



Taken by the Bounty Hunter (The Heroes of Darling Creek #1)

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Description: My best friend tells me I need to let Georgie go, or I'm risking my job. He's right, but I don't care. To be fair, it would make more sense for me to focus on catching a dangerous cult leader first, then worry about love. But my need to find Georgie has consumed me, despite everything that's at stake. And the longer I go without seeing her, the more likely I am to kick down the gates of her captors and snatch her away without a plan. What happens after that, I don't know. Maybe she'll want me or maybe she won't, but at least she'll be safe.

Georgie

I had no choice but to return to the polygamist cult that I escaped from. I was putting too much at risk for the fledgling group that's out there helping real victims. Me? I'm no victim. The elders can burn my books, destroy my work, and isolate me from my loved ones. But they can never take away what's inside of me. Everything I've accomplished while working as Goldie's assistant is stored in my brain forever. Secondly, I experienced the first tingling of true love while I was on the outside. It was only for an achingly brief moment, but Jefferson's kind eyes and calm reserve settled over me like a warm blanket the instant our eyes locked. I can close my eyes and relive that feeling until I see him again. Thirdly, a dear friend once confided in me a secret that will eventually bring down the church from the inside out. I can't wait to play my part in it. Hope is a wonderful thing to hold on to. And there's no hope for the patriarchy.

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Chapter One

Georgie

I trace my index finger over the marks on the floor beside my bed.

Today is day 31. Almost summer.

I want. To go. Outside.

My throat aches and my eyes sting. This can't be my life now.

My hands itch to get back to the garden and the greenhouse. No one is taking care of things in my absence. I just know it.

Why would they? No one is taking care of me.

On day one of my imprisonment, I knew I needed to keep a record. Maintain some kind of order.

You must get creative when trapped in cinder block and concrete and have nothing to write with but a plastic spoon.

Surprising no one, my uncomfortable bed doesn't get any less comfortable when it's missing a spring. And cinder block is an effective sharpening too.

Counting the days by scratching the floor with a sharpened bedspring is difficult, but

I make it work.

Anything to keep me sane.

As of today, I've been under lock and key for longer than I had my freedom.

For one month, I had a life outside.

I had a job.

I had a bank account.

I had friends to guide me and protect me.

I was on the cusp of getting an apartment all to myself.

But then everything came crashing down.

The elders found the safe house.

They didn't kick in the door or barge in with guns blazing. The church leaders have to maintain their image in the community, after all. They can't do crimes. Not obvious ones, anyway.

The threat was indirect but clear: We know how to find you, we have the cops on our side, and The Prophet is still calling the shots.

The terrible news could not have been delivered by a more ruggedly handsome but clueless face. Poor Jefferson. The bounty hunter was so confused by what he'd stumbled into.

Getting involved in helping victims escape a polygamist cult can take over your whole life. Just ask Olivia, Louisa, Goldie, and all their friends and newfound families.

If poor Jefferson has been added to the mix, I feel two ways about it. On the one hand, my friends need all the help they can get. Particularly from someone with the skills I imagine a bounty hunter possesses. On the other hand, that's a lot to ask of an outsider.

If he's tangled up in rescue efforts and has turned his life upside down, I feel partially to blame for it.

Because here's the uncomfortable truth: The church elders found us because of me.

What I didn't tell Goldie—what I didn't tell anybody—was that I had run into a sister-wife in Bozeman.

I had been on my way to work, and I desperately needed a coffee. I should have put on my wig and sunglasses as always, but I was in a hurry. And being in a hurry makes you reckless. So I went inside the Gas & Sip without a disguise.

And there she was. Not just any sister-wife. Floydene Blatch. The nastiest, meanest, most influential sister-wife of all. Buying scratch-offs, of all things.

I don't know what she was doing in Bozeman, a couple of hours away from her home. She's a legal wife of one of the oldest, most respected elders, which gets her certain privileges. But still, I'll bet her sister-wives with lower standing would love to know that Floydene gets day trips out of town.

But scratch-offs? Not very demure or trusting of the favored wife of a prominent polygamist.

Seeing a sister-wife handling lottery tickets was like seeing a cat on a leash. Something was not right about it. For a brief second, her face flashed a particular type of guilt that told me this was not the first time. I was so shocked that I froze in my tracks. That was my second mistake. We locked eyes. She recognized me.

I fled, driving Jake's donated farm truck like a beast back to the safe house.

I was followed. Of course, I was. If not by Floydene, then by whoever was low-key chaperoning her, or by someone she called as soon as I took off.

The whole thing was my mistake, so I decided to be the sacrifice in this cat-and-mouse game.

And here I am, counting hash marks on the floor, watching the light change in the barred window of my cell, and freezing my butt off in a bib overall and tee-shirt—the standard issue uniform for people assigned to hard labor as punishment for crimes of fraternizing with someone of the opposite sex you're not married to, reading or watching unapproved media, or, in my case, insubordination, theft, and leaving without permission.

I assumed I'd be forced to work the crops or the livestock, just like other times I was caught getting up to no good. At least I'd be outside in the sunshine.

Boy, was I wrong. I never expected to end up in a cell. I never knew the elders had converted one of the old dormitories into a prison. Heck, I never could have guessed I wouldn't go outside for 31 days. Not once.

When I'd returned to the church on my own accord, I'd thought the larger population of the polygamists would be so happy to have me back that the punishment would be negligible. Since Goldie left, I'm the only person who knows how to give relief to the sick among us who refuse genuine medical care.

Curly, the grandfather figure of the rescue group, further cemented my confidence when he drove me back to my mother's house despite the protests from our friends.

When Curly dropped me off, he had told me to keep my chin up.

"Don't worry," he'd said. "Some very powerful people are putting eyes and ears everywhere. And I mean everywhere. Inside and out. They aren't going to hurt you."

I'd known Curly barely a month, but I hugged him like I'd wished my dad had when I was a child.

As soon as I saw my mother exit the house, followed by my Uncle Nevyn, I knew I was in for it.

What will it be, I'd wondered. Forced marriage? A beating? Would I be brought up in front of the whole church and forced to confess my sins? A temporary shunning, with everyone forbidden from speaking to me for a month?

Child's play.

Let's get on with it, I'd thought, so I can get back to my greenhouse. Back to my books, journals, recipes, and herbs all waiting for me. I had raised beds to plant and water. I had all kinds of new knowledge to add to the journals.

That thought alone comforted me as my uncle marched me to the old dormitories.

"The greenhouse is the other way," I'd say.

I knew I would miss my freedom, but I consoled myself by looking forward to spending time with boxes of recipes, notebooks, and journals that had not yet been indexed and cross-referenced. My filing system was only in the infant stages when I

ran away. Those journals and books are my connection to Goldie—to someone in the outside world who cared about me.

That, and the card in my pocket from Jefferson Hope. What could I do with that, though? I don't have a phone. Useless, but it was thrilling to have at least one minute of flirtatious—if awkward—attention from a man.

As my Uncle Nevyn walked me down the worn path through the compound, I saw something worse than physical punishment.

Smoke rose from the library. My stomach lurched at the sight. In the flickering firelight, I saw men carrying boxes and stacks of books outside and tossing them onto the fire.

Louisa's life's work. Up in flames.

My heart hurt for her.

Ever since Louisa was 14, she'd been adding to the library little by little for years with donations from the community and by trips to thrift stores in town. It started in Wyoming, and the humble library moved with us to Montana.

It was an escape from everyone's humdrum lives.

That a library was allowed to exist at all was a minor miracle. But it kept the children and sister-wives happy. It gave the mothers with young children something to do without having to go into town.

But that all changed since Orlyn Moffatt has been on the run. He has ruled in exile with an even more forceful iron fist. The rules were tightened while at the same time, he encouraged the menfolk to get jobs in the community to make everything seem

more normal.

Church at the compound became a daily thing, with regular lessons from The Prophet, who still haunted the area from secret locations.

“What are they doing?” I asked, gaping at the bonfire outside the doors of the library.

“God is ridding us of sinful influences,” Nevyn said.

The tone and the words sent a shudder down my spine.

“I don’t know what that means,” I said. I had an inkling of the literal meaning, but I’d been so disconnected by that point that I’d begun to shed the entire belief system. It was more of a question that meant, what’s the meaning of any of this?

Uncle Nevyn harrumphed and tugged me forward as he limped along.

I thought about how Olivia had managed to injure him enough to subdue him when he came to Sterling Ranch trying to kidnap her. It makes sense that Olivia would be the first to escape. And Nevyn and The Prophet sorely underestimated her when they tried to get her back.

“The number of young women in the church must be dwindling if you were so desperate to scare me into coming back,” I said to my uncle. “Congratulations. I’ve returned.”

I said this as if I wasn’t being marched to the temple to marry some creepy old ugly elder or pimple-faced brother. Ho hum. It’s a tired old story.

But then we’d arrived somewhere else. He propelled me through the door of one of the old dormitories into a narrow hallway so bright I had to blink and cover my eyes.

Temporarily disoriented, I didn't fight as I was forced into this dark cell. Nor did I notice at first when the metal door was locked behind me.

Only when my eyesight recovered did I realize the old dormitories, or at least this one, had been converted into a prison.

And so here I am. Trying to keep it together, 31 days later.

I often disassociate from my captivity by reciting old recipes and creating new ones. I sing the songs taught in primary school, complete with the motions. I piece together every branch on every family tree that I am familiar with.

Sometimes, all I can do is cry. Or scream. Or fantasize about taking revenge on my uncle.

When I've exhausted everything else, thinking about Jefferson lifts my spirits.

Today is a crying day. An ugly, angry, tired, red-faced, snot-and-tears-running-down-my-face kind of day.

When I've got no tears left, my mind bypasses everything else in my mental toolbox and goes straight to thoughts of Jefferson.

I start with the facts. He is a bounty hunter. Has ways of finding people, which I find fascinating. He had long hair, wore a leather jacket, and drove a loud car. He carried a weapon in a holster. What sort of weapon? I ask myself. A handgun. A .38, I think. I wish I knew more about those. I wish I'd spent more time with Olivia, learning to shoot more than a .22 I carried with me when I traveled to and from work during my month of freedom.

What else do I know about Jefferson? He is a full head taller than I am, making him

about six foot four inches. He smelled like leather and something spicy that reminded me of a homemade soap I idly sniffed at the farmers market. I bet I could recreate that soap smell with herbs and flowers in the greenhouse. Maybe I'll start making soap when they let me out. How difficult could it be? Honestly, a lot of these folks in this church could stand to use more soap.

But back to the vital subject at hand—Jefferson. His amber eyes had looked at me like I was a puzzle he was trying to decipher. Jefferson's shoulders made you want to grab on tight and never let go. He was the kind of sturdy that makes me go wobbly in the knees.

Exhausted from crying, I fall asleep thinking about Jefferson. Thinking, and clutching my makeshift writing implement.

I wake at the sound of my cell door opening.

Wynella, my daytime guard, is here with my food.

The guard refuses eye contact when she enters my cell. As usual.

She intrigues me.

"I've been watching you for 31 days, and I still can't seem to trace your family tree," I say groggily.

She smirks. "You've been watching me? How amusing."

Her eyes still won't meet mine.

I nod. "Your eyes are like the Smiths, but you carry yourself like a Barker."

“The Wyoming Smiths are related to most of the folks around here,” she says with a shrug like she’s had to explain herself a hundred times, and I’m the 101st person to question her genealogy.

“I guess,” I say. “Weird that I don’t remember you. I never met a Wynella Smith.”

“You were, what, 12, when my family split off and yours came this way?”

I nod.

“You couldn’t have known everyone.”

I definitely did.

“Maybe you’re right,” I concede rather than argue.

The guard doesn’t seem to care either way if I believe her.

She holds out the tray to me expectantly, but I don’t move. I don’t give a flying fig if I eat or don’t eat my mock-tapioca pudding today. I shrug and meet her hard gaze.

And then, Wynella does something unprecedented. She leaves the door wide open and walks over to my bed with the food tray.

“If you’re not going to stand up and take your tray, I guess you’re expecting room service,” she says with a heavy sigh.

It’s all I can do to keep from gaping at this gross negligence. Maybe she’s as tired as I am.

Suddenly, I know I can’t be here for one more day.

I know what I promised Curly. I said I would be good and lay low. I'm not supposed to worry because, somehow, I believed that no one would hurt me.

But I can't do it. I just can't stay here one more day. I need to get outside. I need to get to my journals. And I need to find Jefferson. Somehow.

I hold my breath.

Wynella bends over, pettily muttering as she sets the tray on my bed. "I see your punishment hasn't broken you yet, maybe I should?—"

I lunge.

With the sharpened spring clutched in my hand, I stab her in the side, under the ribs. I'm weak, but I push as hard as I can.

The guard drops the tray. Mock-tapioca pudding splatters all over my bed and against the concrete wall as I jam the crude writing-implement-turned-weapon through her heavy denim uniform.

My captor cries out and falls to her knees.

I'm shocked at what I've done, and I stand there stunned for a moment, waiting for the blood to drip to the floor.

I must have hesitated a long time because she coughs and, with a labored effort, fumes, "They're gonna beat the crap out of you, you little idiot."

My feet are faster than my cerebral cortex.

That was too easy, I think to myself as I fly out of the building and run to the garden

and greenhouse area.

Doesn't matter. I just have to grab a few things, and I'll be gone again. Maybe I'll head to town. Maybe I'll hitchhike to Bozeman. I don't know. I'll just have to figure things out. Like Olivia did. Like all of them did.

However, what greets me when I arrive at the greenhouse is not what I expected.

My journals are gone.

“What the...?”

I look behind the stack of filing boxes where I'd kept the journals. All gone. The shelf where the recipe binders are is also empty.

What's worse, no one has watered anything. No one repotted the seedlings I started. Most of the plants are dead.

All I have left is a dirt-smudged hoodie hanging from a hook on the wall.

My throat is already raw, but I'm about to scream when suddenly, a voice sounds behind me.

“I was coming to get you out of isolation, but apparently, the guard let you out already. Must have had our wires crossed.”

I spin around and find my father watching me from the doorway of the greenhouse.

“Dad,” I say in almost a whisper to Elder George, the man I've spoken maybe ten words to in the last six months. He has a lot of kids to pay attention to. A hell of a lot.

Why did the guard not tell him I stabbed her and shoved her into my mock-tapioca pudding?

I don't dare ask that out loud. Maybe she was embarrassed. I would never want another woman who's also trapped in this hell hole, just the same as I am, to be punished for anything. Maybe she felt the same way about me. Perhaps that's why getting away from her was so easy.

He notices the incredulous look on my face and reaches out his hand. "Come on. Let's go get a burger."

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Chapter Two

Jefferson

For the 31st day in a row, my kicking heart threatens to drown out the noise of my 1969 Dodge Charger as I rumble past Georgie's house.

I wish this incessant ticker of mine would cut it out with the theatrics. Constantly building up hope. Hope that gets dashed, day after day.

I've been doing this for a month, and still no sign of her.

Where is Georgie?

I know she lives here with her mom and siblings. With a few keyboard strokes and paid access to county records, her place of residence was easy to find. My job is finding people who skip out on bail, on court dates, on summonses.

And yet, the minute I use my privileges for personal reasons, I can't seem to glimpse one law-abiding 19-year-old woman.

I search for her like it's my job. Georgie is at the forefront of my mind when I open my eyes in the morning and when I close my eyes at night. I can still see the thick auburn rope of her hair that hangs to her waist. The defiant chin. The shoulders set in iron resolve, ready for god knows what.

