie sighed.

“So, we can’t trust her?” Devyn asked, searching their faces for clues. “Or, can we? I’m new at this.”

“She’s good. She’s been vetted by multiple layers of security at this point. Her father, on the other hand, who fucking knows.” Coy ran his hand through his hair, then held the door for the ladies to exit first. “I guess we need to dig a little deeper on Daddy Banks.”

They walked along the sidewalk with a building on one side and the street on the other, back to the car. Coy positioned himself on the street side to protect Kenzie and Devyn. Quickly scanning their surroundings, Coy promptly found Rip, oddly blending in, his hair pulled back into a low bun and a baseball cap on, wearing jeans and some band t-shirt that barely fit him. He snickered at the sight. Rip almost looked the part, combat-type boots being the exception.

Rip walked along the sidewalk on the other side of the road as if he were out for a leisurely walk along the river that ran through the center of town where they were. As the group approached their vehicle, Rip stopped to tie his shoe, which was already tied, to buy time and stay near as they got into Kenzie’s car. He was the lookout, after all.

Coy was careful to park strategically so Kenzie and Devyn would exit and enter the vehicle on the sidewalk side of the vehicle for an added layer of protection. At the same time, he drove her car and was the only one at risk, streetside. He'd thought of every possible scenario and acted accordingly, clearly keeping Rip in on his plan. What looked like an everyday occurrence to most, just a couple of people coming and going, was a tactical event they'd carefully planned.

Kenzie got in the front passenger side first, but Devyn had a hard time opening the rear door. Coy fiddled with it and tried to open it, but they were quickly distracted by a tiny sound from under the car.

"Did you hear that?" Devyn asked, looking around.

Rip had taken a seat on a nearby bench directly across the street from where they were. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees in a leisurely manner, pretending to skim through his phone, but really, it was so he could see whatever it was they were looking at. Or, looking for.

"I did," Coy said. "What, was that a cat?"

"If it was, it's a tiny one," Devyn said, pacing back and forth, hunting for the tiny mewling sound.

Coy glanced Rip's way as if assuring he was engaged, albeit subtly and from a distance. Something felt off. The air had shifted, the temperature dropped, and terror was on the horizon. He could feel it. When Rip stood and started across the street in their direction, he knew Rip felt it, too.

"There you are," Devyn said in a sing-song voice. "Oh my gosh, you are tiny. You poor little thing."

Devyn was behind the car, crouched down on her knees, speaking sweet nothings to a little black and white pile of fluff staring back at her.

“Come here, sweetheart.” She said, coaxing the kitten out.

“Dev. Get up off the street. We got to go.” Coy warned, watching their surroundings for the next shoe to drop.

“Are you kidding me? We aren’t leaving this little one out here.” She fired back, attention fixed on the kitten. “Where’s your mama, you little precious?”

“Then grab the damn cat and let’s go. This isn’t safe.” He warned once more.

“Coy, we’re in the middle of town, broad daylight. We can spare thirty seconds to save a life.” Devyn scolded. “If it’s that unsafe, why are we out here in the first place?”

“Because it was a controlled situation. This is not controlled.” Coy was getting nervous, and he didn’t get nervous. Something wasn’t right, and he felt it as soon as the hairs on the back of his neck stood at attention. “Get the damn cat and get in the fucking car before I throw you in and leave the fleabag behind.”

Devyn gasped, “You wouldn’t.”

A car had turned off a side street and onto the main road through town, which they were currently stalled on. It didn’t help matters when another vehicle approached from the opposite direction. This was a small town with no traffic, and now he had two cars headed toward one another at what appeared to be higher than usual speeds, given the quick approach. What were the chances that one or both of these vehicles were their enemy out to do harm? Or was that paranoia creeping in, not knowing what he could and could not trust anymore?

Coy couldn't help but question his instincts because the stakes were different this time. This wasn't a standard open and close case with strangers. This was his family. This was his life. And he'd already traveled this road once too many times and had vowed never to find himself on this path again. But here he was. Home. And trouble felt like it was around every corner — and the kind of trouble he attracted was the kind that wreaked of devastation.

"I sure as hell would, now grab it," Coy demanded as he stomped his foot to shoo it out from under the car.

The kitten sprung from its spot under the car, raced into the street, and Devyn followed.

"Damn it, Dev," Coy shouted as he tripped when he tried to grab her.

"Come here, sweetheart." Devyn coaxed with a slow approach to the kitten, who was balled up in the middle of the road, afraid of the noise that startled from behind it and the larger-than-life man headed in its path. Rip.

Oblivious to what was escalating around her, Devyn crouched down a few feet away and extended her hand to the kitten, in hopes that it would succumb to curiosity and mosey back her way. But it didn't.

The two cars were approaching quickly, and one began to sound its horn, warning Devyn and likely the kitten, if they could even see it, to get out of the road. The sound, however, only frightened the kitten more, and it charged off in Rip's direction just as the other vehicle accelerated.

"Now look what you did." Devyn stood and followed the kitten, unaware of what was transpiring around her.

“Dev, no!” Coy yelled just as the honking car slammed on its brakes right in front of him.

Kenzie got out of the car, weapon drawn, unsure what was going down entirely but able to understand the body language Coy and Rip were exuding.

Rip ran at full speed and scooped up the kitten as it tried to run past him before snaking his arm around Devyn’s waist and pulling her out of the crosshairs that had been fixed on her. A loud scream escaped her as she saw the speeding car race by without hesitation as it barreled right through where she had been standing when Rip grabbed her.

In perfect sync with one another, Rip and Coy exchanged roles with a simple, knowing nod to one another.

“Keys.” Coy hollered, and Rip tossed him the keys to the vehicle he had been driving. “Get them to the ranch. Do not stop, man. Protect them.”

“With my life.” Rip seethed as he cradled Devyn’s trembling body against his.

“Coy?” Kenzie yelled as he ran across the road at lightning speed, about to jump in Rip’s vehicle.

“You stay with Rip. Kenz. I mean it. Stay with him. Watch his six. They know who he is now.”

Kenzie nodded with hesitation and raced to the front of her car, shielding Rip and Devyn while she waved on the car that had stopped after Coy raced off in the direction of the vehicle they’d nearly gone head-to-head with.

“Where is he going?” Devyn asked between sobs.

“After the bad guys, darlin’,” Rip said as he checked her over.

“So that was intentional? Not just someone not paying attention?”

“I’m afraid that looked pretty targeted.” Kenzie shared. “They didn’t even slow down after they passed. If anything, they went even faster.”

“To get the hell out of here.” Rip chided. “Especially since they missed their target.”

“So, I’m the target?” Devyn questioned.

“I think you were just the easy target, given you were in the middle of the road.” Rip scolded. “What were you thinking.”

Devyn began to breathe heavily, and her face paled, concerning Rip.

“Are you okay? Anything hurt?”

Kenzie shared his concern. “Dev? Honey? I think she’s in shock.”

“I can’t... I can’t believe...” the tears began to roll down Devyn’s cheeks again, and her breathing hitched with each word. “The kitten...”

Rip scooped her up and, cradled her in his arms, and made his way around the vehicle. “We need to get out of here... now.”

“I agree.” Kenzie went for the driver’s side door, and Rip stopped her.

“Nope. You have my six, remember? You should be on my heels right now, Sheriff.” He warned.

Seeming to understand the seriousness of the situation and that Rip was left with the responsibility of seeing them both to safety, she didn't argue and made her way to the passenger-side door.

"Sure thing, boss." She said sarcastically. "But just to clarify, I have your six because I'm fucking capable."

Rip was able to open the rear passenger door with ease, unlike earlier when Devyn had attempted to get in, "Which is why Coy must've given the orders he did. I'm only successful if I have someone watching my back, too. I'm honored it's you. I've seen your record. It's impressive." Rip informed before leaning in to help buckle Devyn in, who wasn't quite herself and trapped in whatever state of mania the events of late had left her in.

"Of course you have." Kenzie rolled her eyes. "That means Coy has too."

"There isn't much we don't know or that we can't find out, Sheriff. He's well aware of your service and accomplishments."

"So much for classified." She muttered under her breath.

He reached inside his shirt, pulled out the tiny kitten, and placed it in her hands. Her eyes lit up as they filled with emotion once more. "You saved it?"

"Yeah. I fucking saved the damn cat." He said with gruff.

Rip scanned their surroundings, keeping a mental note of all that was going on in that moment — who was present, who was looking their way, and, more importantly, who was trying hard to avoid eye contact. He jumped in the vehicle and didn't look back.

"Anything?" Kenzie asked.

“Not a fucking thing. Any one of them could be spotters.” He said, referring to those who could be lookouts for their elusive and no longer discreet enemy.

“You?” he asked.

“A lot of familiar faces, but after what we saw in that lawyer’s office, familiar doesn’t necessarily mean safe,” Kenzie admitted.

“Coy? What about Coy? Devyn said, looking over her shoulder and out the back window. “Why are we going this way?”

“Because this is the way to safety.” Rip deadpanned.

“He’s alone, Rip. We have to turn around.”

“Your brother works best alone.” He fired back.

“But...”

“But nothing, Devyn. This isn’t up for discussion or argument.”

“Excuse me, but...”

“There it is again. You don’t get to do that. You hear me? You don’t get to say, but... This is non-negotiable. You aren’t safe here. Not even a little bit. None of you are. You are going back to the ranch, and we’ll wait for Coy there.”

“You’re not going back out? You’re not even going to try and help him? He could be charging right into the lion’s den right now and...”

“He’ll be fine. Coy’s always fine.” Rip’s tone was flat, lacking emotion, and his

expression grim, revealing that this was hard, even for him. “If he needs backup, he’ll tell me. This is what we’re trained for. Otherwise, we’ll see him at the ranch.”

“And if we don’t?”

“Are you always like this?” Rip said, looking between the road and Devyn through the rearview mirror.

“Like what?” Devyn asked with her tone full of offense.

“Spoiled. Argumentative. Bordering bossy.” Rip began. “Listen. In case you have already forgotten, something very dangerous has just happened back there. Something that could’ve got you killed. This isn’t the time to play the butts and what if’s game. You’re not going to negotiate your way out of this one, counselor. You’re going to the ranch. We all are. And we’re going to stay there unless Coy says otherwise. Period.”

“I am not spoiled.” She argued.

“If that’s all you took away from what I just said, then you just proved my damn point. You could’ve died back there, Devyn, and in the process, got your brother or any one of us hurt... over a cat.”

“Well, I...” she paused, unsure what to say. “I... Kenzie?”

“Honey, I love you, but he’s right,” Kenzie said as she turned in her seat to look Devyn in the eye. “That was dangerous. Your heart was in the right place, just at the wrong time. I’m glad Rip was able to rescue that kitten for you, but that could have gone a hundred different ways.”

“And Coy?” Devyn asked with a quivering lip.

“Will be fine,” Kenzie said with hesitation. “He’s... going to be fine.”

Devyn shook her head and cradled the kitten tighter, “Who are you trying to convince Kenzie? Me? Or yourself?”

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“I found the car in town, but nobody was around. My guess is they had another vehicle waiting and ditched it,” Coy said as they all sat around the table. The car came back stolen from Oklahoma, and the plates were stolen from a different rig from the other end of Texas.”

“That car had a purpose, and it wasn’t a good one,” Kenzie added.

Rip looked at Devyn, “So this was an attempt on a hit. No accident.”

“We don’t have proof, but how could it not be at this point?” Coy asked.

“Sis, I don’t think you should leave anymore,” Nash said, landing a comforting hand on Devyn’s shoulder. “I don’t like how this is going.”

“I’m pretty content just staying right here on the ranch,” Devyn said, holding the kitten they’d rescued as she fed it a bottle. “Besides, this little lady needs round-the-clock care. You don’t suppose she was part of the plan, do you?”

“I doubt it.” Coy grinned. “They didn’t really need to lure you with a cat to do what they were trying to do. And to be fair, they were likely aiming for any one of us.”

“Well, coincidence or not, she’s either the reason I was in danger or the reason I was lucky,” Devyn said, kissing the top of the kitten’s head.

“Danger’s a good name. Suits her.” Rip said as the kitten tried to make his way to

Diesel, whose curious head was in Devyn's lap while Rip was working diligently on a computer. "I'd watch him close with her."

"Aw, Diesel's a good boy. I think he likes her." Devyn said.

Rip snorted, "Yeah, as a snack, maybe."

"He'd never..." Devyn rubbed his nose, and Diesel quickly pulled his head away from her touch and used it to push the kitten back up to Devyn's chest. "See? He's protecting her."

Rip watched Diesel, gentle as can be, "You're going to untrain all the tough shit right out of him."

"Nah. He's still a tough guy on the outside. He just has a gentle soul. Common theme around here." She said, looking around the room.

"Right." Coy said, rolling his eyes, "I did a sweep, and there aren't any cameras anywhere in this damn town. Whoever was behind the wheel today had just enough of a jumpstart on me to get into a different rig and disappear. For all I know, I drove right by them and wasn't the wiser."

"Dashcam," Rip said. "My rig has one. I'll download the footage and run it. See if anything hits."

"It's worth a look, but I don't recall seeing but maybe a couple of other vehicles, and a couple were people I knew that have lived here as long as we have."

"Still might be worth a look, though," Dillon said. "Get me the footage. I'll do the analyzing. I'll know who's local and who isn't."

“Did anyone else find the timing of that car suspicious?” Kenzie asked.

“Like maybe our friend Ellis Steele gave them the heads up were on the move?” Coy asked.

“Bingo.”

“Yeah, I thought about that too. We have his phones being monitored. Anything comes out of that office, we’ll know it. As of right now, it doesn’t appear there was a call made or message sent.” Coy shared.

“You have a warrant for that, right?” Devyn asked.

“Of course.” Coy winked, then looked at Ransom, “He’s the warrant.”

“Perk of the job.” Ransom teased. “Actually, they don’t need me. This is all on the up and up, Dev.”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this.” She shook her head, “I’m supposed to uphold the law, and here we are, sitting around the table, breaking it left and right. You all might land in a jail cell before the bad guy gets ya.”

