



Their Stormy Reunion (Protectors of Jasper Creek #3)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: The boy who broke her heart is now the man who wants to heal it.

MICHAEL

I fell in love with Fallon the moment I saw her in Mr. Vandebroe's class during our junior year. I knew she was the one. But a year after we graduated from East Tennessee State, she had our entire wedding planned—and it made me feel like I was suffocating. Like I would somehow fail at being a husband. I loved Fallon, but the thought of starting a family... being a father, scared the hell out of me. I panicked, made the worst decision of my life, and lost her.

Now, after years in the Marines and finding a sense of purpose as a firefighter back here in Jasper Creek, I've finally figured out what matters. Fallon. She's back in town, and I'm not letting her go this time. But earning her trust—and her heart—again? That's a battle I can't afford to lose.

FALLON

I fell in love with Michael on the night of our senior prom when he made me believe in a world filled with care, love, and passion. I thought we'd go back to Jasper Creek after college, get married, and build the life we'd always dreamed of. Then, one devastating betrayal turned all that joy into ash.

I left town the day before our wedding, broken-hearted and determined to start over. Now, I'm back in Jasper Creek to help my mom take care of my dying father. The town still whispers about me, the runaway bride who left their golden boy at the altar, but I don't care. Michael and I know what really happened, and that's enough.

Or at least, it was. Now Michael keeps showing up, insisting he wants another chance. Has he completely lost his mind? Worse—why does my foolish heart want to give him that second chance?

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Jasper Creek, Nine Years Ago

I fingered the intricate beading on the bodice of my wedding dress.

So pretty.

Too pretty for something that would never see the light of day.

My throat burned as I choked back a sob. My fingers trembled as I zipped it back up into the garment bag and hung it in the closet right next to my prom dress. The sight of the two dresses side by side nearly broke me. One a reminder of the best night of my life, the other a symbol of my shattered dreams.

How fitting . A wet laugh escaped.

I made sure not to make any noise as I slid the door closed, terrified that any sound might make me lose my resolve. I turned and looked at the one lonely suitcase on the twin bed in my childhood bedroom. The room felt impossibly small, like the walls were closing in around me, suffocating me.

It wasn't much to run away with. Not anything like the trailer full of dreams that Michael and I had readied to move into the small house that we had saved for. It wasn't much, but it was ours. A house that would never become my home. I had a little bit in savings, not much, but enough to start over. Enough to disappear.

My palms were sweaty and I wiped them against my cargo pants, the coarse fabric grounding me. It was going to be hot tomorrow. No rain to dampen the perfection of

the day. It was the stuff of dreams. Now the thought was a nightmare.

I froze when I saw my reflection in my dresser mirror. My reflection stared back, a stranger. Bloodshot eyes. Tangled hair. Tear-stained cheeks.

The pain overwhelmed me as I realized I would never see Michael again. I choked back a sob, primal and raw. Why was I even considering staying? How pathetic would it be to go through with marrying him? To stand up in front of the town, knowing what I knew.

But I love him. I love him so much!

I squeezed my eyes shut as the confession slammed into me. No matter how hard I tried to suppress the truth, tried to suppress the pain, it tore through me. A flood of memories washed over me. His smile. His laugh. The way he would look at me like I was the only person who mattered to him.

Then the memory shifted. Darkened.

Michael. Lindsay. That kiss. The way he touched her waist. The door closing behind them.

My knees buckled and I sank down onto the bed. My arms clasped around my stomach trying to hold myself together, as if I could ever be whole again. I'd trusted him with everything. My heart. My hope. My dreams. Every piece of me.

If he could do that, then he never really loved me, did he?

I slammed my fist into my gut, trying to stop myself from throwing up, trying not to scream. I couldn't afford to wake my parents. Not when I was barely holding myself together.

I breathed deep. I needed to be strong. I was doing the right thing.

Maddie.

My maid of honor, my lifeline. I'd called her earlier, and when I'd told her that there was no need for her to come over in the morning for maid of honor duty, she offered to shoot Michael, and I think she was serious. I told her there was no need.

Then she said she was going to spray paint 'cheater' on the side of his car. God, I loved my friend. Finally, I got her to swear to secrecy.

I told her he was already dead to me, but she knew I was lying. She knew that I was just saying that because I thought I should. My best friend knew my truth.

Dammit, Fallon, get it together!

I swiped at my tears for the thousandth time and stood up, my legs like lead. I made my way to my childhood desk and looked down at my half-written letter. I'd started to write one to Michael, but each time I tried to write his name, I failed. It was too beautiful and sad a name to write, so I threw away those tries. Anyway, he'd made his choice, and now it was time for me to make mine.

But I had to say something to Mom and Dad. I picked up the pen to write something that would help stave off tomorrow's chaos. Give them some sort of explanation. But in the end I couldn't.

The wedding is off.

If I told them the truth, both of my parents would tell me to go through with the wedding. They loved Michael like the son they'd always wanted. He was the golden boy of Jasper Creek, and they would always side with him. Between Michael and me,

their favorite was sticking around.