Georgie is the bravest person I know. Crazy of me to think that after talking to her for

five minutes, I know. But I've learned a few things about her in our time apart.

On this early summer morning, a group of auburn-haired kids play red-light-green-light on the scrubby front lawn of a brick ranch house along the highway, about a quarter mile from the church's main campus. A political sign stands cock-eyed in the right-of-way, reading, "Mark Lund for Sheriff." Over my dead body.

One problem at a time, Jefferson. First, find Georgie. Don't concern yourself with local politics.

I suppose I could invest in a less conspicuous mode of transportation than a classic muscle car named Sonja, which I Frankensteined with salvaged Viper parts. What can I say? I've never been one for subtle. This car was my only hobby before I met Georgie.

This group of kids doesn't glance my way. They're used to lookie-loos by now. People from Darling Creek love to drive around and gawk at the polygamists, whether they support their right to this lifestyle or not.

As for me, I'd never heard of the Celestial Order of Covenant Kinship (or C.O.C.K, for short—are you kidding me?) before the day I met Georgie and her band of highly paranoid friends at that house in Bozeman while I was trying to pick up Orlyn Moffatt. Her friends looked at me like I was in league with the devil.

And when I said that name, they all went white.

I thought that Orlyn was a drifter wanted for questioning about that murder up in the mountains.

Turns out, that guy means something to some important people. Those people call him The Prophet, which is a pretty fucking eerie nickname if you ask me.

The bitch of it is, I also suspect that local law enforcement is aiding the old man in evading capture. I don't have enough evidence to support that, but the way that murder investigation has been handled has been bad news all around for the county.

Not that I rely on cops to help me do my job, but when they actively try to sabotage and send me on wild goose chases? That is not good.

Now, the dirty cop—one Deputy Mark Lund—who “tipped” me off on the wrong address is now running for sheriff, and that's a whole heap of trouble for the town of Darling Creek.

I wish I'd done more than simply give Georgie my card and tell her to call me. I probably looked like a creep, but I honestly meant it sincerely. I hadn't meant it as a pickup line.

Her friend, Goldie, has been cautious about giving me too much information. That's partially my fault.

I may not have started off on the right foot by showing up unannounced after tracking Goldie down at her and her husband's house on Windgrave Mountain.

To their credit, Goldie and Barrett invited me in when they realized I was on their side. They made coffee, and we gathered around their kitchen table.

The two of them had started talking strategy with me. A lot of big-picture stuff that I didn't care about.

Me? I had a one-track mind.

What does Georgie like? I asked.

Goldie and Barrett exchanged a look. “Plants. Books. She collects journals like they’re going out of style,” Goldie had said.

“Where would she go if she ran away again?”

“She wouldn’t.”

Honestly, I can’t blame Goldie for not entirely trusting me, considering she spends most of her time trying to rescue women and children from that crazy church.

“If you want to help Georgie,” Goldie pressed, “You can join us in helping the victims. It’s a process. You’re not going to go in and snatch her out of there. It takes time. It takes precision.”

I regret pushing back on this with Goldie. Words like “process” and “time” and “precision” are not in my vocabulary.

“Like hell I won’t. That’s exactly what I’m gonna do,” I said.

“You need resources. You need us,” she said, crossing her arms, her body language communicating that I was on dangerous ground.

“I don’t play well with others. I just want to find her.”

And then her husband, Barrett, told me it was time to leave.

After I left Windgrave Mountain, I went home, opened my laptop, and did some digging on the cult.

Let me tell you, that was one fucked up internet rabbit hole.

Now that I know what I know about this church, their women aren't allowed to possess their own phones. Of course, Georgie couldn't call me.

So it's all on me to find her. More power to her friends and everything they do, but Georgie is my mission and mine alone.

My hands squeeze the steering wheel as I coast by the house.

A woman comes out through the side door. I sit up straight for a second, hoping against hope that it's her.

But it's not Georgie. The woman is about twice Georgie's age and has a basket of wet laundry. She takes one look at me, then barks something to the children.

They all jump. A second later, they're headed for the door.

The woman continues to give me the side eye as she hangs the laundry on the line. No one else comes outside.

Georgie should be here. As I watch this woman do her work, I realize that none of those clothes she hangs on the line look like they might belong to Georgie.

Where the hell is she?

Off in the distance, a white pickup approaches, coming from the direction of the main compound.

"Get ready, Sonja." I make a U-turn at a reasonable speed and then pop the clutch and fucking fly.

Someone called someone else to warn them about me.

Come quick. He's back again. That man in the leather jacket in the loud car. He's cut his hair, but I know it's him.

I evade the truck by using a couple of winding dirt roads through the foothills, risking bottoming out on a couple of rutted paths. My baby girl scrapes by, mostly unharmed, as the engine screams through backroads headed into town. Thank you, modern custom fenders.

Home sweet home is a crappy multi-use office with dirt cheap rent that I split with my best friend, Joaquin.

I park my dirt-caked Sonja in the alley's carport, where I work on her on my days off. I bound up the steps through the back door, pass through the sad excuse for a kitchen, and head into the front office area.

From the outside, the place is a boring-1970s-era two-bed one-bath that narrowly escaped getting flipped into something with more curb appeal.

Inside, the front room houses two salvaged metal desks, two long rows of green file cabinets from Army Navy Surplus, two bottom-dollar Ikea office chairs that have seen better days, and a rust-colored sofa shoved under the picture window that we call our "magic sofa."

Despite Joaquin's preference to work in the dark, I flick the light switch on my way in. The room is bathed in a half-hearted glow from the ugly amber pendant light fixture that someone's grandmother no doubt thought coordinated perfectly with the popcorn ceiling and the avocado-green walls. Apart from the fingerprint-ID-locked gun safe in the corner, the only thing about this office that's not wildly outdated are the simple but comfortable wingback chairs facing each of our two desks, and the desks' computers. Joaquin and I were unanimous in that we'd rather splurge on technology than on making the place look pretty.

A giant head atop two broad shoulders pops out from behind one of the computer monitors. “Jefferson! Where you been?” Joaquin asks in an overly friendly way, telling me he knows exactly where I’ve been.

I grunt a monosyllabic answer and toss the keys to my Charger on my desk. “Out.”

“Looking for skips? Real juicy ones that pay the rent?”

And here comes the sarcasm. He’s calling me out without directly calling me out.

“Yep,” I say, not making eye contact though I can see his caveman eyebrows arch in mock surprise.

“Neat. Tell me about ‘em.”

I sit down in the cheap wooden desk chair and scrub my face. “Not much to tell,” I say.

“Dammit, Hope,” he replies. “You were out looking for that girl again.”

I ignore him, though he’s triggering my blood pressure. My hand goes to my mouse to wake up my computer monitor.

“We’ve got back rent due, you know,” Joaquin says, chucking a sheet of yellow paper over to my desk. It floats over to me and falls onto my keyboard. A late notice. I know how to fix this. I’ll get a few minor skips, Joaquin will take on one of his sketchier jobs that he doesn’t talk about, and we’ll squeak by.

“Well, lucky for you, we’ve got another income stream. A friend of a friend called, needing to sublet the second bedroom for someone.”

I'm barely listening.

"A woman. You good with that?"

I grunt as I scroll through search results on my monitor.

Joaquin clears his throat. "Which means you can't walk around naked after your showers, buddy."

"Okay."

He goes on, "And you'll have to move into the bonus room because this renter is going to pay over a thousand a month just for a bedroom."

"Cool."

"It's real hush-hush. Like, I don't know when she'll be here, but we gotta just keep the room ready for her so she can crash here whenever she needs it. Could be a government contractor. Could be an assassin. Maybe it'll be real exciting."

No response from me.

"Maybe she's cute."

"Sure."

"Are you hearing me, Hope?"

"Yep. A thousand a month. And I gotta move to the closet. Definitely an assassin. Peachy."

And that means I can keep looking for Georgie. See? We always figure it out between the two of us.

“You might have to move Sonja out of the carport.”

Now he’s trying to provoke me, but I’m not biting. But my blood pressure has started to rise.

“Bro, are you good? I thought you’d be pissed about moving your shit.”

I give a barely-there dip of my chin as I focus on the monitor, where I’m scrolling through the latest failures-to-appear on the county prosecutor’s website. “All good.” I keep a second tab open, of course, which shows a live feed of the main gate of the cult compound. I just sit and watch it sometimes.

It’s not like I have a lot to move. I can handle a mattress on the floor in a glorified closet for a few months. Other than that, I have one duffel bag full of clothes, a laptop, a tattered copy of *Christine* by Stephen King, and a classic car wall calendar. The rest of my shit is in the shared bathroom and the kitchen, including my favorite oversized mug from Yellowstone National Park that holds half a pot of coffee. Other than that, I keep a go-bag of essentials in Sonja’s trunk, and that’s it.

I hope the new renter doesn’t mind sharing a small bathroom and a severely outdated kitchen with two dudes with dubious housekeeping habits. As for moving Sonja, Joaquin wouldn’t dare.

My best friend clicks his tongue. “You need to forget about that girl and worry about yourself. That cult is a hornet’s nest and I don’t want you bringing that heat on this office,” my best friend says.

“She’s not a girl,” I mutter when I should just keep ignoring him.

“If she’s ten years younger than you, and you’re 30, then yes. She’s a girl.”

And now, he has my full attention. I push back from my desk, stand up, and stalk toward my office partner.

The looming only lasts for a second before Joaquin stands up, his Ikea chair falling backward in his usual bull-in-a-china-shop manner.

“Her name is Georgie, and she’s in trouble,” I say, squaring up to my best friend.

“So? You don’t know her.”

“I don’t know how to explain to you that you should give a shit about other people,” I say.

“This isn’t about that, and you know it. You’re obsessed, and it’s going to bite you in the ass.”

“Why don’t you go ahead and bite my ass and get it over with?”

“Why don’t you stop and think before you draw some unwanted attention onto me? I can’t afford to have some cult weirdos sniffing around the premises. It’s bad for business,” Joaquin says.

“And what exactly is your business?” I ask.

He points a finger in the air. “We agreed not to talk about what I do for a living.”

“And why is that, exactly? Are you a hitman?”

He shoots me an icy stare. “Yeah. I’m a hitman. So stay low-key. You and me, we

don't mount white horses and ride to the rescue. And we certainly do not stick our nose into local politics."

"Joaquin, there's no way you could be a hitman."

"Low. Profile."

He can keep his head buried in the sand all he wants. But that's not for me.

Still, I gotta get him off my back.

"Fine," I grit out. "I promise this Georgie person isn't going to cause any problems here at the house."

Joaquin sits back down, crosses his arms, and glares at me.

"Why don't I believe you?"

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Chapter Three

Georgie

All my life, I've wondered what it's like for normal families. For children to have access to their fathers.

"Dad? What's going on? Why are we here?"

His smile is mixed with genuine confusion as if this appointment was in my phone calendar—as if I were allowed to have such a device.

"You think I'd forget your birthday?" He leans in, planting his elbows on the table.

I stare at him. I'd forgotten entirely. In all the days I was counting off by scratching marks on the floor, I never once thought about it.

"I'm 20 today," I say, barely audible.

He smiles, and his kind eyes crinkle.

My dad has always been one of the more handsome of the church elders. So many of the prospective sister-wives vie for Elder George's attention. They don't know that the favorite wife barely has enough allowance to feed her brood every month.

The silver specks in his dark hair glint in the light from the diner's smudged window as he tilts his bulky frame back, allowing room for our server to set down his plate of

steak fries and chicken fingers.

I barely remember the last time I had one-on-one time with my dad. Let alone a meal with him on a birthday.

Then, something clicks.

In this family, these outings usually happen on a daughter's 16th birthday. It's when Dad gives us the "talk" about who we're promised to. This is when the grooming begins, preparing us for marriage at 18.

The quicker and easier we're married off, the fewer mouths he has to feed.

But when I was 16, I was sick. That's what sent me to Goldie in the first place, and that's what got me interested in herbs and natural medicine. My periods were so painful that my father delayed my marriage plans for as long as he could. I milked my illness for years, lying about the fact that I might not be able to bear children.

That charade worked until it didn't.

More women were escaping. Families with children up and vanished in the middle of the night.

Two months ago, weeks after Goldie escaped, the elders came snooping around the greenhouse. I knew the "talk" was coming soon, so I secretly stashed as much food away as I could for my younger siblings, stealing some from the silos little by little over a period of weeks. And then, I asked to use a stranger's phone while running an errand in town.

There was a phone number written on the inside of the wax paper wrapper from a sucker found in the mysterious bag of candy left for the school children.

So I called it. And that night, Olivia, Louisa, and Goldie came with their trucks, a trailer, and half a dozen men with rifles.

It felt like my life was finally about to begin.

I look pointedly at my father across the table from me.

“I’m not going to get married. They can lock me up again if they want to.” My chin wobbles at the thought. If I go back behind lock and key, I’ll die. I’ll either waste away, or I’ll die fighting to get out.

My father squirts some ketchup into his basket of fries. The burger and onion rings in front of me remain untouched. A shame, because I love onion rings. But the sense of doom in this conversation is making me queasy. “You don’t even know who it is.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Doesn’t matter if it’s not Jefferson Hope.

“That’s your problem right there,” he lectures, pointing at me with his fork. Dad dislikes getting his hands dirty. He eats sandwiches with a fork and knife. “It’s your close-mindedness. I’ve put off your engagement for as long as I could. I knew you weren’t still sick at 18, Georgie. You should thank me for covering for you as many years as I did.”

I suppose I should thank him, but I just gape at him in surprise. Thank him for what? He could have pulled strings to prevent me from getting locked up as punishment for running away.

How can he just sit there and eat while we’re discussing the end of my life as I know it?

“You know, if you keep eating like that, you’re going to have a heart attack.” I’ll bet

Jefferson doesn't eat crap food like that. He has to stay healthy so he can chase people on foot. Probably.

"Georgie, don't change the subject."

"If you can't work and support your wives, you know what happens."

"Georgie. I'm fine."

"I mean, sure, you might not die," I go on, ignoring his growing impatience. "And maybe your employer over at the chemical plant has disability coverage. Maybe. But you know what the elders will say. You'll lose your status. The elders have unwritten rules about the disabled."

His eyes widen at my insolence.

But he knows I'm right. And he knows if he tries to shut me up, I'll get louder.

He shifts his eyes to another table of customers. People are eavesdropping. People in this town love to know the tea about the polygamists.

"You get downgraded, and they move your wives around. Well, except for mom. She is the legal wife, correct? You have so many, I can't remember."

A storm is brewing in Dad's eyes. "You need to stop," he says through his teeth.

I don't want to argue with him. I really don't.

But then I deliver the knife to the gut. "Do you refuse to push back on this forced marriage stuff so they don't take you out back and shoot you like a lame horse?"

“Georgeanne Lucille.” The addition of my last name is a warning, but I ignore it.

“Like they did with Trace?”

The color drains from my father’s face, and he drops his fork.

No one says anything for a long moment. He won’t make eye contact with me.

Finally, staring out the window, he grumbles low, so no one can overhear him. “If I’m dead, there’s no one to work the system. If I’m alive, I can use my influence to make sure you marry someone decent. Someone close to your age.”

How did we get here? How did the elders and The Prophet manage to convince everyone that forced marriage and betrothing underage girls in marriage was okay?