“Not a chance,” Coy said. “He’s right. We have... legal authority.”

“Who the hell are you?” Devyn asked. “That’s a lot of authority .”

“Someone with a lot of responsibility... and authority,” Coy said, looking over Rip’s shoulder. “We logged in yet?”

“Almost. Killion is getting us in. Something about back doors and trojan horses.” Rip replied. “I never understand the geek talk. Just know what to do once he gets me in.”

Coy turned to Charlotte, “You’re sure you want to do this? It’s not too late to back out. I assure you that you will not feel any consequences, either way, but if your conscience...”

Charlotte put her hands up, “Stop right there. I believe in good character and a strong moral compass, and this fits that bill. I’m happy to help y’all out. Delilah was a good one, and I want to help bring justice in her name.”

“Fair enough,” Coy said.

“We appreciate this, darlin’,” Nash went on. “I know the decision wasn’t made lightly. Hacking into your companies servers and hunting down medical records and bills for our Mama... well, there isn’t thanks enough.”

“Listen. Somethin’ was bothering her for quite a while, and the more I’ve learned here in the past several days, the more I have to think we’re about to unbury whatever that was. I would hate to think she wasn’t resting in peace.” Charlotte continued, “She deserves peace, and not all of these questions about her final days looming over her legacy.”

“How are you that nice?” Devyn asked. “I really don’t get it.”

“Kindness goes a long way, sugar.” Charlotte winked, “And I really dislike assholes, and I’m starting to think there were quite a few haunting her as much as they’re haunting you all.”

Devyn looked to Dillon, “Did she just say asshole? I swear I just heard sugar dumplin’ buns over there say asshole.”

Dillon nodded, “She did indeed, and somehow even that word sounded sweet coming out of her mouth.”

“I think I like her,” Devyn whispered.

Dillon snickered, “I think we all do.”

“Here you go,” Rip said, turning the laptop in Charlotte’s direction, “Does that look familiar?”

Charlotte nodded and rubbed her hands together mischievously, “That’s our system, alright. Why is this so thrilling when I know it’s so bad?”

“Because being bad is fun, sweetheart.” Nash winked. “How long does she have?”

“Not long.” Rip said, “Get it all and get out as quick as you can. If we’re getting too close to a problem, I’ll get a heads up.”

“I’ll grab the itemized billing statements, payment receipts, and insurance transactions first,” Charlotte said as she went to work on the computer. “Then, I’ll grab her medical records, though I do advise that maybe you just stick those away unless you absolutely need to know something.”

“I appreciate your concern for our Mama’s privacy, but I think she would understand why we were doing this. Besides, we already know she had cancer.” Coy shared.

“I understand that, but I mean... it might be hard to read. The doctor notes. Radiology reports. It’s all very detailed and presents a very specific... timeline, if you will.” Charlotte said as delicately as possible.

“Like a roadmap to her decline and ultimate death,” Nash muttered under his breath.

“You can hold your loved ones’ hand through the entire thing and think you’ve lived it with them... until you read those documents. I don’t know why, but it’s...”

“I can only imagine.” Devyn cut her off, sensing the emotion building in Charlotte’s voice. “You sound like you’re speaking from experience.”

Charlotte nodded, her eyes never leaving the screen, “I do. My sweet Mama had a similar battle. And even with my experience, those records were rough. Like reliving it all over again. I don’t particularly advise it.”

“You’re up,” Coy said, sharing a computer with Nash. “This should get you into Mama’s account you were paying on with the information you used to make those deposits on the loan.”

“How?” Nash said as if the computer was foreign to him. “Don’t I need her social security number or a password?”

“Not at all. Just the account number on which you made payments. Looks like there were a couple of accounts attached to her.” Coy said, “Either of these look familiar? We can’t see anything but the account number right now, and we get this wrong; we set off a lot of alarms that will be tough to shut off because financial institutions don’t mess around.”

“I thought you said there wouldn’t be any consequence here...” Nash nervously questioned. “I’m not trying to catch felonies of any kind.”

“And that will land you dozens of them.” Devyn chimed in.

“Thanks. That was helpful.” Coy sneered. “You won’t be liable, Nash. I’m just saying it’s best if we don’t sound those alarms. You good?”

“I’m good. Let’s just get it over with.” Nash said. “Let’s do this.”

The group stayed at the table together for longer than anyone cared to admit, hunting

for answers everywhere they could. With multiple downloaded files safely stored and just as many printed stacks of paper, they closed the computers, and everyone let out a sigh of relief.

“That loan didn’t pay for the cancer,” Coy grunted. “Just as we suspected.”

Nash flipped through pages of medical bills, shaking his head, “Not even a little bit. I can’t believe this is how much there is left to pay. How do people afford this?”

“They don’t,” Charlotte said. “It’s unfair, really, like putting a price on life.”

“And in this case, there’s a large sum due, and she didn’t even get a second chance at life.” Nash tossed the papers on the table in frustration. “Dying is expensive.”

“I think we should have the itemized bills further analyzed.” Coy continued.

“You think she was charged incorrectly?” Charlotte asked, “I can help if...”

“Not exactly.” Coy interrupted. “I think we need to make sure she got all the treatment she needed and nothing extra.”

“Extra?” Charlotte questioned, awareness washing over her, “Oh, you think... Oh my...”

“Care to fill us in?” Devyn huffed.

“I think what your brother is eluding to is... what you all would consider... foul play?” Charlotte swallowed hard, nearly choking on her words. “I, uh, I can help you sort that out. I’m not an expert, but I’m the closest one you probably have here. And, like I said before, you probably shouldn’t read the chart notes unless absolutely necessary. It can be heartbreaking.”

“I’d appreciate that.” Coy nodded. “You find anything out of the ordinary — bring it up. We have people who can dig deeper if we give them a starting point. I don’t want to exhaust resources on a gut feeling.”

“Understood.” Charlotte’s eyes welled up, “Just the thought of...”

Nash covered her hand with his, “I know, honey. We all know.”

When a single tear escaped her, Dillon spoke up, “Charlotte, no matter what you find in there, know that we don’t hold you accountable. If something was done maliciously...”

Charlotte nodded vigorously and swiped the tear away as if she’d dug deep and found a new source of strength, “I know. I can’t say it would sit right with me for obvious reasons, but I understand. Please... let me help you with this.”

Coy quickly glanced at each of the siblings and nodded, “Thank you, Charlotte.”

“The other thing we need to dig into, Coy, is these financials. If that money didn’t go toward her treatment, where did it go, and why?” Kenzie asked. “I know we still have a lot of unanswered questions, making it hard to determine what applies and what doesn’t, if anything, but I think it’s pretty clear now these things are all connected, and Lilah had many secrets that she was juggling, all the way to her grave.”

“It’s a fair conclusion,” Coy said. “It’s so out of character for her, but then, she even kept the cancer from all of us until she couldn’t any longer. There’s a lot about our mother, none of us knew. Not even you, Nash, and you spent the most time with her in her final year.”

“I hate to say it, but she did seem different. Stressed. Anxious. On edge. Quiet. I just assumed it was the cancer.” Nash said, “In hindsight, I can see there being much

more to that than just being ill, and I wish I saw it for what it was.”

“The secret that killed her?” Devyn deadpanned.

Coy put up a hand to stop the speculation from getting out of control, “Hold on, we don’t know...”

“Sure, we do,” Devyn replied, her words full of pain and sorrow. She didn’t trust me, changed her will, and took out loans that could rob us of the only home any of us have ever known...”

“We won’t let that happen. The debts are large, I’ll admit, but we aren’t going to lose this place — we have some money...” Dillon started.

“As do I...” Coy chimed in.

“I wish I did, but I already put it toward this place. I don’t have much left.” Nash admitted.

“You’ve done more than your share already, brother.” Cut shared. “Nora and I have put away a fair amount, and it can all go toward this place. It’s our legacy and...”

“You’re all missing the point.” Devyn chuckled maniacally as if the joke was on them, and she was the only one who got the punchline. “She lied to us. All of us. Even if only by omission. We inherited a lot of debt, medical bills, property, and shell companies we can’t even unravel and access, and the biggest inheritance of all... her secrets. Secrets that have us all huddled here like a damn compound because someone, or something, got rid of her, that wasn’t the cancer, and we’re all next.”

“Dev...” Coy began, but she wasn’t listening any longer.

“No. There’s nothing you can say that changes the facts,” Devyn stood from her chair, “She lied. Left us in danger. Didn’t trust any one of us or respect us enough to warn us of... of... anything. Just hung us out to... die. That’s who Delilah Stone was. The real Delilah Stone. You all can keep defending her. Feel bad for her. But I, for one, am done. I have no idea who our mother really was, and I don’t care any longer. I just... I just want...”

“Devyn, you don’t mean that.” Dillon corrected.

“I do, Dill.” Devyn looked around the space from person to person and then beyond. “None of this is real. It’s all a lie. One big fat fucking lie, and if you all don’t get your heads together on this, you won’t survive this any more than she did.”

Devyn marched out of the room, her kitten in hand and Diesel on her heels, but Rip stopped her at the doorway.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Anywhere but here.” She tried to push past him, but Rip didn’t budge. “Get out of my way, or I’ll shoot you again.”

“Where ... are you going?” he growled.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I’m headed for the barn. There’s a punching bag in there unless you’d rather play the part yourself.”

Rip stepped aside.

“Great. I’m allowed to go. You sure it isn’t too dangerous? I’d hate to be shot at or run down on my way out there.” She scanned the room, and nobody made eye contact. “Great. You know where you find me.”

Devyn marched out of the room unopposed, leaving a deafening silence in her wake.

“Jesus. How did this happen?” Coy asked under his breath. “Especially given our line of work, Dill.”

“I don’t know. I guess we were a little too confident. We saw what we wanted to see: our sweet mother and our family home being run just as it always has without a hitch.”

“She’s not wrong,” Cut said. “We really didn’t know who our mother was. At least in the last year or so.”

“And with her mixed in the pictures on that lawyer’s wall today,” Coy added. “I believe Devyn’s right. We didn’t have a fucking clues who our mother was.”

“Or did we?” Nash defended. “Maybe she was still exactly who we knew her to be, navigating something bigger than her, the best she could... alone. Maybe we were the problem. That’s an awful lot for her to do unnoticed. What does that say about us?”

“I agree.” Cut sighed. “Until we found out she was sick, we all just sort of went about our business, focused on our own lives.”

“I know I’m an outsider looking in, but I think I’m the closest an outsider can get and have a little perspective, but isn’t that how it’s supposed to be? You’re all adults. You’re supposed to live your own lives, as was she. It isn’t like you missed something right in front of you,” Kenzie shared, “Lilah hid something — something pretty big it seems — from all of you. You guys are all good at what you do, but she was clearly better. Instead of blaming yourselves for becoming exactly who she raised you to be or blaming her for wanting to protect you from something, how about we look at this with a new set of eyes...”

“I agree and couldn’t have said it better.” Nash interrupted. “Just because she kept us in the dark doesn’t mean she intended to forever. Perhaps she just ran out of time, and really, at this point, does it even matter? Figuring out why she didn’t tell us what was happening doesn’t solve the mystery at hand.”

“Unless it does, Nash,” Coy said. “Maybe breaking down what Delilah was up to and why she kept it so quiet will help us solve whatever the hell this chaos is around us. One kind of goes with the other, ya know?”

“Sure. But the new perspective needs to be that she did this out of love or just leave the emotion out of it all altogether. We keep coming at this thing as Mama did something hurtful. Who was she, and why were we so damn blind is nothing more than a distraction.”

“Look who’s the smart one now.” Coy grinned. “You’re... right, and I can’t believe I’m saying that.”

“I guess we know who the wise one is among us.” Cut laughed. “And... he’s right.”

“Maybe,” Nash went on, “Instead of blaming Mama and feeling... hurt. We should take the time to get to know her.”

“With all due respect, isn’t it a little late for that?”

“Not at all, Kenzie. Mama’s all around this place.” Nash rebutted. “Everywhere we look...”

“We need to reconnect with her,” Coy said.

“And follow the money, big brother.” Nash winked.

“And that.”

She was fascinating to watch, Rip thought as he stood just outside the barn door and watched Devyn work out with a bag, one punch and kick at a time. The idea that they called this place a barn amused him as it wasn't like any barn he'd ever seen. No farm animals. Maybe a few pets that he could hear in the distance somewhere, and of course, Diesel rested in a nearby corner, eyes fixed on Devyn, and that damn kitten was in a picnic-like basket of soft blankets right next to his dog. It was more of a party barn if you asked him.

There was a wide-open space for entertaining, a pool table, and a wet bar setting the tone, along with rich leather furniture and the biggest screen television hanging on the wall that he'd ever seen. There were stairs leading to the living quarters upstairs that he was staying in — Nash's place — but Rip had no idea this was below. He could see some sort of dark room in the distance with a large ornate wood barn-like door that might have been a theatre-type setting. There was a large open kitchen that was lit by the night sky, peering through the large roll-up glass door that led to an outdoor kitchen and seating area that looked as swanky as the inside of this barn . If this was ranch living, count him in.

At present, Rip was watching Devyn take out her frustrations in the state-of-the-art gym that sat behind a glass wall where she was leaving every last emotion behind. Petite, delicate, and beautiful as she was, what he saw unleashing in the distance was the wrath of a capable woman on a mission of vengeance. She was seething with anger, drowning in sorrow, and tortured by a pain he didn't think she could even explain. It was obvious to him somehow, even if it wasn't to her, which explained her smart mouth and bratty disposition at times.

Devyn appeared to be tough, or at least liked to tell everyone just how strong and grown she was, but it was clear, as he watched her whale on the bag that didn't stand a chance, that she was trying to convince herself as much as anyone else, just how tough she was. He'd give her credit, though. She was damn near convincing, until the tantrums, or until... the tears. She was unhinged, losing it, and coming completely unwound as she fought against whatever demon she was facing at the moment. Based on what he'd gathered in the handful of days he'd been on the ranch, he was sure there were plenty.

Diesel lifted his head slowly and scanned the room until his eyes fixed on Rip. He knew he was there, even if he couldn't quite see him in the shadows. Instead of alerting Devyn or even come running, his badass highly trained soldier of a dog moved closer to the fucking kitten and rested his head in the basket, never losing his sights on Rip.