Tears came again. Hot. Relentless. I turned back to the suitcase and zipped it shut with trembling fingers. Tomorrow, on that perfect sunny day, I would be gone.

And maybe, just maybe, one day, I would learn how to live without Michael.

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Chapter One

I looked at my friend and shook my head. “Zarek, if the Captain caught wind of what you did out there, he’d suspend you.”

“Who’s going to tell him?” Zarek stared daggers at me.

“I’m your best friend. Actually, I’m damn near your last friend. I think you need to take it easy with the assholishness.”

“Jesus, Michael, can’t you for once lose your temper?” Zarek glowered.

“Not in my nature.” I smiled.

It wasn’t. As soon as Rick and Nancy adopted me, I’d said goodbye to my rage. Done and dusted. “Let’s get back to the chance you took out there. You scared the hell out of me.”

“It was a calculated risk. If I hadn’t shoved forward like I did, the fire was more likely to jump that path, leaving Lucy, Dave, and Max exposed.”

“They could have fallen back. They weren’t in immediate danger,” I argued. “You should have only made that move if they were in imminent danger.”

Zarek sighed. “Yeah, I know that. As soon as I did it, I knew it was a mistake.”

“It’s like you don’t give a shit if you live or die. I don’t get it.”

Zarek ran his fingers through his thick black hair. “Chloe left last week. She said she needed to get her head together.”

I winced. Zarek and Chloe were meant to be together. They’d been friends since childhood. But her second miscarriage had sideswiped her. Hell, it had hit them both like a ton of bricks, but Chloe?

“Where’d she go?” I asked.

“She’s staying at Evie and Aiden’s place since they’re in San Diego.”

“That’s out of the way.” I frowned. I knew Zarek. It would grate on his nerves that she wasn’t close to town.

He glared at me. “Thanks for pointing out the obvious. Anyway, I hear you have your own problems to deal with.”

“What?”

“Fallon’s back.”

I missed a step as we headed out to the fire station parking lot. “Excuse me?”

“Rumor was that it took her over two hours to unload everything from her fancy SUV into her parents’ house.”

“Shit, I didn’t know that Bob was doing that poorly that Isla needed help.” But come to think of it, I hadn’t seen Fallon’s parents in months.

“He must be. You know there wouldn’t be any other way they’d have Fallon living back at their place after what she did to you.”

I winced. Fallon had never had a good relationship with her parents. When Fallon and I had started dating I'd done everything in my power to smooth things over between them, but they'd cut her out of their lives after she'd cancelled the wedding and left town.

"I've told you, Fallon is a good woman," I said.

"Yes, you have." Zarek nodded and thumped my back. "And now you have your own set of problems and can stop sticking your nose in my business."

My parents always got up early. It was their way. I had the coffee made by the time Mom came out of their bedroom. She was wearing the same robe she'd had when I'd left home.

I pushed a full mug over the counter toward her, and she nodded her thanks without looking up at me. It stung, but I knew what I was getting into when I decided to come back home.

Mom had to use two hands to pick up her mug. Her swollen, knotted knuckles from the rheumatoid arthritis looked crippling, but I knew her, she was never going to complain. Never going to ask for help. But the fact that she let me move back in told me just how bad things had gotten.

"How's Dad?"

"I think today will be a good day," she murmured. "He wants to get out of bed."

Shit, didn't that just say it all?

"What are the doctors saying?"

“It’s complicated.” Her voice was so low it was almost lost under the hum of the refrigerator. She stared down into her coffee like she would find answers to my question.

I held in a sigh of frustration. For the last few years they’d tolerated my holiday and birthday calls. They never called me or asked questions about my life, but they allowed me to wish them well. They would always tell me what was going on in Jasper Creek and they never failed to tell me something about Michael Rankin. That would be the point I’d shut down, guarding the fragile pieces of my heart.

Three weeks ago in February, on Dad’s birthday, the call was different. This time it was just him on the line, and he was whispering.

“Your mother needs you.” His voice was labored and out of breath..

My heart had jumped to my throat. “What’s wrong with Mom?”

“She’s trying to take care of me all on her own. She won’t allow nurses in, and it’s too much for her. It’s time you came home.” Now he sounded like the father I’d grown up with.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked.

“The cancer’s come back. Worse this time. Your mom’s arthritis and constitution isn’t up to handling this on her own, but she refuses to see it. You owe it to us to help out.”

My hand trembled as I held my phone. “Dad, how sick are you?”

“I’m going to die,” he said simply. “When can you be here?”

The air rushed out of my lungs. “I-I’ll need to put my condo on the market and rearrange some things with my company. A month?”

“Not soon enough,” he snapped. “You owe your mother your help.”

He hung up and I cried for the first time in nine years.

“How is it complicated?” I probed. I kept my tone even, like I did when my software developers told me they were going to come in late on a deadline. The trick was to get them to explain things in their own way, then gently guide them toward a workable solution.