“Do you remember the before-times? You and Mom chose each other. That’s what I want. Choices.”

Exhausted and weak, my body slouches in the booth as the tension in the air abates for a moment.

Dad sighs and takes a drink of his pink lemonade. “I was too indulgent with you when you were younger. So was your mother. You walked early, talked early. You were so smart. We knew you were special. We were too lax on spankings. And now, I’m picking you up from the DisciplineCenter on your birthday rather than celebrating your wedding.”

I bite my lip hard, refusing to cry. The Discipline Center? Is that what they call it? My god. “You know, I would have enjoyed some alone time with my dad at 16, even if I was sick at the time,” I say.

He smiles wryly. “Well, what would we have talked about?”

I blink. “Anything. Anything other than me learning to cook and clean and birth babies and how to budget a monthly allowance.”

“What do you want me to say, Georgie? That’s the way things are.”

My face heats, and I shrink into myself. I feel like an eight-year-old again. The first time Uncle Nevyn locked me in a closet for smarting off during my catechism lesson. That was only eight hours.

“Daddy,” I say, swiping the back of my hand over my suddenly wet cheek. Dammit, I don’t want to cry. “Why didn’t you come and get me out of there? Why did you let them shut me up for so long?”

He grimaces. “It wasn’t up to me.”

I slap the table and it rattles the silverware. “Yes it is. You’re my dad. You’re supposed to be the one to protect me.”

So I guess we’re arguing after all.

My father looks down at the table and clears his throat.

“I’m sorry, Georgie.”

He’s right about one thing. He was much more lax with me than many other elders with their children. I’ve never shied away from saying what everyone was thinking.

So I say my peace. “I love you, Dad. But you’re pathetic. All of you who have the slightest bit of guilty conscience since letting The Prophet take charge are pathetic.”

“Now, Georgie, you know why we have rules.”

“You let them burn the library.”

He nods. “That, also, wasn’t up to me. If Louisa had not secretly filled the shelves with utter smut and content not fit for children...”

I pound the table again. “They took all my notebooks from the greenhouse. Did you know that? Everything I need to go back to work is gone. Probably burned, too. Everything Goldie did, years of work, is all gone.”

He nods. “I’m sorry. But the good news is, you won’t need to go back to work if?—”

“I don’t want to hear that.”

People are blatantly staring now.

My dad backs down, holding out his open palms in surrender.

“If you want, we can go and buy you a notebook to replace what you lost.”

A notebook. A single notebook. Lord almighty, he has no concept of what I’ve lost.

“Dad,” I say slowly. “What I really want is a phone.” For one month, I had a burner phone that I used to keep in touch with my friends. I miss it.

He lifts an eyebrow. “You know you’re not allowed to have those.”

I know, but I ask anyway. The last time I used one, it was a stranger’s phone at the grocery store when my chaperone was having a bathroom emergency. I’d called the phone number in the candy wrapper, and later that night, Olivia, Louisa, and Goldie

came to get me with a whole cavalry of people.

“I just want to let Olivia know that I’m okay. Why am I not allowed to have a phone?”

“It’s better if you don’t question it,” he says.

I sigh. “Then let me use yours.”

He purses his lips. “Why?”

I arch my eyebrow. “It’s better if you don’t question it.”

“Georgie.”

“Dad. Don’t you want a better life for me?”

He shakes his head and scrunches up the paper napkin. After a few seconds, he drops the napkin into his abandoned basket of fried food and then gets up to go to the bathroom.

He leaves his phone face down on the table.

I look around, wondering if we’ve been accompanied by any spies from the church.

I pick up his phone and to my surprise, it’s been left unlocked.

Did he do that on purpose?

I glance up at the bathroom.

He'll be back any second. If he sees me using his phone, he'll have to make sure it looks like I've taken it without permission. Thinking quickly, I dig for the tattered business card that I keep in my bra and has now migrated under my boob. I can feel the eyes of the lady at the next booth judging me. As I root around, I meet her gaze.

"Can I help you with something?" I ask, smiling sweetly.

She shrugs and looks away.

This card is the only thing my uncle didn't find and confiscate before he locked me away.

Quickly, I type and retype a message. What kind of language would convince Jefferson it's me, but would also not implicate my father if someone in the church reads his messages?

Eventually, I go with:

I have Georgeanne. She's fine. We're stopping at the superstore in ten minutes to pick up a birthday cake and a present. Let everyone at Mom's house know I'll have her home soon.

There. Jefferson will know what to do with that.

I hope.

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Chapter Four

Jefferson

I pop some gum into my mouth and play dumb when the deputy pulls me over near the front gates of the C.O.C.K. compound.

Chewing gum makes a guy like me look extra dumb.

I slide on my aviators when I roll down the window, smiling at the deputy like a real dope.

When he asks me what I'm doing here, I speak slowly. "I'm here to serve some papers to Orlyn Moffat?"

I should have called it quits after yet another fruitless search this morning. Especially after Joaquin ripped me a new one.

But I can't quit looking for Georgie.

"This is about the tenth time I've told you to stop harassing these poor church folks about that drifter," the deputy says. I examine his badge and memorize his name and number like I've done a dozen times before.

The same one who gave me the phony address that led me to Bozeman and the run-in with that rescue group. I guess I should thank him. After all, he's responsible for indirectly causing me to meet Georgie.

I continue to play dumb, smiling like an idiot. “I’m sorry. Is it really that many times? I lost count.”

The deputy sighs.

“Most folks acting on the court’s behalf do not announce their presence like this,” he says, waving his hand in the air, to indicate my car.

“I’m sorry,” I say, leaning out my window to speak to him conspiratorially. “It’s just that all my research tells me—and everyone in Darling Creek seems to think—this place right here is his primary address, so I have to keep trying.”

“Sir. We’ve been over this.”

“Let me ask you. Am I breaking any laws by being on a public right of way? Just curious.”

His jaw muscle ripples. “No.”

“Am I under arrest?”

Over the years, I’ve cultivated a way to ask these questions so I don’t get tazed. A super-dumb, aw-shucks, genuinely curious kind of way.

“Again. No. But I could get a warrant to search your car.”

I nod. “Huh. I wonder what Judge Mayfield would think of a deputy—and one who’s currently running for public office—impeding a murder investigation.”

“I’m not...”

I wave my hand around. “Oh no, I don’t mean you, Mark. Just hypothetically. You get me?”

He grunts.

“See, when you throw around fake addresses to people looking for skips, it looks real bad. Imagine if someone did that for an individual wanted in questioning for a murder.”

Mark puffs out his chest. “I don’t know anything about anyone doing that. And I told you last time, he’s not here. If we knew where Moffatt was, we’d bring him straight to the department, Mr. Hope.”

I smile and chew my gum casually. “Man, you sure are polite. Your moms raised you right. But you can just call me Jeff, m’kay?”

The shade of purple he turns at hearing me say “moms” is interesting.

I dig in. “Which mom was it? Was it the legal one or the one your daddy got engaged to when she was 16?”

Yeah. I did some digging around. That was fun. If your definition of fun is learning horrible things about your not-so-friendly neighborhood cult.

“The fuck are you talking about?”

“Not sure, Deputy. I’m just sitting here trying to imagine having a stepmom younger than myself. I guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. Welp. If that’s all, then I guess I’m free to go.”

I just can’t help my mouth sometimes.

I don't get the pleasure of watching Mark's ears turn a deeper shade of eggplant, because an electronic notification sounds at that exact moment.

The air is sucked from my lungs when I read the cryptic text. I don't know whose phone it's from, but I know it's Georgie, sending up a signal flare.

I have Georgeanne. She's fine. We're stopping at the superstore in ten minutes to pick up a birthday cake. Let everyone at Mom's house know I'll have her home soon.

I feel like I've been lost at sea and I've finally spotted a lighthouse.

Swallowing down the elation that threatens to make me freak the fuck out, I turn to Mark. "The bail bondsman has another skip for me, and it's urgent. You understand. Nice talking to you again, Mark."

The deputy's disgruntled face in my rearview mirror doesn't concern me.

I could go wait at Georgie's Mom's house again. But from the wording in that text, I think I need to get to her before that.

My only focus is getting my ass to that big box store on the outskirts of town.

And it's a nine-minute drive away.

As soon as the deputy disappears over the horizon in my rearview mirror, I'm banging gears. Sonja never lets me down, and I get there in seven minutes flat. I park my baby in the pick-up area because this is Darling Creek, and no one ever gets towed. And also, I do not give a fuck.

My internal homing beacon has been activated. As I stalk around the bakery department, I remind myself that I'm looking for someone who might appear

differently after 31 days. She could be wearing her hair up. She could have cut it. In my mind's eye, I've always been picturing her in an oversized baby blue sweater and baggy jeans, when she could be wearing a dress for all I know.

I don't see Georgie in the cake department.

Where would she go? She mentioned a birthday present. What would that be?

Goldie mentioned something about plants. She likes plants. My instincts tell me I'm going the wrong way, but I check the garden department anyway. No sign of her there.

Goldie said Georgie's really organized. She likes to keep journals of everything in the greenhouse. She has stacks and stacks of them.

My skin tingles and I quickly pivot and head to the books department.

On my way there, someone in a dirty blue hoodie brushes past me in the home and office section. "Pardon me," says the even, feminine voice.

Ever have that lighter-than-air feeling when you find something valuable after looking all day and turning over everything in your house? This is how I feel right now, except I'm not lighter than air. I'm halfway to the moon.

It's her.

My body follows like it's tethered to her as she heads around the corner. Her hair is down, and it falls in waves to her waistline like a coppery waterfall. I've never seen so much hair.

I'm about to call after her when a man steps in front of me, nearly body-checking me

as he follows her around to the next aisle. He has the look that's all too common these days in our friendly cow town. Bitch-baby face. Pressed khaki pants. Hiking shoes. Untucked black polo shirt with the tell-tale bump on his hip from his concealed-carry holster. He smells like fragile masculinity—cologne and an unwashed tiny ballsack.

The dude in the polo shirt follows Georgie at close range, so I follow them at about 15 paces.

She pauses in front of a row of notebooks in the office section. My heart may beat out of my chest at seeing her delicate fingers grazing over the cardboard and leather covers. Her teeth bite down on her bottom lip. She tucks a lock of hair behind her ear.

I watch as her hand skims over the books, stopping at one light blue one with flowers and whatnot on the cover. Then another one with rainbows. She is indecisive, and the man with her, who looks like he might be related to her, grows impatient.

Finally, she picks the one with flowers and whatnot, and they leave. I quickly grab the other book she was looking at, the one with the rainbows. I zip through the self-checkout.

Just as they approach the automatic doors, I pounce. “Ma’am? I’m going to have to check your bag.”

The man steps in between myself and her. I briefly flash him my ID for half a second, which is only my driver’s license, but I have the confidence to carry it off.

“No, sir,” he says.

“Store security,” I say. “Ma’am, I’m sorry to bother you, but I saw you take something without paying for it.”

“This is horse crap,” says the dad. Damn, the dude even swears like a dork ass loser.

“Dad, it’s okay,” Georgie says calmly though her hands are shaking.

I come in close, placing myself between her and her father. The exit doors open and close chaotically as we stand in the vestibule. She opens her bag and I drop the journal I bought inside.

“Ma’am, you’ll have to come with me to the security office for questioning,” I say.

“Okay,” she says, her big eyes wide with fear. God, she’s so pale. Her cheeks are sunken. I have to fight the urge to pick her up and carry her. Am I doing the right thing?

The dad puts his hand on Georgie’s arm. “Absolutely not,” he says.

“I think I’d better go with him, Dad. I made a huge mistake.”

“I’m calling our lawyer.”

Great. They have lawyers now.

I turn and face the man. “Sir, if you’ll be so kind as to wait here while I interview the young lady. This should only take a few minutes.”

I gesture to a bench inside the loud vestibule, near the store greeter. To my surprise and relief, he grudgingly takes a seat.

I walk with Georgie to the meat department and stroll through the employees-only doors, through the stock room, and out to the store pick-up area.

Miraculously, no one follows us or asks a single question. It's amazing what you can do when you act like you own a place.

I escort Georgie to where Sonja waits for us and smoothly hold the door open for her as she gets in. Her face is that of someone about to go into shock.

As I slide behind the wheel, I watch her fumble with her seat belt. Carefully, I reach over and take control of the situation.

For the first time in 31 days, she looks me dead in the eyes.

My world has changed forever now that I have her. I let go of the seat belt. I just need a moment.

She begins to shake all over.

I hold her hand, and it feels cold and clammy. "You're safe now, Georgie."

Her breathing is too shallow, too fast.

I am nearly wild with rage on her behalf, but I turn that rage into something useful. I say to her, "You come here right now, Georgie."

Georgie gives a small gasp as I ease my seat back and pull her to me over the gear shift, fitting her between me and the wheel. I wrap my arms around her, and I don't let go until her breath evens out and she stops shaking.

Moments pass. A few employees stare as they walk by with their wagons full of groceries, but they're more interested in the car than whatever the heck is happening inside it.

Eventually, Georgie leans back to look at me, and the car horn honks, startling her.

I can't help but laugh, and I hope she doesn't think I'm mocking her. To my relief, she laughs, too.

"Jefferson. You cut your hair."

I squeeze her tight and breathe in the scent at the base of her throat, inhaling the apple smell of her soft auburn hair.

We have to get out of here, though I want nothing more than to lose myself in her long, thick locks. In the sensation of her soft hands on my shorn head. "We gotta go," I say.

She nods quickly. "Before anyone sees us."

Once she's buckled in, she holds onto my hand as I grasp the gear shift.

Once I'm safely away from store traffic, we charge down the highway toward town. I like having Georgie in my car.

Every bump and swerve makes her inch closer to me. She doesn't let go until we're in the car port behind The Dump.

The last month has felt like an eternity, and we've finally arrived at the beginning of something big.

"You really need to move to a place with a garage if you're going to make it a habit of kidnapping people," Joaquin says, handing Georgie a glass of water.

He eyes her curiously as she sits on my lap and clutches me like a koala climbing a

tree.

“He didn’t kidnap me,” she says in my defense.

“Potato, potahto.”

Georgie stares at me, wide-eyed.

“I’m an adult,” she says. “Is it kidnapping if I’m an adult?”

“Relax, sweetheart. “No one is going to come looking for you here.”

Joaquin glares at me.

“Did you hide the Charger at the place?”

“No.”

“That’s what I rented the unit for. I don’t want anyone who has a beef with you to show up here.”

“Nobody has a beef with me.”

He stares back at me severely. “Everyone has a beef with you. You’re a walking liability to my profession.”

“What is your profession, again?” I ask, tilting my head.

He points at me. “I’m an Instacart shopper. And you, no driving the Charger until further notice.”

“You’re overreacting, Joaquin. I’ve got this handled. No one followed us. No one is gonna bother us.”

My bossy housemate turns to leave.

“If you’re stealing Sonja, make sure you give her a bath at least. And get my go-bag out of the trunk.”

I don’t know if he heard me, but he’s out the door, muttering as he leaves.

“What did he say?” Georgie asks, watching him go.

“Probably the same thing he complains about every other day. Stuff about me being a reckless, stubborn asshole.”

“You don’t have to put up with that abuse.”

I look at Georgie and chuckle. “Sure I do. He’s my best friend.”

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Chapter Five

Georgie

Finally. He has me.

We're together.

And I'm safe.