"Traitor," Rip said under his breath before heading inside.

The music she was playing grew louder as he drew closer. He didn't take her for a metalhead, but it paired well with the assault she was serving the punching bag. Rip wasn't intentionally being discreet with his approach, but Devyn was so in the zone that she didn't see or hear him coming.

"Dev?" he said, as not to startle her.

When she didn't even acknowledge him, he shouted, "Devyn."

Still nothing.

After a hard shin kick to the bag, she'd turned just so and saw her reflection in the long wall of mirrors and... saw his as well. Startled and with little time to react, much less register the image Devyn saw standing directly behind her. In a sudden motion,

she quickly executed a roundhouse kick, trying to fight off her assailant, but she was met with much resistance. She may not have seen or realized it was Rip, but he knew full well it was her and... what to expect. A fight.

Rip grabbed her leg before it could make contact and steadied her so as not to cause her injury or to fall. That didn't stop her in the least. Devyn continued to fight, and Rip let her. Every swing she took was met with an open palm or a duck of his head. She wasn't angry, she was grieving, and he could see it. Grieving a mother she thought she knew. Grieving the family life she thought they had. Grieving the safety she once felt in this place. Grieving... a life that was no longer hers. Everything was different now and always would be despite the outcome of all that was falling down around her.

It was clear, to even Rip, that Devyn liked to be in control, given her actions and reactions to almost everything. She did well and felt her most confident when in control. She was feeling anything but that, and it was plain as day. Devyn was spiraling, and he was going to let her, even if it meant being on the opposite end of her fury.

Diesel barked, catching Rip by surprise and earning his attention, which was a rookie move if he ever made one. In a split-second, Rip turned his attention to his dog and surroundings to make sure it wasn't a warning of danger; Devyn was able to land a punch right to his eye, causing him to lose his balance and let go of her leg. When Devyn began to fall backward, she'd reached for Rip's shirt with a tight fist and brought him down with her. She hit the ground hard on her back. Rip caught himself, managing not to crush her, and hovered just inches above her.

Their breath caught, each locked in the other's stare. The close proximity and compromising position they were in hadn't even registered as they remained locked at that moment. Still. Unphased by all that was around them. At that moment, it was just the two of them, surrounded by both confusion and certainty that this was

precisely where they were supposed to be, with each other. She seemed to feel safe, and he felt protective. Until that brief moment faded, and reality came back into view, settling around them.

“Rip.” She said with surprise, gently touching his red and puffy eye. “Oh my gosh, I didn’t realize it was you. I...”

“It’s okay.” He began.

“No, it wasn’t. I-I don’t know what got into me.” Her voice quaked as her eyes filled with emotion.

“You were focused, and I startled you. It just took you a minute to realize it was me. That’s all.” Rip justified her actions because he understood the kind of focus and anger she was grappling with.

“I was, but to not realize it was you... you were standing right in front of me.” Her lip quivered, and she quickly pulled out from beneath him and leaned against the wall. “What is happening to me?”

“Really. It isn’t a big deal, not the first time I took a fist to the eye, but definitely the first by a lawyer — it’s usually really bad men, but there’s a first for everything, right?” He teased with a light tone.

“It’s not funny, Rip. I don’t understand. I’m not like this.” She muttered with frustration.

“You were in the zone.”

“Stop, will you? Stop defending my actions. It’s not okay. I hit you.” She pleaded. “I don’t even recognize who I am anymore.”

“I know you’re used to shooting me, but honestly, this isn’t that serious.” Rip continued, ignoring her plea to be serious as she had a deep reflecting moment.

“That was different. I meant to shoot you. I didn’t mean to hit you. I was just caught up in some crazy moment.” She admitted. “It’s like I saw you but didn’t at the same time. The only thing that registered was someone was behind me, and they shouldn’t have been.”

“I believe that’s fight or flight, and you chose fight. It’s a reliable instinct, and yours clearly works.” He continued to tease.

“Rip...”

“Devyn, you went from a simple life as a law student, safe with all the freedom in the world, to being shot at, nearly run over, and if you count your first encounter with me... being chased by a strange man in the woods.”

“And his dog.” She said and winked at Diesel.

“Right. And his insanely threatening and lethal beast.” Rip turned to Diesel, who was still resting his head in the basket with the kitten. “Who’s suddenly into cats and has motherly instincts.”

“He does love her.”

“What he wouldn’t give to chase a squirrel or flock of just about any bird, but cats... who knew.”

Devyn smiled at Diesel, “I think he knows she’s small — just a baby. She needs to be protected.”

“Kind of like how he latched onto you?” Rip asked.

“I don’t need to be protected.” She argued.

“Are you sure about that?” he pointed to his bruising eye, “It’s okay not to have it all figured out and... to be afraid. This is all foreign to you. You’ve probably had more trauma in the past week than your entire life, am I right?”

She hesitated to answer at first, then gave in, “Maybe.”

“Then stop fighting it. Stop trying to prove to your brothers and sister that you’re all grown and can take care of yourself. Stop overcompensating because it’s only putting you in more danger. Let them protect you. It’s okay to be scared and let them look out for you. For me to look out for you... before you get yourself or someone else hurt.”

“You think I’m being defiant.” She stated, daring him to challenge her.

“I think you’re being something.”

“You don’t even know me, Rip.” She guffawed.

“I know enough to know you’re smarter than this. I see how you look at all of them and how you want them to look at you.”

Devyn tossed her hands in the air in exasperation, “Oh my God. Are you a damn therapist now? What is this, Rip?”

“It’s honesty. From a stranger who has nothing to lose or gain here.”

“Do you feel better?” she said sarcastically, taking to her feet, “You know, about

yourself after that little pep talk? Coy send you out here, or did Dillon?”

“Neither.” He said, following suit. “Just offering a friendly observation and maybe a little advice, but I see you don’t want to hear it.”

Diesel suddenly stood tall and was on full alert. A subtle growl that was barely a grumble escaped him like a warning, which Rip quickly interpreted as danger.

“Quick, get behind me,” Rip said, tucking Devyn behind him and pulling his weapon as he backed them into a corner between large pieces of gym equipment. “Don’t move.”

“Rip, it’s probably...”

He didn’t even turn to look at her; he simply kept his stare locked in the direction Diesel’s attention was directed.

“Diesel, watch’em,” Rip commanded, and the dog slowly but methodically moved toward the door and began to bark like some kind of tactical maneuver was underway.

“Watch what?” Devyn whispered. “Rip, what’s going on?”

“He sees someone or something. Stay behind me while he flushes them out.” Rip said.

“Oh no. Someone’s out there? What about the agents and...”

“You’re safe,” Rip reassured, though his tone was flat and lacked emotion. He was as focused as the dog breaching the door and going out of view. “Let him work.”

Diesel's bark grew farther and farther away, then suddenly became aggressive and quickly became louder again.

"He found someone, and he's giving chase. Stay down. Here he comes." Rip warned as he felt Devyn's tiny frame tremble behind him.

"Oh shit." She whispered. "Shit, shit, shit."

"You're safe. No matter what happens, you're safe, Devyn."

She began to gasp, "I-I can't..."

With one hand extended in front of him, weapon in his grip, he shifted his body, reached behind himself with his free arm, and cradled Devyn against his body. He attempted to comfort her as best he could, given the situation, while still shielding her from whatever danger was threatening them. Despite the rapid pace of the scene unfolding before them, Rip's movements seemed to unfold in slow motion, reminiscent of a scene from a movie. "You're okay, darlin' stay put. You're always safe with me."

Loud, heavy footsteps in quick succession grew louder. Someone was running — running from Diesel and right for them. A shadowy figure came into view, and Rip prepared for the confrontation. He was hyper-focused on his target, ready to make a split-second decision to pull the trigger and ask questions later or face off with whatever threat was coming right for them.

"Don't move," he yelled just as the figure entered the doorway. "Don't fucking move."

The person stopped and threw their hands up, but Rip couldn't determine who it was simply by their silhouette in the doorway. Diesel's behavior struck him as odd when

he began to dance around the character, and his bark shifted from menacing to almost playful. Diesel was taunting them, but why? Rip slowly approached, keeping Devyn right behind him like he was a human shield, hands still linked, protecting her.

“Will you call off your damn dog, or do you think this is funny? He keeps nipping at my ass.”

Rip relaxed, and he could feel the tension leave Devyn’s grip as well, and she emerged from behind him.

“You probably deserve it, Nash.” She teased. “What are you doing sneaking around out here anyway?”

“One, he’s frightening .” Nash pointed to Diesel, “Two, I’m not buying the whole sweet, gentle with-the-kitten bullshit. He wants to kill something, and I’m pretty sure he’s hoping it’s me.”

“He doesn’t want to kill you. He was just doing his job. He takes it pretty seriously.” Rip said while Diesel continued to bark and run circles around Nash. “Besides, when he’s a good boy and does his job, he gets his favorite toy to play with for a bit. It’s the only time he gets it.”

“How about you tell your good boy I’m not a bad guy and to... sit or something. Huh?” Nash nervously chuckled.

“Diesel, leave it,” Rip commanded. Diesel immediately stopped and watched Rip for his next command. “Sit.”

Diesel complied.

“You can pet him now,” Rip informed.

“I think I’ll pass and stick to the kitten,” Nash said, headed toward the basket it was sleeping in, but Diesel beat him to it and sat on guard, causing Nash to stop in his tracks. “Or, maybe I won’t. That’s clearly... his kitten.”

“If you pet him and make friends, he won’t feel like he needs to protect anyone or anything from you,” Rip said.

“Pretty sure he’s going to bite me no matter what you say, Rip.”

“Just do it, Nash,” Devyn said with an eye roll. She walked over and knelt beside the dog, letting him lick her face while she scratched his ears. Devyn grabbed his hand and placed it on the dog’s head. “Now pet him. Diesel’s a good boy, aren’t you? Such a handsome guy, sweet as can be.”

“Why are you talking to him in that voice? I’m not using a special voice.” Nash said and reluctantly pet the dog.

“Aww, Uncle Nash is a grump, isn’t he? Diesel likes this voice. See, he likes you. He was just working.”

“I think he’s tolerating me, but only because you’re right there, and he seems to love you for some reason.”

“He really has taken to her.” Rip said, “Never done that before. He’s trained to be a one-person dog and only protect, but here he is... failing all those years and dollars invested in training for a pretty girl.”

“Did you hear that, Diesel?” She said, still in her silly puppy talk voice, “He called me pretty. Sounds like you’re mine now, too.”

Nash finally pulled his hand away, and Diesel stared him down, “Yeah, I’m still a

little afraid of him. That didn't help. What is he, anyway? Yellow lab... on steroids? Part donkey, maybe?"

"Did you just call him a yellow lab?" Rip asked, offended.

"Yeah, I mean..." Nash looked between Rip and Diesel and shrunk under both of their stares, taking several steps backward. "I mean, no? He doesn't look like one... at all. He looks like a big... tough..."

"German shepherd." Rip finished as Nash was at a loss for words.

"Yeah, I was going to say..." Nash gave Diesel an odd look, "Really? You sure? He's so blonde and golden."

"Little less than half husky too." Rip went on.

"Okay, yeah, I guess I can sort of... Wait, huskies are grey, aren't they?" Nash questioned.

"Not entirely. He's also a little Staffordshire... hence the steroid comment." Rip sneered.

"Staffordshire. Oh wow. That's why he's a little intimidating." Nash framed his own face to finish his thought while moving further away from the dog, "That's where all this comes from. Big. Beefy. Head... and stuff. And scary. So, why is he still staring at me like that?"

"Because you called him a lab." Rip snorted.

Nash laughed, "Right, because he knows what that... You think he understands?"

“You also said donkey.” Devyn giggled.

“Oh, dude, Diesel, I only meant like your size. You’re a big guy, and yeah,” Nash continued to stumble over his words with his halfhearted explanation, or perhaps attempt at an apology, to Diesel. “I didn’t mean you were a jackass or anything. Just a big, strong guy... who clearly hates my guts. Okay then.”

“He’s an elite operative, Nash, and knows it. Dogs, in general, sense stress and other human emotions, and he’s trained to respond to those things in a specific way and that they mean something.”

“Really? So, what’s he sensing from me right now?”

“Probably anxiety, and that’s why he’s staring at you like that. He’s trying to get you to crack under pressure to see what you do next and evaluate your threat level.”

“Oh shit. He can tell all that and thinks I’m a threat? How do I fix that? I’ve always been a dog person, never met one I didn’t like or didn’t like me, so this is all...” Nash waved his hand over Diesel, indicating that he was referring to the entire experience going down with ... the dog. “This is weird. And, I’m a little frightened, and maybe using that term for the first time in my life. Because he looks like he still wants to kill me.”

“He won’t kill you, Nash. He’s trained to take a bullet and lay down his life for you. He just probably thinks you’re...”

“Weird.” Devyn deadpanned as she stood and headed for the door, “Like the rest of us. Let’s go, Diesel. Time to feed your baby.”

Diesel grabbed the basket holding the kitten, carried it in his mouth by the handle, and trotted along on Devyn's heels.

“Hey, it’s not his baby,” Rip warned. “You’re ruining him. He isn’t a damn night nurse for your cat, he’s a soldier.”

“Uh huh,” Devyn said and waved over her shoulder. “Whatever you say.”

“I’m going to have to talk to Coy and Dillon about this. Our company spent a lot of money on him and his training, and you’re...”

“His new best friend, I know.” Devyn laughed. “He’s still a soldier, and he also has his own kitten.”

Nash stepped aside when Devyn passed to make room for Diesel and his kitten in a basket. Diesel stopped in front of him, lifted his leg, and relieved himself on Nash’s leg.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Nash hollered and jumped back, “You’re dog just pissed all over me.”

Rip shrugged and followed Devyn and the dog, “You really shouldn’t have called him a lab.”

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“There’s too many to search here.” Coy said, “Will anyone notice if we sign them all out and take them back to the ranch?”