Am I confused about who Sonja is? Yes. Am I overwhelmed and full of questions? Also yes. But overall, no regrets.

I'm not the only one who has questions.

"Georgie, why didn't you try to call me sooner?" Jefferson asks.

"The plan was to wait," I explain. "Curly said something big was happening, so I tried to be patient. But then, nothing did. And I couldn't take it anymore. So I took a stab at escaping again, and it worked."

He doesn't like my vague answer but lets it go for now.

"Why do you look so pale? And you're thinner than I remember."

I pout. "You think I look bad?"

Jefferson combs his fingers through my hair, keeping one hand firmly on my hip. “No, Georgie. You’re perfect. But I need to know, what did they do to you when you went back?”

I don’t answer; I just look away and twist my hair around my finger.

“Tell me. What has been going on for the last month?”

I’m afraid I’ll start to shake again if I talk about it.

Even more than that, I’m afraid of what he’ll do if I tell him the truth.

Jefferson has this energy about him. Not a temper, not that I’ve seen, anyway. But a lethal darkness. A person who easily blurs the line between right and wrong. The way he smoothly lied to my dad, I almost believed that Jefferson was store security. The thought of what he could do with that power makes me shiver. Honestly, I can’t tell if it’s a good shiver or a bad shiver, which is deeply unsettling.

I shouldn’t be having the good kind of shivers right now. I should be processing everything that’s happened to me.

“Nothing. It’s been very boring,” I say. This is not a lie.

If I tell him the whole truth, he could seek vengeance, but that’s not what I want. Not yet. It’s not the time.

I don’t want him to explode at finding out that I’ve been in the polygamist version of solitary confinement.

“More water?”

I shake my head, studying his penetrating amber eyes.

“Coffee? Tea? Milk? Soda?”

“No. I don’t need anything.”

“Thank god, because I don’t actually have the last two things I mentioned.”

The way he says it, totally deadpan, makes me laugh. His lip twitches, and I have the overwhelming urge to kiss it.

“I don’t need anything,” I tell him. “I just need you to stop asking questions and let me look at you.”

The eye contact is too penetrating to bear. His warm hand on my hip is too real. The lazy strokes of his fingers in my hair are too perfect. His leather and soap smell is in my lungs, and his lips are closer than any man’s have a right to be.

“It’s really you,” I say, gently squeezing his shoulder.

“It’s really me.”

“I’m in your house.”

He gives me a wry grin. “Take it in. It’s nothing fancy. But it’s safe. If you want to go to a hotel, I can arrange that. I’ll have to bum a ride since Joaquin is making Sonja disappear at the moment.”

“Who is Sonja?”

That wry grin widens. “That’s my car, baby.”

“Oh.” I bite my lip, feeling stupid at my momentary jealousy over a stupid car with a woman’s name.

“Do you want me to take you to a hotel?”

I shake my head and look around. It’s ugly, but that means nothing to me as long as I’m safe. The gold linoleum curls up with age in the kitchen’s dingy corners. The white refrigerator clanks and hums loudly, like it’s on its last legs. There’s a sink that’s too small to wash more than a few dishes at a time, and the stove has dials that look straight out of the 1960s. The lace curtains over the single kitchen window are discolored and, I’d guess, haven’t been washed in a century. We didn’t have the most up-to-date appliances while living in the church dormitories and later in my mother’s extremely overcrowded house. But it was nothing as shabby as everything I see here.

“Will that loud man be coming back?” I ask.

Jefferson sees me wince.

He nods. “He lives here. Don’t worry. His bark is worse than his bite. Just two rules with him. Don’t ask what he does for a living, and don’t touch the tequila in the freezer.”

“Not a problem,” I say, never having touched alcohol in my life.

“Sorry the place is such a shit hole.”

I laugh at the description. “It’s fine,” I say. Anything is better than solitary confinement, I think silently.

“It’s a dump,” he says, smiling. “And I live in a closet. For now.”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” I repeat, positive he’s exaggerating.

He explains that the second bedroom is being kept empty for some mysterious renter who’s paying big bucks. And since Jefferson is not bringing in a lot of cash these days for some reason, he’s agreed to make room.

So, I suppose that means Jefferson is poor.

Well, I didn’t have any expectations. In fact, I never had any delusions that he would be made of money and that he’d spirit me away to a mansion somewhere. Poor is just fine. I don’t care about money. It’s not like I made a ton of money cleaning motel rooms during my stint of freedom.

“I’ll be happy here.”

I don’t know why everything I say makes Jefferson laugh, but at least his laughter doesn’t feel like mockery. If I make him smile, I’m happy.

“Wait until you’ve shared a bathroom for a week with Joaquin and me before you say that.”

Jefferson stares so intently I grow self-conscious.

And there’s so much to think about that my mind reels from one subject to another.

“I’m going to pull my weight, you know.”

His heavy brows come together. “What?”

“I think I’d like to go to nursing school. I hear nursing pays well? Don’t worry, you don’t have to pay for my education. I’m very industrious. And I can cook. If money’s

tight, I can whip up a cabbage stew that'll blow your socks off."

A smile plays on his lips. "Georgie, what are you doing? Giving me your resume?"

I stare at the ceiling, my tongue wagging as ideas fall from the sky. "I can work at a garden center and save money for nursing school. Or I could work at a garden center during the day while I take nursing classes at night..."

My voice trails off when his hand squeezes my hip, the sensation sending sexy sparks up and down my legs.

Jefferson reaches a hand up to my chin. "Georgie. Look at me."

He holds me still, with his big, rough hand cupping my jaw, forcing me to look him in the eye.

I blink. "Sorry. I haven't figured anything out yet, financially speaking."

He gives my hip another delicious squeeze. "Stop. You don't need to worry about any of that today. Or tomorrow. Or next week. You only have two jobs. To heal, and to be with me. And after that, if you hate it here, you can go somewhere else. If you want to go stay with Olivia and company, I'll take you there. Hell, I won't stop you if you tell me you want to go to another town, or to Brazil, for that matter. Nobody is pressuring you to contribute anything. And nobody is pressuring you to stay."

I nod, swallowing down the emotion in my throat that builds as a result of his kindness. But the other thing he said—about me leaving if I want to leave—makes me sad. He'd leave me at a hotel if I asked? Dump me off with the rescue group? He would not try to stop me if I wanted to go far away?

Well, what did I expect? A marriage proposal? A long-term boyfriend? He never

promised anything except to help me if I needed help.

“I don’t want you to take me to a hotel,” I say, my throat aching at the thought of being alone again. “And I don’t want to bring more trouble to my friends.”

He nods, still holding my face. His hand is warm and reassuring and steady.

“I just want to do things,” I add, my voice shaking. “I’ve missed ... doing things.”

His brow comes together in concern and I almost spill everything. “You don’t have to do anything. You don’t have to figure anything out. You just have to stay here. And not escape my sight ever again.”

I let his words settle over me. He has the same face I remember from 31 days ago, but he looks more drawn and weary. And his hair has been shorn. He looks so different.

But he’s the same person who made me feel wrapped in warmth and kindness. I’ve been dreaming of feeling like that again.

And now that I’m here, basking in those amber eyes, I don’t want to go without that feeling again.

“I promise not to run away,” I say.

Slowly, carefully, Jefferson’s hand moves up toward my ear, brushing my hair away from my face.

“I’m gonna get you a phone if you want to call Olivia and your other friends.”

I shake my head at the thought of leaving with them. As much as I appreciate everything they did for me the last time I got away, I don’t want to drain any more of

their resources. They're so busy making plans, I imagine.

"Soon."

I would like to see them at some point. Just not today.

He nods, then runs his hand down my arm from my shoulder, eventually taking my hand in his. My body tingling, I watch him lift my hand to his mouth, lightly brushing his lips over the sharp edges of my dry, cracked knuckles. I suck in a breath at the sensation. The skin there is rough from a month spent in the cold with nothing but a thin wool blanket. From drawing on concrete. From gripping the steel security bars in my cell window, hoisting myself up to try to see the sun.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"My hands...they're so dry. It's the weather. My whole body is like sandpaper these days." I rasp a phony laugh, knowing I sound like I'm lying. I feel ashamed at how I'm not soft and feminine. I'm thinner than I was, and paler. I'm skittish and scattered and I talk too much because I'm both scared of people, and yet starved for conversation. So many things have never occurred to me until this moment.

Jefferson doesn't seem to hear me. With eyes closed, he kisses each knuckle, one by one, caressing me with his lips. It's the sweetest yet wildest sensation of my life.

No one has ever touched me so tenderly.

Jefferson makes all the blood rush out to my farthest extremities, and back in, flooding my core with a delightful neediness. He makes my arms itch to hug him.

I want all of me pressed against all of him.

“I’ve thought about you every day, Georgie,” he says with a scratchy, emotion-filled voice that makes me swoon.

“I’ve been thinking about you, too. You literally kept me alive the last month.”

He goes tense. “What do you mean, kept you alive?”

Oh no.

“I can’t talk about that right now.”

“Georgie.”

“Jefferson.”

He sighs grumpily, and I smile.

Angling toward him, I say, “I don’t need you to get me anything to eat or drink. I don’t need you to worry about why I look different. I just don’t want you fussing over me. Okay?”

“Roger that,” he rumbles.

“And I don’t want you to look at me like I’m a basket case about to snap.”

“I’ve been worried. That’s all.”

“Well, I don’t want you to worry.”

I pivot some more, trying for a good angle without making it sexual. Although, all the sensations pinging through me would be okay with that, too.

“What do you want, Georgie?”

“I want to be close to you.”

“That’s easy. Come here, then. Come here right the hell now, sweetheart.”

His astonishingly strong arms angle me so that I’m fully straddling him. At the same time, he shoves the rickety table away, knocking it onto its side along with the empty plastic red cup.

I don’t care.

I can only bring myself to care that someone has called me sweetheart. I only notice the way my heart pounds at Jefferson’s commanding tone.

No one has ever called me that. Not even sarcastically. And no one has ever made me fall apart by demanding a hug.

Jefferson’s hands are on my hips, sure and steady. It’s still such a new feeling that I feel like a teenager getting away with murder. He touches me like he already knows my body.

He’s probably been with a list of women too long to count.

Maybe I don’t care.

Maybe he can teach me things.

I shiver as my arms circle his neck, and I melt against the solid wall of protection.

Jefferson exhales a low, satisfied hum, his breath wafting through my hair. He briefly lets go of my hips and lets one hand play in my locks, while the other caresses my spine. Slowly. Intimately. Making me sink deeper into him.

“I knew you’d be a good hugger, Jefferson,” I sigh.

Another low, luxuriating hum is followed by the words, “I’ve never been accused of that before.”

I giggle against his shoulder, which gets me a squeeze. Sparks shoot through me at every new touch, every possessive squeeze. “Then your previous girlfriends should have spoken up.”

He grunts. “No one asked for hugs. No one stuck around long enough for this sort of thing.”

This sort of thing? Hugs? Tenderness? It’s too painful to comprehend. I lean back. “No one? Not even one?”

Jefferson strokes one long lock of hair that falls next to my face, then tucks it behind my ear. It stubbornly falls away again, and he smiles. But there’s something hurt behind his grin. “My life has not been what you would call warm and fuzzy,” he says.

I nod thoughtfully, and his rugged expression softens. “Shit. I shouldn’t have said that,” he says.

“Said what?”

He looks down in embarrassment, shaking his head. “I can’t compare my life to

yours. It wouldn't be right."

I see. Jefferson feels guilty for bringing up whatever hardships he's experienced because he doesn't think they can compare to my own.

"Listen. My life sucks. Your life sucks. But now we're together, and it doesn't suck quite as much," I say.

It's a bold thing to say. It assumes a lot.

Sure, he's mentioned multiple times that he's not letting me out of his sight. But that does not necessarily imply we're an item. It definitely does not mean we're a permanent item. It just communicates that he cares, which is more than enough.

He is enough for now. And this moment of rare physical tenderness offers enough momentary joy to last me a lifetime.

His touch travels slowly, deliberately back down to my hips, gently gripping the flesh there.

"It definitely does not suck having you here with me. I tried hugging Joaquin, but he's not much of a hugger. He's more of a headlock sort of guy."

I can't tell if he's joking or not.

"Don't worry. He won't put you in a headlock. Unless you don't clean up after you use the kitchen."

I inhale deeply, inhaling Jefferson's scent of leather and spicy soap. I exhale out the misery of the last month, letting go of the cold and the grit and the loneliness.

“If your roommate is concerned about having an extra person around, just know that I can cook and bake. I can clean. I am really good at organizing and I’m very thrifty. I can make a couple of two-dollar cabbages last for three meals and...”

Jefferson’s bracing hands pull me closer, eliciting a gasp from me as something rigid presses against my core. My cheeks heat when I realize what that is.

He is a man with a massive erection.

I grow warm and strangely wet.

Jefferson is so close that his nose touches the tip of mine when he shakes his head in exasperation. “You gotta stop talking about cabbage.”

It’s hard to laugh, and it’s harder to keep babbling when Jefferson’s lips are on mine, his steady hands holding me against him so tightly I could not pull away if I wanted to.

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Chapter Six

Jefferson

I didn't intend to kiss Georgie.

Well, that's not true. Just not immediately.

The plan was to take her home and help her heal.

She has a long way to go, after all she's been through. And I don't have the whole story of what happened to her the last 31 days.

Not that I haven't thought about kissing her. Not that I hadn't spent many, many lonely nights fantasizing about losing myself in her. Taking her to my bed and claiming her. Burying everything I have in her. Giving her everything she needs.

But now, this woman I've been desperately searching for hugs me and clings to me. And now my desperation has shifted to a deeper level.

It tugged at my heart when Georgie started talking about pulling her weight. As if any of that matters to me. As if I don't want anything other than to protect her and never let her see the inside of that terrible place again.

I knew when I brought her here that being intimate should be the last thing on my mind. I knew I would have to set boundaries and stick to them.

But her pretty, pouty lips kept talking about stupid things like cooking and cleaning.

She hypnotized me with the delicate sprinkle of freckles over her nose. The softness of her hips. The pretty cords of her throat that bob with emotion.

I am too swept up in everything about Georgie.

Her lips are soft and tentative at first. She responds with trembling breath and the stillness of someone who's never been kissed.

I have to proceed gently with her.

I brush my lips over hers, letting her get used to this closeness. My hands move from her hips to her lower back, caressing the tight muscle there as I deepen the kiss slightly. I take her bottom lip between my lips. Tasting. Memorizing.

I know Georgie is aware of my erection pressing against her, just as I'm painfully aware of warm little tits pressed against my chest.

She pulls back for a moment.

"Jefferson?"

"What is it, Georgie?"

"I've never kissed anyone back before."

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does."

Georgie needs to talk, so she's gonna talk. "Go on."

She inhales slowly. "One time, one of the boys kissed me. We were in middle school. We liked each other but dating wasn't allowed. We were lining up for chapel, and when the teacher wasn't looking, he pulled me into an empty classroom. It all happened so fast I couldn't stop it. I didn't want to stop it. I wanted him to kiss me."

I nod for her to continue.

"We were caught when others in our class tattled on us to the teacher. Word got around, and I was punished with extra chores. The boy was threatened with shunning."

Wait a minute. "Shunning?"

She nods. "They had a trial and everything. But they eventually let him stay. We were 14 years old. If he was 16, they would have shunned him for sure."

"I don't understand what that means."

She shrugs. "They just...leave."

"And go where?"