Kenzie plopped on a nearby table and looked at the rows and rows of shelving containing box after box of old case files. “Who would notice? I don’t think anyone is grabbing cases from this many decades back.”

“You don’t have an active cold case division?” Coy asked as he leaned against a metal shelf.

“No resources. No funding. No need. They’re all cold for a reason, and nobody is asking why.” Kenzie admitted. “I say we take as many as we can fit in your rig.”

Coy stepped beside her and began putting files back in the box he’d been going through, “We can get several years’ worth in there. Might need to make a second trip, but hopefully, it doesn’t come to that.”

“You really think we’re going to find your Jane Doe in these files?” She asked while following suit.

“I sure as hell hope so. We haven’t been lucky enough to find anything in electronic files yet. It’s got to be here, or...”

“Or, nobody missed her and filed a report.” Kenzie finished his thought. “You are prepared for that, right?”

“I’m prepared for just about anything at this rate.” Coy snorted. “I’m ready for answers. I’ll take anything at this point. We just need that one little break to get this thing going.”

“So, you can leave again, or...”

Coy leaned his hip against the table she was sitting on and faced her, their proximity so close he could nearly hear her pulse race when he looked at her, “So my family is safe. So, you’re safe.”

“Me?” she questioned with surprise, turning her body to face him.

“I have a bad feeling Kenz. A really bad feeling. Everything important to me is right here, in this town, and someone is trying to take it away from me. Including you.”

She sheepishly grinned, “Including me, huh? I appreciate the concern, but I do think I’m the safest of the group. I’m the sheriff. Coming after me, to get to you, would be foolish and the wrong way to go.”

“If that lawyer we went to see the other day is who we think he is — in deep with the wrong side — then you have as much to worry about as the rest of us do. I’m serious, Kenz. Don’t take any of this lightly.”

Kenzie studied his expression and noted the pain and pleading that rested there. She cradled his face and looked him in the eye, “I don’t. I understand, Coy. We’re all being safe, and we’re going to get to the bottom of this soon.”

He rested his forehead against hers in a vulnerable moment, “Not soon enough. I’m as patient as they come when working any other case, but this one... it feels like I’ve been holding my breath for days, and my lungs are burning, the world is spinning, and the weight on my shoulders...”

Kenzie gently pulled away so she could look him in the eye, still cradling his face in her hands, her thumbs gently sweeping his chiseled cheekbones, “It’s not all on you, Coy. You don’t have to carry this alone. There’s an army behind you, and we’re all here to take care of each other, and that includes you. I know you think you brought this here, but my gut says you didn’t. My intuition is strong, too, and it tells me this problem landed here a long, long time ago, and it’s just now coming to a head, and you need to be protected from it as much as the rest of us. You don’t have to be the hero, Coy, or anyone’s savior but your own.”

“Kenz...” he whispered.

“I mean it. The only one holding you hostage and suffocating you right now, burying you with the weight of the world, is you. Let that go. Let yourself breathe. Let yourself live, Coy. Nothing before you arrived here was your fault, and nothing since... You’re not the bad guy. You never have been.”

Coy stared deep into her gaze, braising her soul with that single look that caused her breath to catch. There was something electric between them, a chemistry that never died and was suddenly reborn with a familiar craving and desire. Kenzie’s hands snaked around his neck, and she pulled him closer.

“Kenz...”

“Shh.” She leaned in, “Stop thinking. Just... let it go.”

“And if I can’t?”

“Then you’ll never get to be happy again, Coy. It’s your choice. You can live in pain or choose to be happy.” She said, and her voice dropped to a breathy whisper, “And I hope you choose happy.”

Coy took her mouth fast and hard and kissed her like the taste of her was the air he needed to breathe. His body turned to hers as he stepped between her legs and slid her to the edge of the table so her body was pressed against his. His hands gripped her waist and roamed up her back and down her sides, feeling her body, learning it all over again. She was different now. Curves where there weren't any before, soft where she wasn't before, muscles flexing beneath his graze that were tense and crying for release. He'd known Kenzie his entire life, but not this version. This version was equally scarred, branded by life, and beautifully made into the perfect soul that was exactly what his heart needed.

As her fingers ran through his hair and gripped handfuls, a surge of heat coursed through him, thrilling him as he felt something for the first time in as long as he could remember. It wasn't lust or desire. No, this was different. It was an awakening of something entirely new and different. It was as if he'd woken from a long slumber, and the world was suddenly... new. Was this happy, he wondered. Was it wrong that he liked it here and wanted this moment to continue on because the shell of the life he'd been living was far more dark, isolating, and cold, full of ghosts and nightmares? If this was happy, he hoped it was also a new beginning where the past stayed where it belonged, and he could forge on, never losing this sense of whatever it was flooding through him.

Kenzie quickly pulled away, and it was as if the light dimmed when she did.

Breathing heavily, she rested her head against his and whispered, "Cameras."

Coy snorted, "Of course, there are cameras in here. Not a single one in the entire town, but here."

"Yeah, well, you're lucky I just remembered. That could've been a little more embarrassing than it already was." She giggled.

“I can have it erased,” Coy said, stepping back and looking at her. “Thank you.”

“It’s just a kiss, Stone.” She blushed.

“No, thank you for the rest. I-I don’t know how to let go entirely or how to simply choose happiness when reminders of my past and why I don’t deserve it are all around me, but...”

“I’ll help you. Never forget the past, Coy. There’s lessons and purpose in it, but I’ll help you give it a place where it can rest, and you can move forward.” She said, “If... that’s what you want?”

“What I want, right now, is to get through these damn files, find the break we’ve been searching for, and solve the circus of mysteries around us so everyone is safe. Then, I’ll worry about what I want.” Coy shared.

“Fair enough.” Kenzie said, sliding off the table and stealing one last quick kiss, “Go grab that cart over there, and we’ll stack these suckers on there and get out of here.”

They quickly filled the flatbed cart and wheeled the boxes they thought they could fit in the small SUV Coy borrowed from the ranch. The ride on the service-like elevator from the basement to the back door where they were parked was full of heat and tension. It wasn’t uncomfortable tension. It was the kind budding emotions and feelings were born of. The kind that made you sweat and gave you butterflies in the deepest part of your belly. The kind full of intrigue and wonder that left you imagining all of the what-ifs.

The duo kept their hands to themselves and flipped off their feelings like they were on a switch. They were alone in the basement, safe, and their guard was safely down. Outside, in public, where people were coming and going in wide open spaces, their guards were fully erect, and they saw everyone and everything around them move

before it actually did. They were hyper-aware of their surroundings, predicting movements, paces, and activity. That's what they were trained to do. Out here, they weren't alone. Out here... they were in the crosshairs of something heinous.

"I should've brought a horse trailer, and we could have grabbed all of them." He teased as they quickly filled the vehicle to the brim.

"Nope. We don't need it." Kenzie said, handing him the final box. "The answer we're looking for is somewhere in here. I can feel it."

"Is that some sort of superpower or just a wish and a prayer?" he laughed.

"Both." She shrugged as she watched him try to maneuver the last box into the back of the vehicle. "I'm telling you. Our slow or bad luck is done. It's all answers from here on out."

"I don't ever remember you being a cheerleader." Coy teased. "It somehow suits you."

"A cheerleader?" she grabbed the cart and began to walk off with it. "Is that your thing, Stone?"

"It could be." He grinned, still rearranging boxes so the hatch could close. "Hey, where are you going?"

"I need to put this back and lock the archives up. I'll be right back."

"Give me a second, and I'll go with you." He warned.

"Coy, it's the sheriff's station. The only person inside is the Deputy Shanks on dispatch. It's safe." She continued on.

“Still. I’d feel better if...”

“Stone.” She lifted her shirt slightly and revealed her waist, where a weapon was strapped. “I’m good.”

“Alright. But be quick, or I’m coming in after you.” He said.

She saluted him, “Yes, sir.”

“Sir?”

“Don’t let that go to your head, Stone. I’ll be right back.”

Coy’s phone rang. He pulled it from his pocket and saw Nash’s name scroll across the screen.

“I’ll be here, juggling boxes and watching your six,” Coy said, pulling the phone to his ear as he watched Kenzie disappear inside.

“What’s going on, brother?” Coy said, finally getting the last box tucked inside, and he sat on the back of the SUV.

“Well, I have a problem.”

“Don’t we all?”

“No, this is of the urgent kind,” Nash said, sounding out of breath. “And I can’t find my damn keys.”

“How would I know where your keys are and why do you need them? Where you goin’?”

“After Charlotte.” He shared. “She left. She just up and left.”

“What did you do?”

“What do you mean, what did I do ? Why did I have to do something?” Nash was flustered. Worry was laced in his words.

“Well, do you really want me to answer that?”

“Damn it, I didn’t do anything. Charlotte was helpin’ get the babies down for Nora and lettin’ her rest, but she disappeared when she was done. She left a note. Found’em.” He shouted, tossing his keys in the air and catching them again.

“You better not go after her alone.”

“That’s why I’m callin’ you. How far out are you? Almost done there? I was hoping you could meet me.”

Coy was still when he heard an all-too-familiar sound come through the phone: “Nash, was that your gun?”

“Locked and loaded, brother. I know better than to head out unarmed. Don’t worry, it’s all legal, and I’m a damn good shot. You taught me, remember?”

“Shit, Nash. I don’t like this. Where’d she go?” Coy ran his hand down his face, a gesture of frustration, before pinching the bridge of his nose, as if willing the right next move to make itself known. “Guessin’ her daddy’s place. She was real concerned learnin’ that he was in a bunch of the pictures y’all saw at that crooked lawyer’s office. Charlotte was real torn up about it, said she was going for answers.” Nash said.

Coy could hear the background change on the call — gravel. Nash was outside, in the driveway, headed for his vehicle, clearly not listening to reason.

“I’m about ten minutes out,” Coy said. “Wait for me.”

“Aren’t you at the sheriff’s station?”

“Yes.”

“You’re at least twenty minutes out, barring no cattle crossing the road or tractors puttin’ along.”

“Not the way I drive. I can be there in ten, max.” Coy looked at his watch and looked back at the sheriff’s station. “I just need to grab Kenzie.”

“Grab her? Thought she was with you.”

“She was... is. She took something inside but should have been back by now. She must’ve got caught up talking to that deputy inside. I think he has a little crush.” Coy headed for the door to the office.

“You sound jealous.”

“You sound...” Coy froze when gunshots rang out.

“Coy? What the hell was that?”

“Trouble.” Coy ran toward the building, hand on his weapon, ready to draw.

“Tell Rip what’s going on and ask Ransom for one of his agents. I’ll meet you at Charlotte’s.”

“Copy that, brother. Be careful.”

Coy disconnected the call, slid his phone back into his pocket, and pulled out his weapon. As he reached the glass door, he saw Deputy Shanks clearing the space, gun drawn. He looked right at Coy, who knew better than to rush in on an armed officer in pursuit of danger. When Shanks saw him, he signaled for him to enter, and he did.

“Kenzie?” Coy asked, his voice cracking with nerves.

“She went down to the storage locker and hasn’t been back since.” Deputy Shanks answered.

“Who else is here?”

“It’s only me, Coy. Everyone on tonight is out on patrols.”

“Then who the hell just fired their weapon?” Coy asked as they methodically moved, little by little, clearing the floor.

“Good question. It’s only her down there, and the cameras have been clear.” The Shanks said. “We’re all clear up here.”

Coy nodded and hit the elevator button as they passed it, calling it to their floor.

“What are you doing, Stone? The elevator, really? The minute the doors open...you’ll draw fire.”

Coy nodded, “That thing gets here. Clear it and then send it down empty.”

Coy opened the door to the stairwell leading to the basement level and went in. The deputy propped the door and stood at the entrance, where he’d have a clear view of

the main floor and the stairs should anyone breach from that direction.

“You got this, Stone?” Shanks asked, nodding down the stairwell.

“Shoot first, ask questions later,” Coy replied. “Anyone you don’t know. Your patience is thin, deputy. They don’t comply immediately, you shoot.”

“Copy that. I got you.”

Coy proceeded down the stairwell, evaluating every sound and shift in the air. Worry was settling in, and fear was threatening to take over. He didn’t hear her. Surely, if she were still down here, he’d hear her in some capacity. But it was deafeningly silent. So much so that he could hear the air softly flowing through the vent and the subtle hum from the lights above. If you asked him, he could hear someone’s pulse race and the sound of their rapid breathing. Nothing else.

The real question plaguing him was whether or not to call out to Kenzie. Instinct said no because he would hear the elevator begin to descend, and he would have the element of surprise while whoever was down here would be fixed on the elevator. When he reached the basement floor, nothing was out of order, or so it seemed. He also didn’t see Kenzie.

His approach was stealthy as he followed his intuition and swiftly, albeit carefully, moved in the direction of the elevator in hopes his ploy would work and draw out whatever danger was sharing the space with him. Rows and rows of shelves stacked to the ceiling with boxes of files that told a story of a town and its dark history of crime and mischief. He cleared each row, one by one. No enemy... no Kenzie.

A shuffling footstep masked the ping of the elevator. He wasn’t alone. Someone was tactically positioned, just as he hoped, to take out whatever calvary they thought was on the other side of those chrome doors. The joke was on them as the surprise would

be behind them, and he was the surprise, ready to bring whatever threat lay just one steel shelf away to its knees.

When the doors to the elevator opened, he was ready to spring into action, but there was nothing to react to. His enemy was more intelligent than he'd given credit. It wasn't going to be as simple as he thought because they didn't fall for his setup. Coy looked around, assessing the space, trying to determine how he would maintain the upper hand without exposing himself. He was out of options. Coy didn't have a choice if he wanted to find Kenzie — he had to go toe-to-toe with whoever was on the other side of the last wall of shelves and come out in the open like he was ready to play a game of chicken with an unknown enemy. An armed enemy.

However, Kenzie was still nowhere to be found, and he didn't see her standing over her assailant or engaged in a fiery battle. That could only mean one thing, and he couldn't let that thought dominate space in his mind or his heart. All he could do was come out fighting and... pray.

"C-coy?" Kenzie's voice was choppy and winded.

Shit. He began to move, trying not to give into the temptation that was the sound of her in trouble. This could be a ploy and someone playing with his heartstrings and about to win if he didn't slow down and reel in the emotions that were nearly crippling. Though a familiar feeling, it was one he hadn't felt in a very long time, and last time, it didn't end happily.

"Coy... I hear you breathing." She said faintly. "And I smell you..."

Weapon ready, he rounded the last obstacle between them and found Kenzie on the floor, her face swollen and bleeding, an arm wrapped around her waist, leaning against a wall.

“It’s clear.” She said. “They went out the back.”

“They?”

“He? She? I don’t know which. I think it was just one person. Had a ski mask on, and they blind-sided me.”

“Deputy!” Coy yelled, looking at the stairwell as if it would throw his voice farther while he knelt beside Kenzie and looked her over. “Where are you hurt? Were you shot?”

“No.” she cringed as he helped her sit taller.

“I heard the shot. They miss?”

“That was me, and I never miss, Stone.” She smiled, then winced and cupped her jaw. “Got me good in the mouth, though.”

“Yeah, you’re bleeding. Lip’s split pretty good.” Coy ripped off part of his shirt and used it to apply pressure to a gash across her forehead just below the hairline.

“Oh shit. Sheriff Gray. What happened down here?” Shanks asked as he slid to the ground beside her, pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket, and dabbed at a wound at the corner of her mouth that was bleeding.

“Someone got the jump on me.” She said with a snort.

“How? There hasn’t been anyone here since the last shift change.” Shanks said.

“Back exit,” Kenzie said, pointing to the rear of the facility. He went out that way.”

“The camera should have picked them up. Not a single alert.” Shanks said.

“Unless the camera was disabled or infiltrated,” Coy said, pulling his phone out and tapping at the screen.

“Here? In Coyote Creek? Why?” Shanks pulled his handkerchief away, and her wound began to bleed again. “Shoot, Sheriff. I think we need to call an ambulance. You’re just bleeding everywhere. What else is hurting?”

Kenzie took the handkerchief from Shanks and applied pressure herself, pulling the cloth away every so often to see how soiled it was. “No, I’ll be fine. It looks worse than it is. I think I got them worse than they got me — caught my slug.”

“You fired on them?”

“I sure did. Not sure where it hit, but I know I got them — let out a nice grunt as soon as it hit.” She tried to smile and was quickly reminded of her wound again. “Shit, that one hurts. The rest will heal. Mostly just bruised my pride because they got the jump on me.”

Coy slid his phone back into his pocket. “Let’s get you out of here. Are you okay to walk?”

“Sure.” She said, but when she tried to stand, she grimaced. “I might need a second.”

“I’m sorry, darlin’, but we don’t have a second.”

She gripped Coy by the arm, and fear filled her words, “What happened?”

“Charlotte. She’s gone rogue. Nash went after her, and I’m worried he didn’t listen and take anyone with him.” Coy informed. “I got to get to him before he does

something stupid, especially after this.”

“What’s going on? Your family in some sort of trouble?” Shanks asked.

“Nothin’ we can’t handle, Deputy.”

“If you need help…”

“Thank you, but we got it.” Coy didn’t intend to sound so harsh, but his protective instinct got the better of him.

“Well, if I can be of any assistance…”

“You’re the first one we’ll call,” Kenzie said, trying to pull herself to her feet again.

“Hang on, darlin’,” Coy got to his feet and swooped her off the ground before she could respond. “I’ll drop you at the ranch and…”

“No, you won’t. I’m going with you.”

“Kenz.”

“I’m going with you. End of discussion.” Kenzie warned.

Coy shook his head and turned to Shanks, “You going to be okay here?”

“Of course, I’m locking the place down and implementing the alert system.”

“Keep it as quiet as you can. No details,” Kenzie instructed.

“Got it, Sheriff. Whatever you say. I’ll see what I can find on that security footage,

too. Somethin' ain't right about that." Shanks said.

"Shanks, I have a team coming your way to sweep this area. Can I count on you to let them do their job, no questions asked?"

"So, it's true," Shanks said with a knowing grin.

"What's true."

"You're some sort of Special Forces type."

Coy snorted, "Special Forces?"

"I've heard the rumors. You and your sister. Some kind of secret military specialists."

"Something like that," Coy said, moving toward the stairs. "When they get here, you didn't see them, if you catch my drift."

"Saw who?" Shanks all but giggled with excitement.

"Um, yeah. Okay." Coy started up the stairs, Kenzie in his arms.

Shanks quickly followed, "Listen, I was in the military. I tried SEALs but didn't quite get there, injury. But I'm real good on a long gun and can shoot with ninety-nine-point nine percent accuracy from several miles out. Not too bad at working most facets of combat. I've seen it all. If you need me—"

"You'll be the first one I call," Coy said, leaning into the glass doors to leave.

"Anytime. I've always respected what you Stone's stand for. You have a capable ally if you need one."

“Appreciate that, Shanks. Be safe.”

Shanks saluted and quickly pulled his hand down, regretting the moment as soon as it happened. Coy nodded and let the door swing closed behind him, and Shanks was quick to lock it up.

“I think you have a fan.” Kenzie chuckled and reached out to open her car door for Coy.

He carefully slid her inside and helped her with her seatbelt. “Just what I need.”

“He’s a good kid. You can trust him if you need to.”

“Let’s hope we don’t need to.”

“There’s his truck.” Kenzie pointed out as they approached the Bridges ranch. “He had the sense to park out here and walk in. It’s a good sign, Coy.”

“No. None of this is good. He’s in over his head.” Coy pulled over to the side of the road by Nash’s vehicle.

Kenzie pulled out her weapon and had it at the ready.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asked.

“With you. Got your six, remember?”

“Like hell you are.” He warned, pulling his gun case from behind his seat and unlocking it. “You’re hurt. I’m having Ran send an agent to get you and take you back to the ranch.”

Kenzie grinned and leaned her back against her door to face him, “Are we really going to do this?”

“Do what?” he asked, pulling on his shoulder holster and loading it with additional firepower.

“This game where you say stay here, help is on the way, go with them when you know full well the minute you disappear into those trees, I’m hot on your heels.” She smirked. “I understand that as a man, a macho one at that, you feel inclined to protect

the lady at your side, but might I remind you, I'm no damsel in distress. Don't need saving. So, you either accept that I'm going in with you or know I'm no more than ten paces behind you at all times."

"I forgot who I was dealing with." Coy shook his head. "Kenz, what if you have a concussion, or what if that bruised rib is a cracked or broken one?"

"Then I guess I sweat through it like we've been trained, and ice it all later. There's plenty of time to feel the pain and nurse wounds later."

"Don't take a single risk. You hear me? Not a single one. You get dizzy or feel... anything at all, you tell me so I can get you out of there. Deal?"

"I'll consider it." Kenzie agreed.

"Kenz..."

"Okay, fine, I'll let you know if I need out, but don't count on it. I've battled bigger demons with far worse injuries more than once in my career, and here I sit to talk about it."

"Fair enough."

Coy exited the vehicle, Kenzie immediately on his heels as promised. Though she winced a time or two, Coy noticed that Kenzie managed to adjust to her injuries and find a rhythm that worked. They methodically and stealthily moved through the trees and brush until the main ranch house came into view. A single light was on inside. Then... it went out.

"Shit," Coy whispered, worry coursing through him. "Kenz, you sure you're up for this? We're literally in the dark, with no gear."

“I’m not letting you go in alone.”

“Let me lead then. Fall in behind me.”

Coy didn’t wait for an answer. He simply moved ahead and proceeded toward the house where they knew trouble awaited them. It didn’t take long to clear the space between the tree line and the house, and they were inside before they knew it. It was almost too easy with unlocked doors and what felt to them like a roadmap right to trouble. The ease of the breach only heightened their alertness and made them more strategic and careful in their mission; using hand signals and body language to communicate, they advanced through the space in roaring silence.

“Don’t move.” Came a familiar voice. “Hands up where I can see them.”

Coy and Kenzie complied, squinting to make out the figure standing in the shadows.

“Charlotte?” Coy questioned, staring down the barrel of her weapon.

“Shit, Coy.” She said, peering around him. “Sheriff? What are y’all doing here? You scared the ever-loving daylights out of me.”

Charlotte lowered her weapon and waved them into the room she’d been staged in.

“We’re here to get you.” He said.

“Well, I left Nash a note and said I’d be back shortly.” She went on.

“You aren’t supposed to leave alone, Charlotte.” Coy scolded.

“I came to look for answers. I’m safe here. Daddy has this place set up like Fort Knox. Surprised you didn’t get caught in any of his booby traps.”

“Boobie traps?”

“Well, I think he’s graduated from snares to laser technology for security, but still.”

“Your dad sounds paranoid.” Coy chided. “Interesting detail.”

“He’s always been a little... cautious,” Charlotte admitted. “We aren’t alone here. I was getting ready to leave, and I heard someone. I think they’re in Daddy’s den. I was nearly there when I saw y’all creeping in.”

“It’s probably Nash. He came looking for you. That’s why we’re here.”

“Oh, that boy. I suppose it’s better that it’s him and not someone looking for trouble. Come with me.” Charlotte said, leading them out of the space, seemingly with her guard down.

As they crept down the hall toward their target, a loud crash and gunshot could be heard in the distance. They weren’t alone after all, and Nash was in trouble.

“Get behind me,” Coy demanded, and Charlotte complied.

He led them through the maze of hallways in the large stately compound until they found their target, right where Charlotte had warned it would be. The sound of a scuffle on the other side of the door raised concerns. Nash wasn’t the only other person in the house. Danger was indeed present, just as Coy had suspected. He could hear grunts as skin met skin in a hand-to-hand battle.

“Where is she?” Nash could be heard saying.

“Oh my God. Nash.” Charlotte gasped quietly under her breath. “He thinks someone hurt me.”

“Kenz, stay with Charlotte,” Coy whispered. “I’m not walking you both into a trap. Wait here. You understand?”

Kenzie and Charlotte nodded in agreement. Before Coy could breach the door, the sound of shattering glass filled their senses, followed by the sound of more gunfire. Then, silence.

Coy broke every rule in the book and rushed in, gun ready, and scanned the scene, immediately training his weapon on the only target he found, which wasn’t the one he was looking for. Nash stood alone and breathing heavily, wiping blood from his mouth on the back of his hand.

“Took you long enough,” Nash said, kicking a chair out of his way as he traipsed through the room. “Son of a bitch jumped through that picture window and ran. Let’s go. I need to find Charlotte.”

“She’s safe. Right outside the door with Kenzie.” Coy said, following him out of the room. “What the hell happened here.”

Nash looked over his shoulder and waved a handout as if presenting the roughed-up room as evidence, “Isn’t it pretty clear?”

“Are you hurt? Shot?”

“No, I’m the only one who got shots off. Ambushed that asshole and knocked his gun out of his hand as soon as he walked in.” Nash shared, just as Charlotte entered the room and rushed to Nash’s open arms. “There you are.”

Nash picked her up off the ground and held her tight, “Thank God you’re okay. Don’t ever scare me like that again.”

“I didn’t mean to scare you, Nash.” She said softly. “I didn’t think there would be any harm in coming here. I needed answers and wanted to help your family... Even if my dad knows something about all this, which I don’t think he does, I know he’d never hurt me.”

“It isn’t your dad that I’m worried about. It’s whoever was in here that I got into it with, and that worries me. Whoever that was and whoever they work for, don’t mess around. That guy tried to kill me, and he would have tried to kill you.” Nash shared.

“He’s right, Charlotte,” Coy said. “That’s why we locked down the ranch. Tonight could have ended much worse.”

Kenzie shined a flashlight on her face, “We can’t be too careful now.”

Nash and Charlotte gasped at the battle scars she was wearing.

“Honey, you need to let me fix you up, or you’re going to have some nasty scars.” Charlotte rushed to Kenzie’s side and began evaluating the injuries, “Where else are you hurt?”

“I’m okay. I’ll let you clean these up at the ranch. My point, though, is this could have been what was coming for you too.” Kenzie shared, turning off her flashlight. “We have to be more careful.”

“Whoever this was here tonight... they weren’t here for me,” Charlotte said. “They were already here in Daddy’s den when I arrived. They had to have been.”

“You saw them?” Nash asked.

“No, I had no idea. I heard someone enter the house, and I ducked into a room down the hall. I thought I’d been followed. I only made it another room or two before I

heard Coy and Kenzie come in.” Charlotte shared. “If you walked in that room and found yourself a fight, that means they were already in there waiting for someone.”

“I caught them in the act.” Nash shook his head. “The place was already tossed when I went in. I started in that room because I saw a light go out.”

“As did we. We must’ve been right on your heels, Nash.” Coy shared.

“That means we have another problem,” Kenzie said. “If they were already here tossing the place, then they weren’t here for any of us.”

“They were looking for something.” Coy finished her thought.

“My father wasn’t here when I arrived. You don’t suppose...”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions. If they were rifling through his things incognito like they were, then they likely waited for him to leave. I think Nash surprised the shit out of them. Did you get a good look at them?”

“It was too dark. All I can say is it was a guy, roughly my size, dressed in all black.” Nash shared.

“Close your eyes for a second,” Kenzie asked of him.

“Close my eyes?”

“Just... humor me.”

He tossed his arms out to the side in defeat and closed his eyes, “Alright.”

“Think back to when you first walked in. How did you know it was a man?” she

asked.

“Size?”

“But it’s dark, Nash, and he was in dark clothing. How could you tell his size in the dark from across the room?”

“Well, I guess I couldn’t.”

“Okay, good. Think hard now. You’re standing in the doorway and see someone suspicious. It isn’t Mr. Bridges, so who is it?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen him before.”

“Describe him.”

“I can’t really see him yet. I...”

“Just stand there, in your thoughts, for a moment. What is he doing.”

“Going through files, I think.”

“How do you know they’re files?”

“Because the moonlight is coming through the window, and I can see that creamy color. He’s flipping through them.”

“Great. You saw the folders in the light. Keep looking, Nash. Don’t leave that place. Watch him. Tell me when he looks up.”

“He, uh, doesn’t know I’m there. He didn’t look up. He’s just flipping through...”