"I don't know. They never come back when that happens."

"That's a fucking crime, Georgie."

She looks away. "The elders see young men and boys as competition. The more wives an elder has, the richer he'll be in the afterlife. So if there was ever anyone who showed interest in a girl, they ran the risk of being cast out."

I want to tell her how absolutely fucked up that all is, but I get the feeling she already knows that.

“I’m telling you this so you know why I’m so...weird.”

“You’re not weird...”

“That’s sweet of you to say. But if things...progress, and I seem immature for my age, that’s why.”

I angle her face and kiss her softly on the lips, then meet her clear-eyed gaze.

“So what you’re telling me is, you’re a virgin.”

“Shocking, I know.”

I honestly could not give less of a shit about that. I’m just happy she’s here, and she’s mine. But I’d be lying if I said some deep, dark part of me gets a small thrill that I get to be Georgie’s first. And last, if I have anything to say about it.

I kiss her again, longer. “Don’t be afraid to kiss me back if you feel like it.”

She leans in and meets my lips. She moves against me, and her touch is heaven. Lips brush as our hands wander. She softens under my grip. Her sweet scent fills my lungs. Finally, her lips open to me as her kiss grows and deepens.

My tongue slips inside Georgie’s mouth. She softly gasps, her body jerking, effectively rubbing against my rigid length.

I moan into her mouth, and she makes the sexiest little noise in return.

Every move and every moan from her makes me pulse painfully, my penis aching as it pushes against the zipper of my jeans.

My hands grip the front of her hoodie, “Too many layers between us.”

She quickly unzips and tosses the hoodie aside, then rests a hand on my chest. I work the buckle free from one of the straps of her denim bib overalls, and the front of it falls open at an angle. Underneath her overalls, she wears a shabby, long-sleeved white tee-shirt that’s loose over her frame. It’s ridden up on her torso, revealing her ribs.

I touch her bare skin there.

“Your hands are so warm,” she says.

I brush aside the material of her tee-shirt, revealing the thin cotton bra underneath. I drag my hand from her ribs upward, cupping her soft breast, running my thumb over her nipple.

“Oh...” The sight of her biting down on her bottom lip, her eyes fluttering closed, makes me want to lay her down under me and hike her legs over my shoulder. But I have to wait. I have to go slow.

“You’re so damn pretty, Georgie. You’re so pretty, you put the filthiest thoughts into my head.”

Blood rushes to my cock as she tilts forward, her body making more friction, tormenting my rigid length.

The pad of my thumb teases her tight nipple that’s visible through her bra.

She leans in again and kisses me with more confidence, her tongue taking its time. Exploring. Wanting.

Georgie tastes sweet like lemonade, and her feminine scent intensifies.

“What kind of filthy thoughts?” she asks breathlessly.

I press long, wet, hungry kisses along her throat, pausing briefly as I describe things to her, struggling not to get too graphic at first. She needs comfort and protection right now. She doesn’t need to jump into the deep end. Not yet.

“I think about getting all these layers off you...taking your pretty nipples in my mouth and touching your soft tits.”

“Oh,” she squeaks, her thighs squeezing me, urging me on.

“You like that?”

“Hmm, yes.”

Another long, wet kiss. Another teasing touch over her boob.

“I think about what you would look like under me. How you would look with your legs wrapped around me, taking me bare as I make you mine.”

Georgie kisses me with tongue, and with a sweet whimper that makes me ready to take her right here on the disgusting linoleum.

“I need to kiss you everywhere until my marks are all over you. So everyone knows you belong to me.”

“I want you, Jefferson.”

I hook my thumb into the flimsy bra and tug it downward until her gorgeous tit is exposed to me, letting me take her nipple into my mouth. Her skin is ridiculously soft as I suck and lick and tease. She writhes on top of me, moaning as her fingertips scrape over my shorn head.

I need those hands of hers everywhere.

Breathless, I pull away from her nipple, and she whines.

“You’re gonna make me completely lose control, sweetheart.”

Georgie’s eyes widen as she looks down at me. “Will you show me how? How to...touch it?”

I groan against her almost bare shoulder. “Why do you have to be so sweet?”

“Do you want me to be mean?”

Laughing, I say, “You grinding on it is mean enough. It’s torture.”

Georgie pulls back and reaches down between us. “I don’t like torture,” she says, reaching down and covering my crotch. “It’s a particular pet peeve of mine.”

I guide her eager hand slowly as she strokes me, working the meat of her palm slowly and firmly over the bulge in my jeans.

Sitting here with Georgie on top of me, my cock aching to be free, it’s all I can do to breathe.

“Am I going too fast for you?” Georgie asks.

“Baby, I’m afraid it might be the opposite.”

“What do you mean?”

“You...feel too good,” I say, fighting the urge to thrust. And I want to. I could, even with her sitting on top of me. I could make her fucking bounce on me and she wouldn’t have to do anything but hold on.

“Tell me what to do, Jefferson.”

My reply is a low, strangled groan. I’m lost in her kiss.

When she pulls back, she says, “Show me.”

“Soon. We should slow down.”

“Why? I want to show my gratitude, Jefferson.”

I press my forehead to hers and cup the back of her neck like I own her.

“No. You first.”

“Me first? What do you mean?”

It finally occurs to me, amid this wild fog of lust that’s taken over my brain, that perhaps she’s never experienced an orgasm before.

“Have you ever touched yourself, Georgie?”

She pulls away, and her brows come together. “Touched myself?”

“Did you ever find yourself thinking about someone late at night, alone in your bed?”
I whisper against her throat. “And you couldn’t keep your hands from finding their way down between your legs to get some relief?”

I can’t decide if Georgie’s pink cheeks are a sign that she has done this before and felt ashamed of it, or if I’ve scandalized her.

Slowly, she shakes her head but doesn’t look away.

“Do you trust me?”

“Completely, Jefferson.”

With a whimper, she stops caressing my crotch and circles her arms around my shoulders.

She gasps, her mouth agape in response to the touch of my hand between her legs.
“Oh...”

My hand delivers slow strokes, and I keep her mouth busy with my kiss.

“Is this good?” I grit out, fighting the urge to pop open the opposite strap of her overalls.

“Yes. Don’t stop.”

Cupping her pussy, I rub firmly over the front of it, finding just the right spot to make her gasp. To make her feel good enough to let go of what ails her.

“Oh my god, that feels good...”

My voice is an uncontrollable growl against her throat. “Is it making you wet, sweetheart?”

“Yes!”

I grind my palm harder over the material, barely believing she’s so sensitive that she’s enjoying this through her clothes.

Georgie shocks me when she comes with a loud cry, her thighs clenching, her back arching, her breast grazing my chin.

“That’s it...good girl...that’s my girl...come for me...I barely have to touch you to make you come.”

Her breath comes in short gasps as she rides out her first climax, eventually softening once more and collapsing in my arms.

“Oh...my...god.”

“How do you feel?”

She sighs. “That was...you were...”

All I can do is give a satisfied hum, inhaling the scent at the base of her neck.

We both freeze at the sound of gravel in the alleyway, followed by the chirp of a car’s automatic locks being activated.

“Shit,” I hiss as a pair of monstrous feet bound up the rickety back stairs.

Georgie slides off my lap, and I scramble to help her adjust her bra, shirt, and the strap of her overalls.

Two seconds later, Joaquin bursts through the door with three paper bags.

I recognize the logo on the front as that of the new Chinese place in town.

“What are you doing with all that food?” I ask.

Joaquin stops and stares at the overturned table, then looks at Georgie. He turns to me with an arched eyebrow.

I right the table, and Joaquin plops the bags down one by one. “You didn’t answer my text, so I got a variety. Kung pao, sweet and sour soup, orange chicken, beef and broccoli.”

When I look past him, I find Georgie in the corner, still fixing her strap, looking red as a tomato.

Meanwhile, her eyes are trained on the bags of food, and she looks like a prisoner of war who hasn’t eaten in three days.

I scrub a hand over my hair. “I’m an idiot. I should’ve ordered food.”

“It’s not your fault you weren’t raised right,” Joaquin jokes, then turns to Georgie and extends his hand. “Time for a proper introduction. I’m Joaquin. Welcome to the dump. You can stay as long as you like sleeping in a closet.”

Georgie shakes his hand and looks like she can’t tell if someone’s joking. I pick up a takeout box and hold it out to her. “Egg roll?”

She comes over and sits down on my lap again and takes one of the egg rolls out of the box.

“We can switch sleeping arrangements around,” I assure her.

Joaquin grabs chopsticks from the bag and starts eating the beef and broccoli right out of the box as he leans against the kitchen counter. “No can do, brother. Remember, I just rented out the second bedroom upstairs, and they’re paying me government contractor prices. I’m not switching up anything.”

I give him a stern look. “Then Georgie can stay in your room, and you can sleep on the magic sofa until we figure things out.”

He starts to protest, but Georgie cuts in. “No, I wouldn’t want to put you out, Joaquin. Thank you. I’ll be fine on the sofa.”

Joaquin shakes his head. “It’s in an office full of sensitive information. No way.”

I look at Georgie and tell her, “Don’t worry. We’ll figure it out.”

Joaquin and I take guesses about the new renter, who hasn’t shown their face yet. Georgie doesn’t seem interested in anything but food, putting away two egg rolls and half of the sweet and sour chicken.

After dinner, she insists on tidying up. Joaquin watches her, marveling. “Keep that up and maybe I’ll build an addition on the house so you can stay forever,” he jokes.

I snap irrationally. “She’s not here to be your maid.”

He holds up his hands in surrender. “Take a chill pill. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

Georgie turns from washing up in the sink, “I didn’t take offense.”

“I like her,” Joaquin says. “Hey, Georgie. Maybe you can teach Jefferson some pointers on how not to be so sensitive.”

“They really should never have taught apes human speech,” I say.

This joke goes right over Georgie’s head. “Honestly, I’m just happy to have hot water,” she says, smiling as she wipes her hands on a towel she found in a drawer.

Joaquin shrugs. “It’s not the biggest water heater, but it’s enough for a hot shower. As long as you don’t spend too much time in there thinking about your personal life, if you know what I mean,” he says with a wink in my direction.

Before I have a chance to feel mortified at Joaquin talking about his assumptions that I jerk off in a community shower—which I don’t—Georgie pipes up. “Oh really? I haven’t had a hot shower in weeks!”

Both Joaquin and I stare at her. I want to ask her again what the hell they did to her.

Joaquin rubs his hands together. “On that note, I’ve got work to do. You two enjoy.”

“Oh, I’m not...we’re not gonna...” I start.

Joaquin turns, heads out of the kitchen, and lumbers through the short hallway. “I’ll be in the office. With the door firmly closed.”

“Joaquin.”

“Have fun.” He closes the door that separates the office from the rest of the house, and I hear the lock click into place, followed by the deadbolt.

“It’s not like I don’t have keys if I wanted to get in there,” I shout after him. But why would I bother with going into the office when Georgie’s here?

I glance at Georgie, who’s smiling shyly and watching me expectantly.

Denying the desperate ache in my pants that hasn’t gotten any less desperate since Joaquin’s arrival, I motion down the hallway. “This way to the shower.”

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Chapter Seven

Georgie

The hot water streaming down my body feels so good that I have to bite back a moan, or else people in the house will wonder what's wrong with me.

I hear a voice on the other side of the bathroom door that startles me at first, until I remember that Jefferson said he was going to find me some clean clothes to wear.

“What?” I call out.

His muffled response is inaudible.

“Jefferson, I can't hear you!”

He opens the door at the same time as I lean out of the shower.

“I brought you some...oh god, sorry!”

He looks away and sets down a stack of clean clothes on top of the toilet seat.

“You can look,” I say.

It is perhaps the most brazen thing I've ever said aloud.

Jefferson turns hesitantly toward me.

I push the shower curtain open further.

He rakes his eyes over my body, making me shiver.

“I need you to show me which shampoo I can use. Can you help me?”

I know. I’m so transparent.

But I trust this man completely.

He tugs off his leather jacket, followed by his tee shirt. The muscles of his shoulders bunch as he moves, tossing his things to the floor. I take my first look at him shirtless, and there’s just so much to look at. He’s so much man in this tiny, steamy bathroom, overwhelming the space with its chipped tile and peeling paint.

“You’d better hurry before we lose hot water,” I tease.

Jefferson instantly loses his jeans and boxers and kicks them to the side. His rigid length stands at attention, thick and red, and I can’t take my eyes off it.

All of him takes my breath away.

He climbs into the tub and backs me against the tile wall, shoving the curtain closed behind him.

He reaches behind me and picks up a green bottle. “This okay?”

I look away from his deliciously broad chest and read the bottle of combination shampoo and conditioner. I nod shyly.

“Turn around,” he says.

I lift my eyebrows as I watch him squirt a healthy amount of shampoo into his palm.
“Are you sure? It’s a lot of hair.”

“I’m sure.”

Feeling giddy, I turn around and surrender to the moment.

He smooths the shampoo through every strand with his big hands, wetting all of it through from my scalp down to the ends. I would fall asleep from the sensation if I weren’t standing up.

The scalp massage sends tingles down my spine. I don’t care if he doesn’t wash everything perfectly. I also don’t care that a combo shampoo and conditioner never works on my hair, nor that my hair will end up a frizzy mess in the morning.

It’s the best shower of my life.

Those big hands sluice water through my hair, rinsing it as carefully as he washed it. He carefully wrings the water out, section by section. I can’t get enough of him babying me.

“Thank you, Jefferson,” I say, resting my head against the tile, feeling half-drunk with all of his attentions.

Soft hair tickles my back as his chest covers me. Luscious lips graze over the back of my neck, making me ache.

His hard length pushes into my lower back.

I reach behind me, fumbling around for a moment until I have it.

Jefferson sucks in a breath. “Shit, I wasn’t expecting that,” he rasps.

“Show me what to do.”

He rests his forehead on the tile above my head and plants his hands on either side of us. I am fenced in. The way he towers over me is delightfully protective.

“Baby, you just do whatever you want with it.”

“Really?”

“Really. Just don’t use your nails.”

I move my palm up and down his shaft. He jerks under the pressure as I work my slick hand up the underside, marveling at every ridge. Up and down I stroke, fascinated at the new experience, and gratified at knowing I could ever exert control over this powerful man.

“That’s it. That’s it, Georgie. You’re so fucking perfect.”

Up and down. Squeezing. Tugging. Making him twitch around me. Making him gasp for breath.

Suddenly, his release takes hold. His seed paints my lower back in hot, pulsing streams. His towering body tenses as he thrusts hard into my hand. A low growl echoes off the tile.

I keep on kneading him until he buries his face in my shoulder and groans.

Turning toward him, I search for his mouth in the steamy shower, needing to feel his lips once more.

He pulls me against him and claims my mouth.

The perfect moment is lost when I shriek at the abruptly cold water hitting me in the middle of my back.

Jefferson laughs and lets out a curse, slamming the knobs into the off position.

I barely have time to shiver before I'm wrapped in a towel.

He apologizes for not having a bonus towel for my hair, but I tell him I don't mind. I blot it dry and twist it up in a bun. I'll deal with the frizz tomorrow.

"I could look for a hairbrush," he says, clearly concerned at the amount of tangles in my hair. It is a lot. "I think Joaquin has one around here somewhere."

I laugh weakly. "Honestly, brushing it takes forever, and all I want to do now is sleep. I know it's early, but I haven't slept well in a month."