Nash paused.

“What do you see, Nash?”

“He looked outside. He sees something. Maybe someone? He tossed the folders and grabbed his gun. He’s backing toward the door.”

“He’s coming toward you then. Be still. He doesn’t know you’re there. He sees me and Coy.”

“Shit. He does. He heard the back door open, too. He hears you.”

“You heard us too, then. That’s good. When he hears us, what does he do?”

“He turns around and heads for the door.”

“But you’re standing in the doorway. He can’t leave the room.”

“He sees me.”

“What did you do, Nash?”

“I charged him.”

“Back up. Don’t charge him yet. He’s looking right at you. He sees you, so you must see him. Remember the moonlight leaking in the window?”

Nash nodded.

“What does he look like.”

“It is a dude. I saw his face. That’s how I knew...”

“Describe him, Nash. Don’t move from the doorway and describe him first.” Kenzie demanded.

“About my age, height, build... He has a thick goatee, kind of a dark blonde, maybe.”

“Good. What color are his eyes?”

“Blue. Piercing blue.”

“Why do you notice his eyes, Nash? Why the eyes?”

“Because he has a thick scar that starts above his eyebrow and runs down his eye and cheek all the way to his chin. They aren’t piercing blue eyes. Just the one. It’s cloudy-looking and appears...icy blue. The other is dark, I think.”

“What else do you notice?”

“A tattoo on his throat. A... skull with flowers, maybe. I can’t really see anything else. He’s coming right for me. I have to...”

“It’s okay, Nash. You already saw him. You gave a good description. Open your eyes.”

Nash opened his eyes and scanned the room, “Don’t ever make me do that again. That was...”

“Helpful.” Coy deadpanned. “You gave us a good description. It could help.”

“Yeah, well, now I can’t unsee his damn face.”

“I’m sorry, Nash,” Kenzie said. “It wasn’t supposed to frighten you.”

“I’m not scared. It just makes me want to hit the son of a bitch one more time.” Nash admitted. “Can we get out of here?”

When they turned to leave, the sound of broken glass under footsteps stilled them.

“Don’t you fuckin’ move.” Came a voice from just outside the window as he stepped over the wide-open windowsill and a gun with a red laser fixed right on Nash. “Well, well, well. Nash Stone. I’ve been waiting a long time for a reason to shoot you.”

“Daddy, it ain’t funny,” Charlotte said. “You’re lucky you didn’t get shot.”

“Oh, I knew what I was doing, honey. Their arms were lame, weapons hanging at their sides.” Owen Bridges chuckled from behind his desk, trying to make sense of the piles of mess left from the earlier debacle.

“All due respect, sir, your daughter’s right.” Coy chimed in. “We were all a bit amped, hypervigilant, and a little trigger-happy if I do say so myself.”

“Nah. I’d been standing outside a solid few minutes listening to y’all before I even let my presence be known.” The older man admitted. “I wanted to hear the description of the unwelcomed asshole who made this mess... he owes me a God damned window.”

“Know him?” Nash asked while taking jabs. “Seems your type.”

“Now, son, that’s about the ballsiest thing you’ve said since I met ya. I respect that.” Owen said, earning a satisfied grin from Nash, “Wipe that shit-eating grin off your face, and don’t ever talk to me like that again.”

Nash bobbed his head, his suddenly a grimace, “Sorry... Sir.”

“Are you really that weak and easy to rile up?” Owen shook his head. “You come here, guns a blazing to save my daughter, but sound a little like a pansy right now, if ya ask me. Toughen up.”

“Yes. Right... Sir.” Nash replied.

Coy shook his head and chuckled, “Ellis Steele. What do you know about him?”

“A lot.” Owen shared. “But not nearly enough?”

“Which means what, Dad?”

“It means I’ve had my eye on that prick since he came to town and can’t seem to find anything dirty on him.”

“You’re not friends?” Charlotte asked.

“Not even a little bit.”

“There’s pictures... of you... all over the guy’s office. Sounds like you’re pretty friendly to me.” She shared with her father.

“Ever heard the phrase, keep your enemies closer? He’s public enemy number one.”

Kenzie took an ice pack Owen had given her off her head and tossed it in the trash.

“Care to elaborate?”

“Not really,” Owen said matter of factly. “But I’ll tell ya this. He’s squeaky clean. Too clean. I’ve had a bad feeling about that asshole since he arrived in town, but I can’t find a damn thing on him. Someone owns him. Someone with money and reach so they can keep his dealings nice and private.”

“Someone with authority and resources,” Coy said.

“One hundred percent. He’s more of a politician than a lawyer. I don’t like the riffraff

he hangs around.”

“You mean, like the Governor?”

“No, the others. Everyone thinks he’s great. He’s invited to everything like a damn socialite making his rounds.”

“You think he’s in someone’s back pocket, doing their dirty work for them,” Coy questioned.

“Something like that, but I’ve never been able to prove it. Hence, the squeaky-clean part.” Owens tone deepened to something more menacing, “I don’t like him, though. Not one bit. His behavior is too familiar, guessing you feel the same way, Coy.”

Coy nodded, “Organized crime?”

“You got it. He reeks of it, but we haven’t had issues down here in I don’t know how long.” Owen tossed his hand in the air in frustration.

“There isn’t any activity in the area, you’re right,” Coy confirmed.

“I know. You’re to thank for that. You and your team.” Owen grinned and winked.

“You know.”

“Of course, I know. I know exactly who you and your sister are. Her husband is a good guy. I know you work with the President’s brother, too. Those Wyatt men are good people. So is your organization. I’ve never had the opportunity to work alongside any of you, but I’m very aware of who y’all are and what you do.”

“I suppose as high ranking as you were, it makes sense you’d be privy to

information.”

“Son, they don’t tell us shit on the border. I went looking for it myself and used my connections. You have to be pretty resourceful to be in the know and to make a difference. The longer I held my position, the harder it was to do my job. I’m more effective now that I’m retired, given my own background. I know you don’t need my help, but know you have it if you need it.”

“We appreciate that,” Coy said. “Might take you up on it, but what’s in it for you?”

“I think ol’ Ellis Steele and his outfit are owed something from me. And I intend to pay that debt as soon as I find out who’s behind his paycheck and fancy suits.”

Coy’s brow furrowed, “Debt? What do you owe them?”

The corners of Owen’s mouth curled into a menacing grin. “Revenge, son. Revenge.”

“Revenge for what?” Coy questioned.

“Ah, nothing for you to worry about. I think you have your hands full as it is.” Owen paused like he was lost in thought while a flash of emotion washed over him ever so briefly, “I owe an old friend.”

“What did they do to your friend?” Coy asked.

“I’m not sure. That’s the mystery, Stone. As is the reason my company tonight stopped by and went through my office.”

“Well, if we can offer a hand in any way, we’re happy to help.” Coy nodded, not wanting to pry too much, but deep down, he knew there was a connection there. It wasn’t a priority, but definitely something he’d keep an eye on.

“I appreciate that and may take you up on that at some point.”

Charlotte stood, “We should probably get back to the ranch. I need to fix up the sheriff, and all my supplies are out there.”

Coy and the others followed suit and made their way through the house as Owen Bridges saw them out.

“You sure you don’t want help securing that window?” Coy asked as they stood on the front stoop.

“Nah. I have someone coming to fix it up.”

“The offer to come stay at the ranch stands if, at any point, you feel unsafe here with that guy loose.” Coy reminded.

“I’ll be alright out here — got my friend,” Owen said, propping his weapon on his shoulder.

“That’s an impressive friend. Didn’t know civilians could have a HK416 registered.” Coy raised his brow, questioning the weapon reserved typically for active-duty Special Operatives like SEALs and the like — not retired border chiefs.

“Yeah, well... You know what they say.”

“No, I don’t.” Coy grinned.

“Then I guess it ain’t my place to tell ya, son.” Owen winked. “Y’all be safe getting home. I got security out in those woods now. They’ll expect you comin’ through. Don’t pay them no mind.”

“Security?” Coy raised his brow and scanned the perimeter.

Owen smiled. “Put in enough time on the job, and everyone owes you a favor or two.”

“That’s a pretty big favor,” Coy said over his shoulder as they walked toward the tree line where they hid their vehicles.

“Lucky guy, I guess,” Owen said before turning and going back inside his home. “Oh, and there’s a rig waiting out on the road to pick up your tail to the ranch. Figured you lead, put that hair-brained brother and my daughter in the middle, and let my guys cover their backside? They’re trained. Vetted, of course.”

“And if I say no?” Coy asked.

“They’ll follow you anyway. Have a good night.” Owen left before Coy could further protest.

No sooner did he disappear inside than a crew pulled up with a brand-new window — in the middle of the night, no less — ready to replace the one a common enemy had broken earlier that evening.

“Shit. He wasn’t kidding.” Kenzie said quietly to Coy. “Look around. He has people everywhere.”

“That old man isn’t a retired Border Chief. He ain’t retired at all.” Coy snickered. “We need to do another deep dive on Owen Bridges.”

“What are you thinking?” Kenzie asked. “Friend or foe?”

Coy opened Kenzie’s car door for her and hesitated for a moment as he looked back

at the security crawling all over Owen Bridges ranch, “My money is on... friend... with a foe in common.”

“There you are,” Devyn said as she approached Rip, sitting outside by the fire pit. “Have you seen...”

Rip didn’t even turn around. He just held up his hands, kitten in one, a tiny empty bottle in the other.

“On kitten duty, huh? Okay then. I can get used to this.” Devyn said, taking a seat next to him, Diesel lying at her feet.

“You stole my dog. It’s only fair I steal your cat,” Rip said, handing her the kitten.

“Clarification: I didn’t steal your dog. He chose me. I can’t help it if he loves me.” Devyn shrugged.

“Touché.”

“I uh. I think maybe we got off on the wrong foot.” Devyn said.

“You don’t say,” Rip replied sarcastically.

Devyn huffed. “I’m being serious. In case you haven’t noticed, it’s been insanely chaotic around here as of late, and, well, I haven’t entirely been myself.”

“Are you sure about that? Seems to come pretty naturally to you.” He smirked.

“Very funny. You know, I was actually going to apologize, but—”

“Oh no. Don’t let me stop you.” Rip continued. “I can’t wait to hear this.”

“I’ve changed my mind. I’m keeping your apology and your dog.”

“Diesel, heel,” Rip said. Diesel rose and moved to sit at Rip’s side and watched him, waiting for the next command.

“You play dirty.”

“Diesel, work,” Rip commanded next, and Diesel stood again, moving back to Devyn’s side.

“Wow. So, I’m just a job to him, huh? Is that what you’re trying to say?”

“Yes and no. His job, amongst other things, is to guard, and he chose you as the one he was to guard. So, technically...”

“He loves me.” Devyn shrugged.

“Something like that.” Rip snorted. “Normally, he waits for instruction, but he found you to be the one who needed him most.”

Her grin quickly became a frown, “He thinks I’m needy?”

“Not necessarily. You were his first impression here. He saw you in need and jumped into his role. When left up to him, he usually chooses the children, so...”

Devyn swatted Rip’s shoulder, “Children? I am not a child.”

“At my age, anyone as young as you is a child.”

“At your age? Okay, Grandpa.” She laughed. “You can’t be more than somewhere around Coy and Dill’s age if you all work together.”

“I might be around there, give or take a few years.” Rip shrugged.

“So, you’re really not going to tell me your age?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It isn’t important. Do you ask everyone you meet these questions? Is it part of your apology?” he teased.

“No, and no. I’m just curious now. That’s all. Especially now that you’re being so... weird about it.”

“I’m not being weird. It’s called privacy.”

She rolled her eyes, “Right, you operative types and your privacy. Heaven forbid I know something as telling as your age — I might sell it to the bad guys of the world so you meet your demise.”

“Wow, you are dramatic.”

“Says the old guy, embarrassed by his age.” She fired back.

“I’m not embarrassed. It just doesn’t matter. I’m just very private.”

“Well, you need to do a better job at keeping your own secrets, then.” She surmised.
“You already told me how old you are.”

“No, I didn’t.”

She giggled, “Yes, you did.”

Rip turned to face her, genuinely curious, “How do you figure?”

“Given the information regarding your age in relation to my older siblings, I’d say you’re roughly ten years older than me, give or take a few.” She said, using his words against him.

“And how old is that?” He asked, amused.

“Oh, I don’t discuss my age. After all, it’s just a number, and I keep a pretty private life.” She snickered while mocking him.

“You know I have a file on you — I can just look it up. I have access to just about everything there is to know about you, actually.”

“Ooh. I love a good stalker.”

“Clever, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Rip. Quite clever.” She teased. “You, on the other hand, were just taken by a child.”

“I’d like to retract that statement. You’re definitely not a child. Not even a little bit.”
He chuckled.

“So, you noticed, huh.”

Rip held her stare longer than probably appropriate when dealing with a client, “Maybe.”

She leaned in and whispered, “So you are a stalker.”

Realizing how far the conversation was going in the wrong direction, Rip was quick to reel it in. “No. Just doing my job.”

He saw the pain in her expression his words left, and it caused his chest to tighten. He didn’t understand how or why, and this wasn’t the time to dissect the ins and outs of feelings. Rip was determined to keep the conversation easy, and professional, despite Devyn’s efforts to take it further... and his desire to explore said efforts.

“Right. A job. Seems like I’m a lot of work for everyone around here.” She hurried away, turning her attention back to the kitten.

“Why do you say that?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m sort of the outlier here. I’m not like the rest of them. Everyone is either coddling me or scolding me for being, well, me. Which is it? Should I be baby sister Dev or grown and mature Dev? Both seem to get me in trouble. I’m a walking talking contradiction.”

“I think your family just loves you so much. They’re distracted by the contradiction ,” Rip said. “I’m sure it’s hard for them. You’ve all suffered a tremendous loss followed by chaos and danger around every corner.”

“They have to realize we’re all in this together, though, right? I mean, come on, I may not be a roughneck rancher or a...whatever Coy and Dill do, but I’m capable, smart,

and can contribute if they'd just let me."

"Have you told them that?" Rip asked.

"Only my entire life." She snorted.

"Maybe you just need to show them. Instead of running out in the road after stray kittens and throwing tantrums at the dinner table, you can show them just how capable you are."

"I've tried. The will. I'm sure you heard. I took care of all the estate planning, made sure everyone was protected and taken care of, and look how that turned out."

"That wasn't their doing. That was your mother's doing."

"And if they're taking their cues from her, it's no wonder they question my every move and still treat me like a child."

"Prove them wrong, Dev. Show them."

"How?"

"I don't know. Only you can answer that. Find a need and fill it. That's your spot to take. Your role. Whatever you want to call it." He said. "What's your role going to be, Dev."

"I don't know. They won't let me have a gun, even though I'm a pretty damn good shot."

He snorted, "I can vouch for that. There's enough people with guns around here, though, you trying to blend in?"

“I already do.”

“Then what else?”

“I pack a good punch.” She shrugged.

“I saw you in the gym. You can handle yourself. I could probably help you and teach you a few things to make you stronger, but I’ll give credit where credit is due. You’re not bad at hand-to-hand encounters. So is Coy. So is Dillon. So is Ransom and the others. What do you do that none of them can? What’s their weakness and your strength?”

“I guess I need to figure that out.”

“Figure it out, and you might earn the respect I think you’re looking for.”

“Wow. Never really thought about it like that.” Devyn watched the fire dance while she wrapped her mind around the words he was sharing. “You were right.”

“About?”

“All that wisdom you’re dropping... you must be old.”

Rip tossed his hands in the air, “Older than dirt.”

Devyn’s smile faded to a curious stare, “Nah. You’re wise but not old. I think there’s a lot more to you than that edgy look, tattoos, muscles, and whatever kind of man bun that is on your head.”

“Man bun? This isn’t a man bun.”

“It’s a man bun. Your hair is longer than most women and tied in a knot on your head... man bun.”

“No. It’s not for fashion or a style.”

“It’s definitely a style, Rip. I mean, even your name. You’re a whole brand of broody badass — I think it’s half your game.”

“Game, huh?” he snickered. “It’s not a game, I can assure you that. It’s just part of me. It tells a story. It’s who I am.”

“Ah. You’re sharing about yourself again. You’re a warrior. Your hair represents strength and resilience.”

“You’re observant.”

“I’m a lawyer. I don’t miss much. It’s my job to dig deep, extract all the details most miss, and use it against my opposition to win the argument.”

“Hmm.”

“Hmm, what?” Devyn questioned.

“Just, hmm.”

“Rip.” Devyn’s tone was scolding.

Rip shrugged, “What?”

“Hmm. That’s what.”

“I thought it was your job to extract all the details and use them to win, or whatever.”
He answered.

“That’s what hmm means?”

“Devyn Stone, you’re always the brightest one in the room, at least from where I stand, but you’re dense.”

“Dense? And here I thought we’d called a truce. We were becoming friends. But if name calling is more your speed, then...”

Rip leaned in and kissed her before she could say another word. Devyn pulled away and studied him and the sultry look he was wearing before she went in for another kiss. It was ravenous, hungry, and full of need as if igniting a wildfire of some level of desire between them. Time seemed to stand still as they lost themselves in each other's embrace, surrendering to a primal passion that consumed them. And in that moment, nothing else mattered but the electrifying connection they shared, a connection that transcended words and told a story of new friendship, new understanding, and just... something new. Until... she pulled away.

“Wh-what was that?” she asked.

“If I need to answer that, then...”

“Will you stop? Of course, I know what that was, but... what was it? Why?” she asked.

“To get you to be quiet and out of your own head.” He answered.

“Is... that all?”

“What else would it mean?”

“Right.” Devyn turned away from him, “What else?”

The two sat in awkward silence for longer than either of them seemed to care to measure. When the sound of crackling branches from the nearby wooded area, Devyn couldn’t help but jump to her feet with fear, ready to run.

“Whoa,” Rip said, pulling her back down to the bench they’d been sitting on. “Where are you going?”

“I uh...” she pointed. “Did you hear... over there...”

“I did.”

“Then why are you asking where I’m going?” her voice raised to a panicked pitch. “There’s someone out there. I heard them and...”

“And you’re safe,” Rip said, full of calm. “You’re perfectly safe.”

A tear threatened to spill over, and her voice dropped to a whisper. “You don’t know that. How can you possibly know that? I-I’m scared, Rip.”

Rip hooked the end of her chin with a finger and held it so she couldn’t look anywhere but at him, “You’re safe. This place, your home, it’s safe. If there were anyone out there who wasn’t supposed to be, Diesel would let you know before he went and took care of it.”

Devyn shook her head vigorously, and that tear trickled down her face.

“Darlin’, when you’re with me, you’re always safe. You hear me?” he said, “I’ll

never let anything happen to you, and not because it's my job. You don't have to be scared when I'm here."

"Okay." She whispered.

"You don't have to be scared when I'm not here either or when Diesel isn't nearby. You're the most lethal one here, you know that? Because you're the smartest. You react strictly off instincts, and that's far more menacing than the kind of training any of us have had. I've seen it with my own eyes and have the bruise on my back where you shot me to prove it. Devyn, when you start believing in yourself, so will everyone else. You're tougher and braver than you think."

"Y-you really think so?" she asked.

"I know so, darlin'. I've seen you in action. More than once. You learn how to let go of that fear and unlock the fury. You'll be unstoppable, sweetheart."

She closed her eyes, bit her bottom lip, and willed away the fear — and the tears went with it. Devyn sat taller, her jaw tightened, and her shoulders sharpened. Rip reached to swipe away the leftover tears, but Devyn grasped his hand in hers and stopped him. Her eyes shot open, and she looked between him and his hand in hers. Then, she released his grip and let him wipe away the fear that had been haunting her for days.

"Told you. Instincts." The corner of his mouth quirked up, impressed with her response. "Don't be scared. Not anymore."

"I'm not." She whispered, relaxing into his side. "Not anymore."

"Besides, it was just Nash and Charlotte walking back from the garden that you heard."

“How could you possibly know that?” she asked.

“It’s my job to know where everyone is and what they’re doing at all times. It’s why I’m here.”

“I can’t wait to get that superpower.” She snickered.

“I also saw them...” he admitted.

Devyn sat up and swatted at his knee playfully. He was quick to pull her back to his side, where they sat and enjoyed the fire in silence.

“Here you go,” Coy said as he handed Kenzie a fresh ice pack. “Charlotte said it’s the last one, and you can rest. Something about watching the swelling.”

“Something about it, huh... that’s pretty specific.” She chuckled, swapping out her old ice pack for a freshly cold one. “I’m pretty sure I’m fine. If I wound up with a concussion, it’s minor. I’ve had zero symptoms.”

Coy pushed his lounge up against hers on the shared balcony outside their rooms and plopped down beside her.

“Well, we aren’t taking any chances. Let me see those stitches.” He asked, leaning in to get a good look at the wounds on her head and face. “Charlotte did a really good job. You can hardly tell.”

“Now I know you’re lying and just being nice. I am fully aware that I currently resemble Frankenstein.” She informed with a huff. “There’s nothing barely about the amount of stitches I’m currently wearing.”

“I’m serious, Kenz. It isn’t bad. A day or so from now, you won’t be able to tell. I didn’t think nurses were trained in this kind of care. At least not at this level.”

“She’s currently training to be more than a nurse. I forget what she called it, but it’s more than a nurse, not quite a doctor.”

“That’s awfully specific.” He said sarcastically. “You sure your head’s all right?”

“Yes. I just don’t recall the job title, smartass. Anyway, that girl has big ambitions. She wants to change the medical world for the better, she says. Pretty impressive.”

“She’s something else, all right. And she chose Nash.” Coy chuckled.

“She’s good for him, Coy. He’s still very much Nash but… better.” Kenzie said.

“Better? You sure you’re okay?” he teased.

“Yes. I’m fine.” She swatted at him, “Stop it, will ya? You know what I mean.”

“I do know what you mean. He’s grown up a lot these past few years, maybe more these past few weeks I’ve been home. It’s good to see this side of him. Of all of them, really. I’ve missed a lot, Kenz. And I’ll never get that time back.”

“You were working. It wasn’t intentional.” She paused. “Or, was it?”

“Maybe, unintentionally intentional.” He answered.

“Now, who’s not making sense?”

“What I mean to say is I didn’t mean to miss everything I have. I stayed away to protect them but keeping them safe from my world came with a greater cost than I realized. I thought I was doing something good, but really, my choices just stripped us all of valuable time together.”

“Do you really think that’s what it was? To keep them safe? Or were you just running?”

“Running? From them? My family?”

“I said what I said, Stone.”

“Why would I run from them? This is my safe place. This is home. They’re home.”

“Because loving and losing from a distance is less painful than losing someone you see every day, have routines with, and will have to adjust to a life without their everyday presence? When you’re away, you miss them the same as you did whether they’re gone or not because they’ve been at a distance for so long the loss isn’t as in your face.”

“You’re saying I don’t miss my mom or her loss as much now because I’ve been away?”

“No, I’m sure you miss her a great deal, but your life isn’t changing. You don’t have to get used to not seeing her every day, seeing her at the breakfast table every morning, missing the casual conversations around the fire pit in the evenings... you’re removed from the everyday of it all. The loss hits differently. It’s... psychological. A way to protect...”

“Protect who?”

“You.” She said.

“I stayed away to protect them. From me. The shit I see daily...”

“Right. You think it follows you everywhere. You think it’ll find you here and use them as a way to hurt you.” Kenzie shook her head.

“What? Why are you doing that? Why are you shaking your head at me? You think I’m lying?”

“No, I believe that you believe every word of that.”

“For fuck’s sake, Kenzie, just say what you want to say.”

“Your job doesn’t follow you everywhere you go, Coy. You just think it does. The only thing following you are ghosts from your past because, reality is, if someone you brought down wanted revenge, they wouldn’t need to follow you here to get it. They’d just come take it whenever the hell they saw fit, whether you were here or not. It would have already happened.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do know that, Coy, because it would be a much easier hit to wipe out your family without you here. If anyone were coming for you, through them, it would have happened already because they aren’t exactly a secret or hard to find, given who you are and who your brother-in-law is. The media has been in town since before Ransom’s plane landed — everyone knows how to find the family Stone. How many shots have been taken at your family in the last decade?”

“None. I’ve seen to it.”

“Right, by neutralizing any and all threats before they have the chance.” She said with snark and discontent.

“Exactly.”

“If you’re neutralizing threats before they can harm anyone else, then who the hell do you think follows you everywhere, putting your family at risk? They’re all dead and locked up, Coy, so who is it?”

“I don’t want to take chances.” He became defensive.

“Oh, so that’s the story now.” Kenzie shook her head in frustration. “Coy, you aren’t protecting them. You’re protecting yourself because your heart has already been broken in such a way you believe you wouldn’t survive any more blood on your hands — not when it comes to your family.”

“You...”

“I, what?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Sure, I do. That’s why this is pissing you off. You know I’ve seen my fair share of the world’s bullshit, and I’ve suffered the worst kind of pain just like you...” She stood. “The only difference is — I chose to go on living after my heart broke. I chose... to live .”

Coy watched her storm off to her room seeming aggravated while letting out an audible huff. Coy followed her.

“You think you know.” He said. “You think you know what it’s like.”

“I do.”

“Really? It’s not the same Kenzie.” He raised his voice. “Your husband did not die the same way or for the same reasons my wife did. Our losses... they may be equally painful, but they aren’t the same.”

Kenzie turned on her heels and stood toe-to-toe with Coy. She poked him in the chest, “It is the same. Do you think because you knew who killed your wife makes it different? Because you didn’t see the warning signs and led danger right to her?”

“Now you’re getting it.”

“Wrong, Coy. It’s still the same.”

“How do you figure?” he taunted.

“Because I couldn’t save him. Just like you couldn’t save your wife.” Tears began to spill over, and her voice quaked. “I couldn’t save him from the killer I knew either. I couldn’t save him from himself. I may as well have put the gun that he used to take his own life in his hand myself because I couldn’t stop him... and the worst part, I made it easy to take his own life by bringing him here instead of having him locked up somewhere until we could find some magical cure for the demons that haunted him. So, it is the same, Coy. It’s the fucking same.”

Coy stood silent and in absolute shock at her admission. The idea that she felt responsible for her husband taking his own life was more than he’d even thought to consider before. It never occurred to him that she would, or could, feel the way she did about her husband’s passing, given the circumstances. What hit him the hardest was that she did indeed feel just as he did, and yet, she’d managed to move on with life, and for some reason, he was still strapped in his.

“I-I had no idea you felt that way, Kenz.”

“Why would you? It seems ridiculous, right? To take responsibility for someone else taking their own life.”

“It’s not ridiculous, but you have to know...”

“That it isn’t my fault, and there’s nothing I could have done to change the outcome? I’m well aware. That doesn’t mean I live without the what-ifs, and could I have done more ? I knew he was unwell, yet I left him alone, and that one time, I ran to the little

farm stand for eggs so I could make him pancakes for breakfast. I wasn't gone but a handful of minutes, Coy. Minutes . I could have made him something else. I could have brought him with me. But he seemed fine, and I was going right up the road — so close to home, I heard the gunshot... and knew. There is an endless list of would have, could have, should have's... but at the end of the day, I know that no matter what I did differently, this was going to be the outcome... we can't control the actions of others and we certainly do not get to control the fate of others. He wanted this. He was going to do it, eventually, no matter how hard I fought for him."

"I... I don't know what to say."

"Then don't say anything at all. Just listen, Coy. No matter what you wish you would have done differently, whoever came for your wife would have found a way, regardless. You had no warning. You only knew what you knew at the time. Had you known you'd been double-crossed and made by the darkest of enemies, you could have taken every precaution, protected her, got to them before they got to her... but you didn't know, Coy. You believed she was safe because you kept her safe the best you could with the information you had. It was tragic, horrific, and soul-crushing, I'm sure, but it happened. And you didn't die that day, too, Coy."

"Part of me... part of me did."