Jefferson helps me step into a pair of borrowed boxers. I don't even care whose these belong to, as long as I never see those bib overalls again. "You ready to tell me what they did to you?"

"Nope."

"Thought so."

"I thought you were joking about sleeping in a closet," I say when I see Jefferson's "room."

Dressed in one of his sweatshirts along with his boxers, I stand in the doorway, staring in surprise.

The room is about ten feet deep and five feet across. A mattress takes up much of the floor. In the far corner is a duffel, and on the wall by the head of the bed is a wall calendar with a sexy blonde model wearing nothing but a bikini. The model is draped over the engine of an old-timey car. I try not to take it personally, but a part of me wonders if blondes with bikini bodies are his actual type.

“Technically, it’s a storage room,” he says.

I nod and try not to freak out at the idea of sleeping in such a small space.

Sensing my hesitation, Jefferson says, “I’ll sleep on the magic couch.”

I grab his arm. “No! I can’t sleep in here alone.”

“The mattress isn’t big enough for the both of us.”

I don’t like to talk about the fact that my uncle once locked me in a closet for eight hours, and I’ve been freaked out by tight spaces ever since. On top of that, now I have extra isolation trauma to deal with.

“Could you humor me without asking any questions? Just for tonight. Tomorrow night, I might feel more secure being in here alone,” I say, knowing that is not the case.

Jefferson dips his head down and presses a sweet kiss to my forehead. “We’ll figure it out,” he says.

“Thank you.”

“First things first.”

I smile when he goes to the far wall and rips down the calendar with the bikini model.

“You didn’t have to do that for my comfort,” I say, sliding my legs under the surprisingly comfy blankets.

“Does it make you more comfortable?”

I yawn the world’s biggest yawn, stretching my arms so wide my knuckles hit the walls on either side of me. “Yes.”

“Good.”

I lie down and close my eyes, trying not to think about the small space. Jefferson spoons me from behind.

“Do you need quiet or do you need a bedtime story to go to sleep.”

“Hmm,” I say, half asleep and hunkering down into the pillow. “I think I’d like a bedtime story regardless.”

This hulking man who barely fits on this mattress on his own, let alone with a partner, slides his arm under my head, effectively forcing me to use his bicep as a pillow.

“Let’s see if I can remember a good one,” he says, kissing my damp neck.

“Tell me why it’s called the magic couch.”

He chuckles softly. “It’s not all that interesting. That sofa came with the house. It’s so ugly that it disappears against the industrial green walls. The clients who visit the office are usually here for Joaquin, and they are not exactly in a position to be picky about decor.”

I yawn again. “What does he do?”

“Not real sure. Like I said, I don’t ask him a lot of questions. My guess is either an international spy or loan shark.”

“Hmm.”

“Anyway, that couch is where we go when we need to think and figure out what to do when we’re stuck on a problem. It has magical powers.”

“Sure.”

“You’re too tired to argue with that, right?”

“Yep.”

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Chapter Eight

Jefferson

I don't know what time it is when Georgie wakes up in a panic, gasping for breath.

"Where am I?"

"Georgie. You're in my room."

I do my best to calm her down by rubbing her back as she sits up on the mattress, her hands reaching out to the wall to steady herself.

"My room?"

"No, baby. My room. The Dump, remember?"

She splutters and starts to sound more lucid. "Jefferson?"

"I'm here."

Her breathing slows, and she turns to me.

"You're here. And this is your room."

"And this is our bed. Breathe."

“Our bed?”

“Ours.”

Let’s be clear, I would never take advantage of a woman in a vulnerable state. All I intended to do was cover her back up and hold her tight to me until she went back to sleep.

But that’s not what Georgie wants at this moment. And I live to do whatever Georgie wants. Whatever Georgie needs.

I try to get her settled with me spooned up behind her again, but she’s not having it. She rolls over to face me, our arms and legs tangled together, and presses her soft lips to the base of my throat.

“Jefferson,” she whispers. “I need you.”

“You have me, G.”

I dip my head down, aching to feel those perfect lips on my mouth. To feel her fitted against me, warm and needy.

And dammit, I can’t help myself. She provokes the beast within with every kiss, and I growl against her skin.

Her soft, sleepy whimpers are too much for me. Her leg slung over my middle is everything.

“Need you,” she repeats, her smooth, perfect thigh sliding over my skin. “Need you to touch me.”

I nearly come apart when I reach between her legs, suddenly remembering that she's wearing my boxers.

I tug almost angrily at the waistband until she shifts upward and helps me shove the boxers down. I sweep them off and toss them aside, happy and relieved to have her back where I wanted her. As if those few seconds of lost contact between our bodies threatened to ruin my night.

I slide my hand between her thighs and cup her warm, soft pussy. She ignites at my touch, urging me onward with her clawing fingers on my shoulders.

The wet heat I find between her folds has my mouth watering.

Not that, Jefferson. Not yet. She's not ready for that. Soon. I'm happily satisfied with getting to know her body. Her likes and dislikes. What makes her cry out, and what makes her melt. I sink one finger into her tight heat, stroking in and out.

"You're so sweet and wet, Georgie."

"Yes," she gasps.

"Is that pretty pussy gonna come for me?"

Georgie answers with an unintelligible whimper.

"Is it?"

She hums, squeezing me with her thighs. "Yes."

"Whose pussy is it?"

Dazed and confused, she rasps, “Who...?”

“Who does this pussy come for?”

“I...oh...it’s for you...?”

“That’s my girl. She’s a needy little girl, and she comes only for me.”

“Oh ...oh my god...” she moans as I stroke in and out, stretching her inner walls.

Georgie whines when I pull out. “Don’t stop...please...”

Her fingers dig into my shoulders.

My mouth finds hers, and my tongue soothes her frustrated cries as the meat of my palm finds her swollen clit.

She cries out into my mouth as I work her over, massaging her there in slow, deliberate circles.

“Come for me, sweetheart. Now,” I murmur in her ear.

Her body seizes, and I muffle her cries with my hand over her mouth. Her honey drenches my hand, and I keep going until she relaxes into me.

I can’t wait until I can do everything with her. Take her outside and show her the world. Make her my wife. My forever person.

For now, I’ll take stolen moments in a closet. Whatever it takes to keep her feeling safe.

I lie there for I don't know how long, until I'm sure she's in a deep sleep.

Joaquin can't keep his big feet from shaking the whole house when he unlocks the back door. I didn't even hear him leave.

"Where you coming from?" I ask a minute later when I find him at the back door, pulling off his boots.

He gives me an uncharacteristically beaming smile. "Had a pretty big job."

I nod. "Cool."

Once his boots are off, he stretches, cracking his back and neck.

"Are you gonna tell me about it?" I ask.

"Since you might have a vested interest in this particular case. Sure. I got the guy they call The Prophet in the back seat of my car."

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Chapter Nine

Georgie

“That’s him.” My voice is a terrified rattle in my dry throat.

I never expected to be wearing boxer shorts and a pair of Crocs five sizes too big the next time I saw The Prophet.

In fact, I never expected to lay eyes on Orlyn Moffatt again.

I have so many questions. “Why is he tied up like that?”

With Jefferson and Joaquin on either side of me, I shiver in the alleyway with a blanket wrapped around me, staring into the back seat of Joaquin’s Lexus SUV. The Prophet lies there in the back seat, unconscious, with his hands zip-tied behind his back.

“He’s a slippery fucker. That’s why,” Joaquin says.

“And why is he unconscious?” Do I want to know?

Joaquin scratches his head. “Uh, because he’s more compliant that way?”

“Joaquin, did you kill him?” Jefferson’s question makes my stomach roil in panic.

“No, I didn’t kill him,” Joaquin says, sounding offended. “He wouldn’t shut up so I

gave him a night-night shot.”

“Shit. How much did you use?” Jefferson asks, tapping on the glass.

Joaquin shrugs. “A little ACP goes a long way for a skinny guy like that.”

“I’m sorry, ACP?” The only thing coming to mind is arroz con pollo. I have food on the brain.

“Acepromazine,” Jefferson explains.

Oh. I know what that is. This is not good at all. “That is the stuff they sedate pigs with on the compound. But that comes from the vet. Are you a vet?”

“Yes. I’m a veterinarian,” Joaquin says. “Let’s go with that.”

Jefferson shakes his head. “I don’t know whether to be pissed or impressed.”

“You were busy,” Joaquin says.

“Where did you find him?” I ask.

“That’s classified.”

I cluck my tongue.

“I had it under control,” Jefferson seethes.

I turn to Jefferson. “You had what under control?”

He doesn’t answer before Joaquin interjects. “You need to learn to ask for help

sometimes.”

“I told you, I had this.”

“You didn’t.”

I wave my hands around. “Children! Stop fighting and explain to me right now what the hell is going on? Joaquin? What do you mean Jefferson was busy?”

Jefferson clears his throat and I turn around to face him. “Well?”

“Joaquin is under the impression that I was so busy looking for you that I wasn’t focusing enough on finding Orlyn Moffatt.”

I think about this. “Is that true? Was I a distraction to you?”

Jefferson reaches a hand out to cup my face. “No. You were not a distraction.”

Joaquin coughs something that sounds like “Liar.”

“Shut up.”

“Why don’t you just say thank you for the help?”

Jefferson growls, on the verge of exploding. “Because I don’t need anyone’s help.”

“One victory in 24 hours is enough, don’t you think?” I remind him.

Joaquin pipes up with, “Oh, it’s still your catch, brother.”

We both turn to Joaquin.

He adds, “What, you think I want to get involved in all this cult bullshit? He’s your catch. You get the bounty.”

We both watch, dumbfounded, as Joaquin unlocks the car and slides behind the wheel. The man raises an eyebrow and revs the purring engine. “It’s not a Charger, but it’s a sweet ride. Get in, losers; we’ve got a delivery for the sheriff.”

We must pass a dozen campaign signs on our way to the sheriff’s department, advertising Elder Mark’s candidacy for sheriff. A dozen more signs read things like “Keep Polygamists Out of Office.” “No Polygamists in Darling Creek.”

All of it makes me want to vomit and wish I was invisible. I don’t want my friends and families persecuted for who they are, but I also don’t want to see someone like Mark Lund in positions of real power.

I stay in the car with Joaquin while Jefferson hauls the zip-tied, disheveled, and groggy Orlyn Moffatt to the county courthouse.

“I want my lawyer,” the oily fucker squawks as people turn to stare.

“Don’t care. I’m not a cop,” Jefferson says in a flat, lethal tone as they march up the steps.

After they disappear through the doors, I turn to Joaquin. “Thanks for helping him,” I say.

“Had to be done.”

“You could have collected the reward yourself.”

“I’m not a bounty hunter, but nice try guessing.”

“It was worth a shot,” I say.

He chuckles and fiddles with the buttons on the touchscreen until he finds the hip-hop station he likes.

“Can I ask you a yes-or-no question?”

“Sure.”

“Promise you’ll tell me the truth?”

“Hmm,” Joaquin replies. “That depends on if you’re going to try to guess my job.”

“It’s not about your job. I don’t think.”

“Fine. Ask away.”

“Have you ever killed someone?”

“No comment.”

“You agreed to tell the truth.”

“‘No comment’ is not a lie.”

“What about Jefferson? Has he ever killed someone?”

“It’s better if you don’t know the answer to that.”

I let that sink in. I wonder what my life will be like from now on, tied to someone who might or might not have killed someone.

“He’s dangerous, but he’s good,” Joaquin says after a while.

I turn to him. “What?”

“He’s a good guy and he deserves to be happy. He gets obsessive about his side quests—the latest being you—so you’ll have to pull him back once in a while to show him the big picture.”

I think about this. He’s talking like Jefferson and I are a committed, long-term item. I like how that feels. Yet, I think I can see the obsessive side of Jefferson that Joaquin is talking about. Can I handle that?

“Also, he’s rough around the edges. If he ignores you because he’s babying that ridiculous car of his, just kick his ass a little bit.”

I gasp. “Oh, I would never...”

“I mean that figuratively. He forgets to eat, and when he does, he eats like shit. So you’ll have to make him eat a vegetable every now and then.”

“I can handle that.”

“Jefferson wasn’t raised right at all. He was removed from his parents’ custody for neglect when he was eight years old. That’s where we met. We looked out for each other in a pretty shitty group home, and we’ve been like brothers ever since. He doesn’t usually get attached, but in the end, he always sticks up for victims. That’s also you.”

“I’m not a victim.”

“Whatever. I’m just telling you the way it is.”

“He’s a hero,” I say.

“Don’t tell him that. He’s too humble. He’s also driven, hard-headed, and doesn’t give a shit if he puts himself in harm’s way. That’s why I finally decided to do what I had to do.”

“Why was it better that you find Orlyn than Jefferson?”

Joaquin turns to me and says, “Because our man Jeffy finally has something to live for.”

I blink. “Which is?”

He throws his head back and laughs. “You, baby girl. It’s you.”

I turn away and face the courthouse lawn, processing what he just said.

“And he’s not gonna have you out of his system anytime soon. So I suggest you buckle up and make an honest man out of him.”

Jefferson exits the courthouse as half a dozen men in polo shirts walk in hurriedly, followed by a team of what looks like very expensive lawyers. My heart nearly stops when I see among the crowd the faces of my father, Uncle Nevyn, and four other elders from the church.

On the lawn, a small group of people have assembled, holding up colorful protest signs demanding that the polygamists leave Darling Creek. Some are pretty vulgar, and some invoke street justice.

“Oh man,” I say.

Word about Orlyn's apprehension has spread fast.

Remaining in this state of limbo, in hiding, while the tension grows and grows around town seems like the wrong thing to do.

I have to choose a side. Even if that means I'll never see my parents again. Or my siblings. Unless they decide to leave, it'll be impossible.

I open the door and throw my arms around Jefferson when he approaches the car.

"Baby, what are you doing? Get in the car," he says, squeezing me tight.

"I don't want to hide anymore. I want to pick a side."

With his hands on my hips, he kisses me. My lips have been missing that.

"Of course you're on a side. You left, didn't you?"

I nod. "But there's only one way to make sure I can never go back."

He waits for me to continue, urging me on.

God, I hope I don't have to be the one to ask. "They won't want me back in the church if..."

I wait, and the facts finally click in Jefferson's brain.

"If you get married," he says.

I bite my lip and wait for what he says next.

A smile creeps across his face, and he gestures with his chin in the direction of the courthouse. “Well, hell. Right this way, sweetheart.”

Chapter Ten

Jefferson

“This might be a stupid question, but how do we make it fit?”

Georgie’s cheeks are flushed; she bites her glistening bottom lip, already swollen and bruised from her relentless kisses. Not that I’m complaining. I’ll never complain.

“It’ll fit,” I say as I fist my cock, hovering over her on the hotel bed.

Joaquin drove us straight to this luxury ski lodge deep in the mountains following our quickie wedding ceremony.

I knew better than to ask too many questions. Such as how any of us plan to pay for a \$2000-per-night room.

The more I get to know Joaquin, the more I suspect he doesn’t actually need to live in a crap shack for financial reasons.

For now, I’ll let him be a mystery.

For now, I’m caught up in my pretty wife, who lies eager and ready under me. I take a mental picture of the moment: Georgie in a fluffy hotel bathrobe, her silky auburn hair splayed out over the Egyptian cotton.

“I like you.”

She giggles. “I like you, too.”

“Tell me if it hurts,” I say.

I’ve thought about this exact moment for 31 days — no, 32.

I tug the knot of her robe loose, then hook her leg around me. The tip of me brushes against her wet heat.

“Fuck...Georgie.”

Every inch of me is rigid. It is all I can do to keep from exploding at the feel of her sweetness taking me in, inch by slow inch.

Her strong thighs squeeze my middle as I stretch her slowly.

I watch Georgie’s face tense and soften, her eyes trained on mine. She runs one hand over my chest, and it’s almost too much. I grab that hand and link my fingers through hers, bracing it out of the way, next to the pillow.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No, baby. I’m just too crazy for you. And I want it to be good for you.” Hell, even these buttery sheets are turning me on.

Desire pushes me in deeper, and she feels so good. So fucking tight, warm, and wet for me.

I groan into her shoulder, inhaling the apple scent of her hair.

“It’s good, Jefferson,” she half-whispers. “It doesn’t hurt.”

I did right by her, preparing her for me.

My hand drags down to her perfect, round ass, squeezing the flesh there.

“I’m sorry I don’t have enough meat on my bones,” she apologizes.

I crush my mouth to hers. “I love you just the way you are, Georgie. Whether you’re twenty pounds underweight or have fifty pounds extra. As long as you’re with me and let me love you.”

Her eyes shining, she says, “Always.”

Emotion clogging my throat, I slowly begin to move inside her.

Georgie’s fingernails rake over my back as I push in and pull out.

My cock grows and twitches inside her as she clamps down.

I rake my teeth over one pretty nipple, sucking it into my mouth. Pulling. Teasing. Making her shiver under me.

I switch to the opposite nipple as I reach down between us and thumb her clit.

Her breath comes in quick rasps as her first orgasm rolls over her. She pulses around my dick, and I nearly erupt.

“You take me so good, sweetheart. That pussy takes me so good.”

“Oh my god, Jefferson!” Her eyes squeeze shut as she clamps down, her body rigid.

When she softens again, Georgie begins to move with me, rocking her hips upward.

The last of her fluttering release is the final straw, and I snap, exploding inside her.

I roar as my release barrels through me like a freight train. I can't see, I can't think. I can only feel the sweetness of my wife as I burrow in. I bury my face in her hair and breathe as if she's the only sustenance I need.

And she might just be.

"Baby...what are you doing?" Georgie asks a moment later as I ease my way downward, feasting on her soft belly.

"Cleaning you up."

She cries out in surprise when my mouth meets the front of her pussy. And then she melts when I introduce her sticky folds to my tongue.

"Jefferson," she says weakly, reaching down and running her fingers over my head.

"Pretty pussy," I murmur as I lick her clean. "Delicious."

She moans, rocking her hips up. At the same time, she grips the back of my head and presses down.

"Mine," she rasps.

I flatten my tongue and stroke her clit with it, working my wife into a frenzy.

And she's mine. Mine to devour and destroy in the sweetest way possible. Mine to put back together. Mine to worship.

Georgie comes harder this time, her throaty scream echoing across the room, her

sweet cream flowing down my chin.

Georgie wanted to come with me to the lobby, but I insisted she stay and get some rest. I'm not bragging, but we wore each other out last night.

As for me, I want to check out the pool and grab some snacks from the hotel lobby. After filling two shopping bags full of junk food, I wander outside to feel the sun on my face.

The L-shaped pool overlooks a cliff. The water is tempting now that summer in the mountains has fully taken hold. I wonder if the hotel has any swimwear we can buy.

I'm sitting in a lounge chair by the pool, eating a Twinkie and thinking about whether Georgie would like a one-piece or a two-piece, when the world comes crashing down.

"Hands up! Police!"

I shove my Twinkie in my mouth because I'll be damned if I'm leaving it unfinished, but I drop the other one on the pool deck.

Slowly, I raise my hands and turn in the direction of the voice.

Motherfucking Deputy Mark is there, his gun cocked, pointing at me.

With a mouthful of Twinkie, I let him know my thoughts.

"Now, Lundy. Let's not be rash and do anything to ruin this pretty face."

Although I don't resist, It takes three men to toss me into the back of the squad car.

Mark and some other dude I don't know are headed down the mountain before it

occurs to me that Mark may not be in his jurisdiction.

“Wait a minute. Where’d the third guy go?”

No one answers.

That’s weird.

Things are much, much worse than they were a minute ago.

And I left my phone in the hotel room with Georgie.

“Hey, guys,” I say from behind the wire that separates the back seat from the front. “I’m gonna have to ask you to turn around so I can drop my room key off at the front desk. Probably bad form to check out in such a rush from a swanky place like that. Know what I mean, fellas?”

The one not called Mark keeps facing forward, so I can’t see his face, but he answers me with a cold, blank voice. “We got the key from you. Stop stressing, big guy.”

They got the key from me while they were roughing me up.

Which means...

Which means I’m gonna have to fight my way out of this car to get to Georgie because this arrest is phony as hell.

It’s a setup, and I have to get out of it.

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Chapter Eleven

Georgie

The mountain view from our luxury suite is so high up that it feels like I'm on another planet.

Our wedding ceremony took all five minutes in the magistrate's office at the courthouse, including signing the paperwork.

The best part was doing all of this while knowing that my father, uncle, and a gaggle of other elders from the Covenant Kinship were one floor down, offering moral support to The Prophet while he was being booked in for impeding a murder investigation, and, hopefully, questioned in the murder of Elder Trace.

And now we're booked into the prettiest hotel I've ever seen.

I look down at the ill-fitting, borrowed ring on my finger—the best we could do on short notice. Joaquin came through on that part, too.

"I'm married," I say aloud, smiling at my ring.

No one answers because Jefferson has gone downstairs to check out the pool and find some snacks in the lobby. We made love three times last night, and I'm sore in places I didn't think possible until today.

It's a good sore.

Gazing out the window, I try to spot Jefferson down at the pool, but he's not there.

Strange.

Just then, the sound of the magnetic card reader outside beeps. I turn and smile as the door swings open slowly.

"Babe, I told you to wave up at me when you got to the pool..."

But it's not Jefferson.

My brain buffers at the sight of the limping man entering the room. "Uncle Nevyn?" I rasp. "What are you doing here?"

My rat-faced uncle lurches into the room. "Is that any way to greet family?"

I ease slowly backward, aiming for the desk chair where Jefferson lazily dropped his clothes and holster.

God, I wish I'd learned to handle something more powerful than a .22 caliber handgun. It's probably not that different? Let's hope. "How did you get in here?"

I try to remain calm, and not give away how scared I am at seeing him again.

"Your boyfriend was kind enough to give me the key. He said I should stop in and say hello."

"What a coincidence that we're at the same hotel," I say.

"Isn't it? So glad I ran into you. You left so quickly that you didn't make it to your discipline hearing."

My hands scramble behind my back, finally locating Jefferson's belt.

"Hearing? Aren't you supposed to have those before you get locked up?"

Nevyn leans against the mahogany armoire casually. "That's the thing about a private enterprise. We can do things our own way."

The sound of the retention strap coming loose gives me away.

Nevyn perks up. "What have you got behind your back?"

My body tenses. "Where's Jefferson?"

"He's been arrested for kidnapping, of course. Your dad is worried sick. Come home now, and he won't be punished for losing you. If you resist, well, let's just say he won't have much of a say in who you end up married to. Now, why don't you show me what you've got behind your back."

He doesn't know yet that I'm married. He comes closer, creeping in, and I know that look. He has plans for me. Plans for the kind of punishment my father never had the stomach for.

But I'm not a child anymore.

With Jefferson's .38 in hand, I point it at Nevyn.

"Where's my husband?"

He pauses. "Your husband? He's waiting at the temple. We've been so patient with you, dear. Let's not play this game any longer."

“It’s not a game. Where’s Jefferson? My husband.”

Anger suffuses his face when he realizes what I’m saying. He still doesn’t think I’ll pull the trigger. He still has plans to hurt me. Lock me away. Well, it’s not happening. Never again.

Nevyn lunges. “What have you done, you reckless little whore?”

The shot rings out.

My uncle jerks back at the impact of the bullet as it punctures his chest.

Nevyn falls to his knees, heaving. His eyes are surprised and enraged as he takes one last look, then drops.

I don’t move until I’m sure he’s dead. I nudge him with my foot, just to make sure.

“Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god!”

My hands shaking, I dig through Jefferson’s discarded clothes until I find his phone.

“Joaquin. Bring the Charger.”

Jefferson’s best friend growls. “Now’s not the time for a manual driving lesson. I’m kind of in the middle of something.”

“Joaquin! Will you just shut up and bring the Charger? You don’t want any blood in your pretty little Lexus, okay?!”

He only sounds halfway concerned when he asks, “What’s going on, baby cakes?”

I snarl at the nickname, finally losing my cool. “I shot a man! Jefferson is missing! And you are wasting time because someone heard the gunshot, and the cops are gonna be on their way any minute!”

Chapter Twelve

Jefferson

Too bad I'm not wearing any pants, because that's where I always keep a set of handcuffs, and, more importantly, a handcuff key.

But my dumb ass had to be gauche and wear a bathrobe downstairs.

I'm not that dumb, though, because I know from experience that a fluffy, draping bathrobe is excellent for preventing a car door from perfectly latching and engaging the central locking system.

I just hope I can safely roll out of here before the guys in the front seat notice the "open door" alert on the dash.

Fortunately for me, distracting Mark is easy to do, as I keep peppering him with questions.

"Where are we going, sport?"

"Shut up."

"Is it far?"

"I said, shut up."

“Aren’t you gonna read me my rights?”

“Shut the hell up before I pull over and beat the shit out of you.”

He’s taking the switchbacks faster than I would, and we end up having to swerve out of the way to an oncoming car. A very familiar-looking oncoming vehicle.

The big guy behind the wheel of a gleaming black 1969 Charger, with cherry red interior and custom panels, honks his horn as Mark drifts across the yellow stripe.

I have no idea why Joaquin is driving Sonja. I’ll have a million questions later, but at least I know he’s headed up the mountain to the lodge. Which means he probably got a call from my wife. I am equal parts relieved and pissed off. I need to be the one to protect her. Instead, I acted careless, and now this could be the end of me.

Calm. Must remain calm.

“How’d you guys find me, anyway?”

“Shut up.”

“You sure you want to go to all this trouble to harass me?”

The more questions I have, the more Mark is triggered, and the less he pays attention to the road. That last part is where I didn’t think this escape plan all the way through.

As we round a hairpin turn coming down the mountain, Mark turns to me and tells me one last time to shut the fuck up.

“Not very righteous language of you, Father Mark,” I say.

“It’s Elder!”

The other one shouts “Hey!” and lunges for the wheel.

The car swerves, crashing through a barricade. The deafening shearing of metal is only overpowered by the sudden, brain-rattling landing as the car comes to rest on a boulder.

A chorus of curses follows, letting me know no one was hurt.

Carefully, I peek over the edge. The car’s nose hangs over a gorge so treacherous, I might piss myself in terror.

“Well, it’s been real, fellas,” I say, easing the door open and leaning out.

The car teeters under the movement as I aim to step out.

Mark screams like a little girl. “Wait! Wait! You can’t get out! The car!”

The other one has gone silent, with his hand braced against the dash.

I’m considering my options. Step out and let the corrupt soon-to-be sheriff fall to his death, or wait for the cavalry, and my inevitable arrest for kidnapping, apparently. That is easy enough to worm my way out of since Georgie came with me willingly. But I know that in the end, this Mark guy will still come out squeaky clean somehow.

Apparently, they don’t know what to do any more than I do. Right now, these idiots are arguing over how to counterbalance the weight to keep us from plummeting to our deaths.

A familiar rumbling engine sounds behind us. A car door opens and closes.

I turn around to see the most beautiful sight of my life. Joaquin approaches as the Charger idles in park behind him in the road. He opens the trunk and takes out a tow strap.

The passenger car door opens, and an ashen-looking Georgie dashes out. “Jefferson!” My wife wants to run to me but then realization dawns on her face. Coming any closer to this cliffside is a very, very bad idea. She covers her mouth and tries not to scream.

“Georgie, I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

My wife covers her eyes as the car groans, and some rock gives way and tumbles down the cliff.

I could vomit. Everyone is freaking out except my best friend.

“She’s fine,” Joaquin barks, crouching down to attach the strap to the tow ring under Sonja’s front end. “Or she will be. I just needed to help her clean up her little mess.”

“What mess? What happened to her?!”

“Enough chitchat,” Joaquin says, grunting as he stands and makes his way over to the back of the cruiser. “Our new housemate is meeting us in an hour, and I don’t wanna be late.”

The cruiser’s nose tilts dangerously as I instinctively lurch forward, desperate to get out of this car and go to my wife. Mark and his companion curse as they uselessly punch at the protective bars, trying to get to the back seat.

I shout over the commotion, “You cannot be seriously thinking about using Sonja to tow this car!”

Meanwhile, the unflappable Joaquin smiles as he attaches the other end of the tow strap to the back of the cruiser. “Oh, ye of little faith. Would you rather wait an hour for a tow truck, or put your trust in yet more of the local law enforcement to get you out of this?”

“That’s not the point. The hook is for towing my car when she breaks down, not for pulling something in reverse! You’re gonna fuck up the front end, and...”

When finished, Joaquin wipes his hands and struts back to my car. “Brother, your priorities are fucked. I’m just trying to make sure no one else dies today.”

My stomach drops. “What do you mean, no one else?”

“I’m sorry,” Georgie mouths. “It’s all my fault.”

Perpetually unbothered, Joaquin’s laughter can be heard over the revving of the engine.

Boy, I can’t wait to hear the rest of this story.

Chapter Thirteen

Georgie

“Your keys.”

Joaquin tosses a fresh new set to the new housemate and gives her a rundown of the house rules. She is tall, blonde, leggy, and has curves that won't quit.

I'm not comparing myself to her; I'm just making an observation. I snuggle deeper into the blanket next to Jefferson as we sit together on the hideous office sofa. I bury my face in his shoulder, barely listening to Joaquin give the new renter the rundown of the house rules.

“Thanks,” she says. “You don't happen to have a first aid kit here, do you? I gotta change a bandage.”

That voice is familiar.

I look up.

The leggy blonde comes into focus. She has the eyes of a Smith and the swagger of a Barker.

I cannot process this. Not now.

“Do I have a bandage?” Joaquin laughs, pushing back from the desk and going to a

footlocker in the corner. He kicks the lid open with one oversized boot.

“You rob a hospital or something?” the woman jokes.

Jefferson notices me tensing up.

“What is it, Georgie?”

The blonde’s whole body snaps to attention. I wait for her to speak first when she sees my face. But she turns away from me, and instead focuses on Joaquin, who roots through the state’s largest first-aid kit.

I remain in silence and shock as the woman lets Joaquin help her replace a bandage on her lower right abdomen.

I haven’t had time to heal and process everything that has happened to me in the last month.

And on top of that, the last two days have held enough surprises to last me a year. I ran away a second time from the cult. I finally told my dad exactly how I felt about everything. I watched Orlyn Moffatt get apprehended. I got freaking married. I shot and killed my uncle. I’ve been interviewed by the state police and told not to leave the state, pending their investigation of the shooting. Oh, and my husband was apprehended on phony kidnapping charges and almost plunged off a cliff to his death in a car crash. And Elder Mark agreed to drop out of the sheriff’s race in exchange for Jefferson agreeing not to file charges against him for false arrest and arranging Nevyn’s intrusion with intent to harm me. Mark and Jefferson called a temporary truce, and I don’t know how I feel about that.