"When we love someone, they own a piece of our heart forever. When they die, that little piece dies, too. That's why it hurts so bad, and we don't feel like we're whole anymore. You may not be whole, and you never will be while branded with a scar something like that leaves, but you still have a whole life, full of people who love and adore you, who miss you, and who feel like that little piece of their heart that you own... is dying. Don't run from that kind of love, Coy. Embrace it. It may not fill the holes left from loss, but it sure makes them easier to live with."

Coy sat at the edge of her bed and buried his face in his hands. She was right. He'd

been punishing himself all these years and, by doing so, punishing his family too.

“I didn’t mean to... ya know? I didn’t mean to push them away. I really want to keep them safe. I didn’t think...”

Kenzie stepped closer and ran her hand through his hair as a gesture of comfort, “I know you didn’t. Love hurts and costs us a lot, but it’s the most worthwhile investment if you don’t waste it. There’s a difference between life and living, and you get to choose if you’re just present for it or you’re going to experience every inch of it, Coy. You don’t have to keep punishing yourself or those around you. You’ve already paid the price, dearly. Take away the power from those who are really responsible because every day you give in to the guilt and sorrow, they win just a little bit more.”

Coy put his hands on her hips and brought her closer, resting his head against her belly, his voice dropping to a near whisper as he began to confess what was heavy on his heart. “Today. In that basement at the station... it took everything in me to keep me from running straight into the fire to find you, Kenz. When I heard that gunshot, and I couldn’t find you... it was that pain all over again.”

“I’m fine, Coy.”

“It doesn’t matter if you’re fine. I still felt it. Like I’d... lost you too. I couldn’t live with that, Kenz. Not now, not ever.”

“You didn’t lose me.”

“And I’m so damn glad because being back here, with you, has been the most healing thing I think I’ve experienced, and getting to know you all over again, despite the circumstances... I wasn’t ready to let that go. And I felt guilty for it. I don’t deserve it, and I don’t deserve you. It felt like a cruel joke.” He let out a cold, cynical laugh.

“Like I was being punished all over again.”

Kenzie cupped his chin and lifted his gaze to match hers, “And it still isn’t your fault. You can’t save everyone from everything. I chose to go back inside, alone, and I fought my way back out until you could find me. I’m okay. I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I have no right to you.” He whispered as he pulled her to his lap. “I have no right to feel this way for you.”

“You have every right, Coy. We both do because we deserve to be happy again. We paid the price through the pain, and I can say, without a doubt, your wife wouldn’t want you to go through life an empty shell of a man.”

“How can you know that?”

“Because when you love someone that deeply, you don’t want them to hurt the way you hurt. You want them to be happy and remember how to love because remembering how to love means you get to be loved again, and love, real love, isn’t something worth wasting.”

“How did you figure all this out? It seems so easy for you.”

“I got tired of hurting. I miss my husband, but I also miss being loved. I want that again. I know he would want that for me just like I’m sure your wife would for you.”

Coy nodded his head in agreement. “I want that too.”

“Then let yourself have it, Coy. Let yourself love and be loved so fiercely it hurts.” She paused. “Forgive yourself and let love in.”

Coy ran the back of his hand gently down her cheek and, swiped away the flood of tears she'd been wearing, and nodded his head.

"I do." He whispered. "I will."

He took her mouth and kissed her deeply, wrapping her body around his. Something came over him at that moment: a sense of freedom, and the weight of the world that had been resting on his shoulders somehow felt lighter. He was ready to love again, ready to love her. Kenzie was familiar, but still different than she was all those years ago. There was both comfort and intrigue in that.

As their kiss deepened, Coy felt a surge of emotions flooding through him, washing away the remnants of past heartaches and uncertainties. With Kenzie in his arms, he found solace in the familiarity of her touch, yet excitement in the discovery of the woman she had become. In her, he saw a reflection of his own journey, marked by growth and transformation. And as their lips parted, he gazed into her eyes, knowing that this moment marked the beginning of a new chapter in their lives. One filled with endless possibilities and the possibility of a love that could withstand the trials of life they'd both been handed.

There was a promise of something new, fresh, and intriguing. He'd never love anyone like he'd loved his wife, Emery, but he thought that's what made her unique. Just like how he felt for Kenzie was unlike anything he felt for anyone else. Maybe that was the point of love. It came in many designs, each as unique as its beholden.

So, he loved her. Coy spent the rest of the night showing her all the ways.

“Facial recognition didn’t give us anything of value,” Coy said to the others as they sat around the breakfast table. “All we can confirm is they were in the area the day Devyn was hit based on all of the intel collected from the immediate area.”

“Those are the guys who shot at us?” Devyn asked, taking a closer look at the images. “Who are they, and how did you get all these pictures?”

“We have no idea who they are, unfortunately. They don’t come up in any of the databases, and we are linked to all that exist. The initial images were taken the other day while Kenzie and I were in town, then the rest were extracted from the few cameras we were able to access in the area.” Rip said. “Our colleague infiltrated the cameras and took feeds as far back as available to extract the images.”

“There are so many felonies in that confession. I don’t know if I want to know more,” Devyn said under her breath, sighing. I know you guys are allowed certain courtesies the rest of us law-abiding citizens aren’t, but...”

“The road to justice can’t always be by the book, princess,” Rip said. “Sometimes, you have to take the information any way you can get it, darlin’.”

“I guess...” she said under her breath between sips of coffee.

“Nash, are any of them familiar to you?” Coy asked.

Nash studied the images and shook his head, “I can’t say they are. Should they be?”

“I was hoping they were your... business partners .” Coy teased.

Nash tossed the images on the table, “Very funny. No. Those aren’t the guys who leased the land from me. In fact, not that I’ve been in town much since the funeral a few weeks back, but I haven’t seen them at all.”

“Is that pretty unusual?” Rip asked.

“Considering I saw them pretty regularly before, I’d say yes.” Nash shrugged, then piled his plate with food. “I suppose they could just be laying low, waiting for the right time.”

“They knew enough about you to know you had the property to spare for their crop. That means they know the ranch. You don’t suppose they found out the crop was a bust and no longer exists, do you?” Rip asked. “Maybe they split?”

“I don’t know about that. Would they really just up and leave without a word or some kind of reimbursement for their investment?” Nash asked, then turned his attention and accusing tone toward Coy. “Seems to me, in that business, people don’t take too kindly to people getting in the way of their crops. That’s money out of their pocket either way — for the plants and what they could produce.”

“Which is why I thought for sure they would be among those images and possibly behind what’s been going down around here,” Coy confirmed. “I’m starting to believe the two have nothing to do with one another.”

“I have to agree,” Kenzie said. “The men in those pictures have been around here for some time, and if they aren’t Nash’s friends...”

“Hey, those guys weren’t my friends.” He corrected.

“Right. I guess we really are calling them your business partners.” She rolled her

eyes. “If the men in the images and Nash’s business partners aren’t the same, then I’d say we have two entirely different issues, and they may not be connected at all.”

Nash let out a deep sigh as if he’d been holding his breath for weeks, “Somehow, I find a little relief in that. The idea that my bad decision brought this on was weighing heavy on me.”

“Don’t get too excited, we haven’t confirmed that, just a theory,” Coy warned.

“But it’s looking that way, and that’s enough for me.”

“Fair enough.” Coy nodded.

“So, how do we move forward?” Kenzie asked. “The attack at the station, the intruder at Charlotte’s family ranch... this is very targeted, and it extends beyond your immediate family now.”

“I still don’t know that the man at my father’s ranch was there for me. Instead of looking around for me or lying in wait, he went to my dad’s den and tossed the place.” Charlotte shared. “Now, I’m no expert; this is obviously more your arena to operate in, but that feels more about my father than me.”

“You could be right, or when he didn’t find you, he was sending a message,” Coy said. “We have no real way of knowing. We also have to consider that your father has enemies, too.”

“Could whatever has your family in the crosshairs overlap with what my father would be targeted for — if it is him they were after?” Charlotte asked.

“Good question. You sure you’re just a nurse?” Dillon chuckled.

“Happily, just a nurse. Growing up around this stuff, however, made me a bit of a

thrill seeker. I also like true crime. I guess my hobby is just rearing its ugly little head.”

“It’s a refreshing perspective. Don’t stop.” Dillon said. “And though I don’t see how your father and whatever the hell is going on here are related, we really can’t rule it out.”

“Then that begs the question...” Kenzie went on. “Why me? Why the station? Was that an intended hit on Coy, and I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, or is there something I need to worry about?”

“Another very good question.” Coy sat back in his chair, ran his hands through his hair in frustration, and gritted his teeth. “It seems every little bit of information that comes in, the further we get from answers and the bigger the pile of questions grows. Who the hell are these guys? We just need something. Anything.”

“Does anyone else find it odd that the people Nash was dealing with haven’t been seen?” Charlotte asked. “I don’t know why, but that’s sticking out to me. It seems that if they had business in the area, they wouldn’t be too far at any given time. If they are leasing land from Nash, you also have to assume that they are leasing land from others, too.”

“She has a good point,” Rip said. “Who sets up an operation like that and just disappears? That suggests two possible theories... One, they were pushed out or left willingly when they noticed shit going down around here. Or, two, they were never legit to begin with and part of a set-up.”

“Something more sinister,” Coy added. “What would that be setting any of us up for?”

“If I’m being honest, as sheriff, a few pot plants wouldn’t be something I spent a lot of resources on. I would confiscate them, have them destroyed, and slap you with a

fine at best. We'd be more interested in who was behind the land lease and where else they're possibly growing more than anything else. Try to prevent a ring from establishing if there is one." Kenzie said.

"So, a distraction," Devyn said.

Kenzie gave her a bewildered look, "Excuse me?"

"It's a given that marijuana isn't going to draw major consequences... not this day and age. So, like you said, your investigation, if any, would be a bigger-picture investigation. You'd spend resources searching for additional land leases around the surrounding area... likely collaborating with surrounding counties..."

"We would all be distracted by the investigation." Kenzie agreed. "So, what is it they, whoever they are, want to distract us from?"

"That's the million-dollar question, sheriff, and in this case, multi-million," Devyn added.

"I think you're right, Dev." Coy pinched the bridge of his nose. "And maybe it's to distract us. Suddenly, I'm wondering if Mama's bank loan, the shell corps she has assets buried under, and the mysterious property we supposedly own somewhere has anything to do with that multi-million-dollar question."

"My point exactly." Devyn shrugged. "I think we are at the point of this investigation, mystery, whatever you want to call it, where we have to assume every detail and every question pending is related. Mama dies, and suddenly, the world around us blows up? We know Mama had secrets, but somehow, they're all connected. You won't convince me otherwise."

"Given the circumstances and events that have transpired since her passing, I'd say she was knee-deep in whatever this is," Dillon said.

“That means she was involved in something sinister. Our sweet, kind, gentle mother. How the hell did we miss this?” Coy asked.

“Do you really want me to answer that?” Nash asked sarcastically.

Guilt filled Coy’s words, “No. I don’t.”

“Then are we to assume all hell broke loose due to her passing?” Rip asked. “If that’s the case, your mother was a ringleader, and this is a battle for her throne.”

“Jesus. What the hell was she up to? Delilah Stone, mastermind? I just can’t wrap my mind around that.” Coy shared.

“It’s just a theory at this point, Coy,” Kenzie assured. “We still don’t know enough about any of this to confirm one way or the other.”

“That’s all we have. Theories.” Coy stood and paced the room. “Whatever this is, it’s organized, sophisticated, and well-trained, backed by a criminal mind.”

Rip leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers behind his head, “You just described organized crime... Mafia? Cartel? Some home-grown hillbilly backwoods militia?”

“All of the above and none of which translates to Delilah Stone,” Coy said. “Not the Delilah we all knew, anyway.”

“People change.” Rip shrugged. “If things were getting as bad as they appear to have been financially, who knows what she would have been capable of. I want to be wrong, believe me, but it wouldn’t be the first time we saw something like this happen to good people.”

“I know. You’re right. That’s what bothers me.” Coy admitted. “What bothers me

more is that this wouldn't have been all of a sudden. She was in those pictures on Ellis Steele's wall along with every other influential person from here and the next five counties."

"Including my father," Charlotte said.

"You think he knows more than he's letting on?" Coy asked.

Charlotte shrugged, "I've never known the man to lie, but he didn't have a lot to say about the intruder at his house. That whole experience seemed... odd."

"And didn't you say he's on the wall of shame at the lawyer's office?" Nash asked.

"To be fair," Coy began, "There's a lot of respectable people pictured with that guy in his office. We don't know where the shame lies and where it's just a matter of coincidence."

"Awfully convenient, though."

"You're just mad because he threatened to shoot you." Kenzie snorted.

"Didn't I tell y'all he looked like he wanted to kill me all the time?"

"Wait, you think Daddy wants to hurt you? Why? He loves you." Charlotte confessed.

"Based on what? The fact that he reminds me he has guns or the fact that he told me, to my face the other night, that he'd been waiting for the chance to shoot me?" Nash said.

"I believe his words were, looking for a reason to shoot you , not that he was actually going to shoot you." Kenzie laughed.

“Same thing.”

“Oh, honey. Daddy’s just messing around. He’d never really shoot you.”

Nash snorted, “Maybe not in front of you.”

Kenzie stood and began clearing plates, “I think we’re talking in circles at this point. Facial rec was a bust. The guys we saw are definitely up to no good, but we don’t know why. We still don’t know who Nash’s business partners are...”

“They aren’t my partners, okay? They’re... associates that I deeply regret being associated with.”

“Fair enough.” Kenzie winked, “Where does that leave us? Nash’s associates are missing, and we still don’t know why Delilah did all the things she did in her final days. Why is this all targeted at your family now? Let’s not forget the dead body that started this all. Am I missing anything?”

“Where Ellis Steele fits into all of this because he’s definitely dirty, and I’m just going to add Owen Bridges to the list. If Charlotte thinks his behavior was a bit off, then he’s on the list until cleared.” Devyn said.

“What do we do next, boss?” Rip asked of Coy.

“The only thing we can do right now... figure out who the hell our mother really was.”

It’s all come to a head in Episode 2: Justice, Vengeance, and the Pursuit of Truth!