And the hits just keep on coming.

All patched up and covered up, the blonde woman thanks Joaquin for his help. Her tone is different. More professional and confident than I remember. But it's definitely her.

"Wynella?"

She sighs, and finally meets my gaze. "Yep."

She looks way more comfortable in the tight jeans, boots, and low-cut top than she ever looked in her Discipline Center uniform.

"Care to explain yourself?"

"No," she answers flatly.

"You two know each other?" Joaquin and Jefferson say this practically in sync.

Everyone's eyes are on me.

"Wynella?" Joaquin interjects. "That's not the name I have on the paperwork."

Something fishy is going on here.

"What are you doing here? What's going on?"

"I'm just in town to run some errands," she says.

I'm not buying it. "Bullshit. Why are you dressed like that? Where's your chaperone? Why in the hell is Joaquin giving you keys?"

"I have special privileges. The less you know about it, the better," she says.

“Again, bullshit.”

She shifts her eyes around the room, then turns to Joaquin. “I gotta go rest up.”

She’s about to head down the hallway and out of my sight, but I have had it with people thinking I can’t handle the truth.

“Why did you leave the cell door open?”

She pauses and then curses softly under her breath. Finally, she admits, “Because it didn’t matter. Your dad was on his way to pick you up.”

Okay. Now we’re getting somewhere. “Why didn’t you tell anyone I stabbed you?”

Jefferson flinches. “Excuse me?”

“Little Georgie stabbed you? No way!” Joaquin exclaims. “Wait, don’t say anything else yet, I’m going to pop some popcorn.”

I hear the back door open and close. Wynella darts out the front door.

“Wait!”

The moment is lost. Evidently, she doesn’t want to be seen by too many people. And I intend to find out why not.

Footsteps and shouting can be heard in the kitchen. The clamor gets closer, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

“Where is she? Where’s Georgie?”

I recognize that voice and stand up. The next moment, this shabby office is overcrowded with my friends.

Before I know what's happening, I'm being attack-hugged by Olivia, Louisa, and Goldie.

I fall to pieces. I'm so happy and so relieved to see familiar faces that my knees give out.

I let these brave, extraordinary, fierce women hold me up.

Amid the hugging, crying, and shouting, I catch Jefferson watching me from where he sits, looking like the cat who ate the canary. I know he called them. He's the reason they're here.

I mouth a "thank you," and he nods.

Joaquin is barking something about this being a place of business, but no one is listening.

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Chapter Fourteen

One week later

Georgie

Dad and I sit together in the gazebo.

The park is quiet today, and the creek that snakes through downtown sparkles in the summer sunshine.

A box of donuts from the bakery is set between us on the bench.

“So. You’re married now.”

“Yep,” I say a little coldly.

“Do I get to meet him?” Dad asks.

“That depends on Jefferson. You’re not exactly his favorite person.”

Dad nods toward an anti-polygamy sticker that someone has stuck to the railing of the gazebo. “It hasn’t been the most welcoming community, I’ll say that much.”

I give a rueful laugh. “Please don’t be a martyr. Jefferson doesn’t like you because I was in a fucking prison for a month, and you didn’t do anything about it. And you also were going to arrange me in marriage against my will.”

Dad sighs. “Swearing now, too, I see. Are you at least going to come to a Sunday service?”

“Never gonna happen,” I say.

He doesn’t seem to have anything to say to that, then nudges the box toward me. “You should eat. You look thin.”

“I’m getting better. Jefferson takes good care of me. You don’t have to worry about that.”

I finally look over at his face when he’s silent for a long time. I’m shocked to see him wipe a tear from the corner of his eye. “I’m sorry, Georgie.”

“Dad.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t take care of you.”

I’m not going to cry right now. I refuse.

“It’s not too late,” I say.

He shakes his head and tries to cover up his emotions by clearing his throat.

“It is too late,” he says. “I lost you.”

You didn’t. Or, you won’t. If you want to do better.”

Dad continues to shake his head in regret. “I’m in too deep. There’s nothing I can do.”

“You can make a statement to the prosecutor. Tell them you want to testify against Moffatt.”

“They’ll kill me.”

“We can protect you. We can protect the whole family.”

He calms himself, then stands up to shake it off. This man is not accustomed to showing emotion, and I almost feel sorry for him.

“Just think about it, okay?”

He looks out over the creek and nods curtly.

On the street, Jefferson rumbles up in the Charger and leaves it running while he walks up to fetch me.

“Ready to go?” he asks.

Well, this is awkward. “Um. Jefferson? This is my dad. Dad? This is my husband, Jefferson.”

That’s it. I’ve done my part. Now, it’s up to them to decide if they’ll ever have anything resembling a father/son relationship. My father bears the largest portion of that burden.

My dad turns and puts out his hand.

Jefferson stares at it, and the two of them shake.

No one throws a punch, so I’ll call it a win.

Jefferson opens my door with a blanket folded in half and draped over one arm.

He offers his hand. I take it and step out of the car.

The sun hits my eyes, and the sky is so big. The breath whooshes from my lungs like someone is pressing down on them like a bellows.

And then I get right back in the car.

The gazebo in cute little downtown Darling Creek was one thing.

I hadn't thought about being in the wilderness. Wide open. Under the big sky. I never thought about how it might affect me. Under lock and key, I'd wanted nothing more than to go outside and breathe in the mountain air. Now, I feel like I'm in free fall.

The vastness makes me want to run and hide.

As I look out at a grassy hillside, the sky is so big that I feel like the clouds could swallow me up.

"I don't want to go out there."

Jefferson pauses, not letting go of my hand.

"What's wrong, Georgie?"

"I don't want to go outside."

"Tell me why not."

His tone is even. No hint of shock or annoyance.

“I don’t know.”

He moves to let go of my hand, but I grip it tighter. “Don’t go without me.”

“Georgie. I’m not leaving. I’m getting back into the car to sit with you.”

I nod and try to breathe as my hand slips from his. I avoid looking at the grass, sky, water, and hills. I simply watch him move from my side of the car to his side.

Jefferson slips behind the wheel of the Charger and shuts the door, then takes my other hand in his. Together, our hands rest on the gear shift.

He says nothing at first.

“I’m not sure what’s happening,” I say.

“It seems to me like you’re having a panic attack.”

“Okay.”

“With a sprinkling of agoraphobia.”

“How do you know?”

“Trust me. I know about these things.”

When the feeling of terror passes, I loosen my grip on his hand.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m starving.”

“I’ll be ready to go in one more minute,” I say.

“No worries,” he says.

Jefferson swivels in his seat and grabs the lunch cooler. “One sub with cheese, one with no cheese.”

“What are you doing?”

“We’re having a picnic.”

“But I ruined our date. You still want to have lunch with me?”

“You didn’t ruin anything. And to answer your question, yes. I want to have every lunch with you. I want to have every breakfast, dinner, brunch, high tea, and elevensies with you.”

I smirk. “Elevensies?”

“I have to keep my calories up or I get cranky,” he says.

Laughing feels good.

Celebrating and remembering feels good.

Today, though, we’re celebrating a win. My uncle, who’s long been the enforcer for The Prophet, is dead. I don’t celebrate the fact that I killed a man. But his reign of terror is over. Orlyn Moffatt is sitting in a county jail cell.

The continued upheaval in the church means Olivia, Louisa, Goldie, and the rest of the gang have been able to help more people get out of the church.

And today, the sun is shining. Even if I don’t want to go outside just yet.

I carefully unwrap my sandwich. My stomach growls, and I've forgotten what scared me a minute ago.

I feel better when the food hits my stomach.

"So. How long did they lock you up?"

He asks this abruptly as if asking about my favorite color.

I nearly drop my Coke.

"What?"

"You're shocked that I guessed right. You have that look," he says.

I swallow. "What look?"

"Don't try to deny it."

"Okay. They had me in isolation for a month."

"Fuck, Georgie."

"I know."

"I never went outside."

"What else?"

I dab the tears away but don't fight the urge to cry. "I want to fucking burn that place to the ground."

“I’ll help you.”

“I know.”

He already knows Wynella was my prison guard and the whole story about how I stabbed her. What neither of us know is why the hell she’s renting a room in town. But we’ve both already agreed that we need to find a place of our own. Living in a closet and living with Wynella are both untenable situations.

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

I nudge him with my knee. “We know why I’m weird. How about you?” The crying is starting to subside, and I manage to smile.

“You already know my story,” he says. “But it’s not as bad as yours.”

I shake my head. He knows how I feel when he talks like that.

A few moments pass, and we eat in comfortable silence.

Jefferson shoves the food wrappers, empty cans, and napkins into the cooler.

“Back to the closet,” I joke.

He laughs at my dark humor but drives us in the opposite direction from The Dump.

“Where are we going?”

My husband doesn’t answer until we’re parked in front of a sweet, modest house in a

leafy residential neighborhood of Darling Creek.

“What is this?”

Without a word, he tosses me the keys. “Our new house.”

“You didn’t,” I say.

“I did.”

I look from my husband to the single-story white brick house with a screened-in front porch. It looks older but well-kept.

“It’s so...normal,” I say.

“And no closets. Not a single one,” Jefferson says.

I laugh at this lovable fool that I married. The tender protector that I married. The hero that I married.

I look down at the house key in my hand and smile. “Let’s go take a look at our new life.”

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TEN YEARS LATER

Jefferson

I trace my fingers over the marks on the door jamb.

“Georgeanne, 47 inches.”

Below that:

“Nellie, 39 inches.”

There are so many more milestones that the marks don’t show, but I keep them all in my head to ground me.

It’s been 3,681 days since I met Georgie.

Three thousand six hundred and hundred and fifty days since we were married.

Our daughters are now ages 9 and 5, and it’s time to measure them again.

The house is quiet, which can only mean one thing.

I find my girls in the greenhouse with their mom.

Standing on her stool, Nellie wears safety glasses and rubber gloves while she watches Georgie pour a spicy-scented soap mixture into molds. Nellie has to be

involved in everything Georgie does. We don't let her handle the ingredients, of course, but wearing the proper safety equipment makes her feel important, and that's what matters.

Georgeanne, meanwhile, sits cross-legged on the old magic sofa while reading a book. My wife has made extensive accommodations for our daughters' comforts, as she spends so much time in the greenhouse and our little garden.

My wife loves having them near, but I try to lure the girls away occasionally, so Georgie can concentrate on her work.

"Hey, girls. Guess what time it is?"

The easily distracted Nellie turns toward me and hops off her stool. I laugh as she jumps up and down. "Is it time for the anniversary cake!"

"Almost. Aunt Olivia is bringing the cake in an hour, so you'll have to wait just a little bit longer."

She goes limp with disappointment. Georgie, finished with the soap for now, pulls off her gloves and safety glasses and laughs at our dramatic five-year-old.

Georgeanne rolls her eyes.

"I was going to say, it's Sharpie time."

Nellie perks up once again. "Sharpie time!"

Georgeanne sets down her book. "I guess I won't be finishing my book before everyone arrives."

"Come on, G," I say. "I'll let you ride on my back."

“Sure, old man,” she jokes, lumbering past me as if I’ve asked her to pull weeds in the hot sun.

Nellie grabs Georgeanne’s hand and drags her out of the greenhouse. We follow them outside across the freshly mown backyard, already set up with balloons, tables, and chairs for the tenth-anniversary party.

“Our oldest is quickly turning into a pre-teen, and I don’t know if I’m ready for it,” Georgie says when the girls are out of earshot.

“I know what you mean. She’s stubborn like her dad,” I say.

“Come on!” Nellie shouts, dragging our oldest into the house.

“And the other one inherited her flair for the dramatic from Uncle Joaquin,” my wife remarks.

“Did they RSVP, by the way?” I ask.

I open the screen door, and my wife fixes me with a look that says I ought to know better. “What do you think? Have those two ever told us exactly when and where to expect them?”

I shrug and follow her inside. “At least they always seem to show up when we need them.”

“True.”

“Are your parents coming?” I hold my breath. I’m still not the biggest fan of the people who raised my Georgie. But I want my kids to have a relationship with their grandparents, despite it all.

My wife shrugs. “I told Dad they were welcome. Mom’s still not talking to me. She holds it against me that none of the siblings are choosing polygamy.”

“Sorry, babe.” I rub her back.

“Let’s focus on the party. Okay?”

As if we conjured Joaquin out of thin air, I hear the familiar rumble of the Charger’s engine.

Nellie is at the picture window, shrieking. “Uncle J! Auntie Jasmyn!”

My best friend scoops up our little one for a bear hug. Not even Georgeanne can hide her excitement as she goes in for a hug from her Auntie Jasmyn.

“How’ve you been brother?” Joaquin asks with a side hug as he holds Nellie with one arm.

“Great. How’s Sonja?”

He laughs. “Oh, I’m also good. Thanks for asking, jerk.”

Nellie taps her oversized uncle on the chest and gives him a withering look. “That’s a bad word, and now you have to put a dollar in the swear jar.”

“A whole dollar? The price went up since last time,” he says.

Nellie shrugs. “Inflation.”

Sometimes I still can’t believe I gave Sonja away as a wedding present to those two. But I’ve traded my sweet ride for a minivan. I console myself that it’s much safer, and I must admit I’m spoiled by the backup camera and other modern features.

“We were just about to measure the girls’ heights,” Georgie says. “Jefferson thinks they’ve grown since their birthdays.”

“Oh yeah!” Nellie shouts. “Put me down, Uncle J!”

Suddenly feeling competitive with her sibling, Georgeanne lines up first with her back against the door jamb of the hall closet.

Nellie pouts. “Me first!”

Georgeanne smirks. “Beat it, shrimp.”

“Daddy! She called me a name!”

“Don’t be a tattler,” Georgie admonishes.

I squat down so I can speak face-to-face with our five-year-old and whisper. “You tattler all you want, as loud as you want. That’s how we’ll know if you ever need help. Okay?”

She nods.

I look up at my wife, and all the adults in the room exchange looks.

“Your father’s right,” Georgie says.

Silence is compliance, after all. In the end, speaking out saved the day.

Jasmyn takes the Sharpie from me and draws the line over Georgeanne’s head. Nellie and Georgeanne switch places, and this time Joaquin does the honors.

Georgie remarks, “You were right, Jefferson. They’ve each grown a whole inch

already. Wow.”

Joaquin looks like an idea has occurred to him, and he hands me the keys to the Charger and winks. He then turns to the girls and claps his hands. “I think I saw a trampoline out back. Let’s go bounce.”

The girls and their favorite aunt and uncle head to the backyard. Georgie and I stay back.

My wife spies the keys in my hands. She plucks them up and waves them in the air.

“Wanna go for a drive?”

She doesn’t have to ask me twice.

We don’t make it out of the driveway. I don’t have any desire to go anywhere but home.

Instead, I ease the seat back and drag my pretty wife onto my lap.

She laughs and shrieks, “Jefferson! What are you doing?”

“Making out with my wife,” I say.

I claim her lips as my hands plant firmly on her hips. Georgie sighs into my mouth as she not-so-subtly grinds forward.

“I love you, J.”

“I love you more, G.”

“I missed this car.”

“Shut up and kiss me again.”

Gladly. Anytime. Anywhere.

Georgie is my world, and I’m happy to lose myself in it. Forever.

THE END

Thank you for reading Taken by the Bounty Hunter! If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review.