“There are too many doctors. They say different things.” Her response was quiet and she still avoided my gaze.

I turned to the refrigerator, where she always kept the bread. There was none. As a matter of fact, the contents of the fridge were dismal. I winced as I looked closer. I saw condiments and some leftovers that looked like they were from last week, at best. I turned back to my coffee on the counter.

“I haven’t had time to go shopping,” my mom snapped. It was the first time she looked at me. She looked angry.

Okay. Nothing new there.

“Would you like me to go to the store?”

“I’m more than capable of taking care of my own home. Your father should have never asked you to come.”

I took one of three overripe bananas from the fruit bowl and started to peel it. At least

it was something.

“Aren’t you going to say something?” Mom was working herself up into a good-sized mad.

“Is there anything I can say to make you less angry?”

Silence stretched between us, thick and heavy.

Good to see all those management training classes had taught me something.

After I finished my banana and threw away the peel, I saw the garbage needed to be taken out. Dad had been right to have me come home.

“If you give me a list, I can go to the store.” I kept my voice soft. Kind.

“You decide. You’re going to take over, anyway,” her voice cracked.

If it had been nine years ago, my mom would’ve spun around and marched out of the kitchen, but it wasn’t nine years ago. She slowly turned and walked slow and stiff out of the kitchen, her pain obvious. I preferred it when she’d marched.

“Why didn’t you call me as soon as you arrived?” Maddie Avery said as she came up behind me in the checkout line in Roger’s supermarket. “You need a wingman.”

I spun around and just stopped from squealing. Maddie wrapped me up in a huge hug, and I started to tremble. I hadn’t seen her face in three years. Three years too long. And after some of the looks I’d gotten as I went down the cramped aisles, I needed to see her smile.

“How did you know I was here?” I whispered into her ear.

“Roger called me. He saw what was happening.”

That made me tremble even more. I’d stocked shelves here one summer, and he’d always said I was his best worker. I’d looked for him, but I hadn’t seen him. Apparently, he’d seen me. And he’d done something to help me.

“Come on, let’s get your stuff on the belt, before Amanda pops her cork.” I looked up to see the young cashier glaring at the two of us. When I looked behind us, there was nobody else in line.

“We’re not holding anybody else up,” I pointed out.

“There could be somebody coming soon. It’s busy today,” Amanda grumbled.

That was a blatant lie, and I also saw her phone by the register, logged into some kind of video app. I started to slowly take my items out of the cart. Very slowly. Maddie chuckled and didn’t help me, instead she kept talking.

“So, how’s life in the big city been treating you? Last I heard, your consulting firm was developing some architecture with coffee programmers?”

I laughed. Maddie always asked what my company was doing to be nice, but tuned out my answers. “We created architectural designs by implementing Java-based solutions when we migrated the company’s outdated systems into something more streamlined based on their business needs. That was a long project.”

“How many people did you have to hire for that project?” Maddie asked, as I put the last two items on the belt.

“At the most intense phase of the project, we had eighteen. They were a good client.” I smiled. I wished every client was as easy to work with. The one I had now required

a lot of personal handholding. Coming home couldn't have come at a worse time.

“How are Mr. and Mrs. Frosty?”

I grimaced. That had been Maddie's nickname for my parents for years, and considering the shitty parents she had, it was amazing she had anything bad to say about anyone else's.

“They're the same. I'm trying to gauge how sick Dad is, and Mom's arthritis is so much worse than when I left.”

“Is she doing anything about it?”

I watched the bagger take care to gently place the eggs and bread in one bag. I swiped my card and took my receipt from Amanda. Before the bagger had put the last bag in my cart, I heard some new silly video playing.

As I left through the sliding glass doors, I waved up at the security camera and mouthed the words, ‘thank you,’ knowing Roger would eventually see that.

Maddie walked with me to my Audi SUV and helped me load up my supplies.

“So. Do you know if your mom is taking care of her arthritis?”

“I don't know anything. I just got here three nights ago. Mom's either freezing me out or angry as hell. She says that Dad wants to get out of bed. When I asked about his condition, she said it was complicated and too many doctors were involved. I'm hoping since Dad was the one who asked me to come home, he'll be a little less reticent to tell me what's going on.”

Maddie snorted. “Yeah, sure.”

“I don’t want this to be all about me. What about you? Last we talked you were dating a doctor in Nashville.”

“That didn’t work out. It took me four months to trust him enough to tell him the Avery Family saga, after that he pulled the dick move of being constantly unavailable.”

“Forcing you to break up with him, cause he had teeny-tiny balls.”

She sighed. “That about sums it up.”

“What an asshole.”

Maddie looked around the parking lot, then leaned in. “I’d ask about your dating life, but that’d be a snoozefest,” Maddie said as she rolled her eyes.

“That’s not true. I date a lot.” Even though there weren’t any cars around, I kept my voice quiet.

“Yeah. But have you gotten past second base with any of them?”

I shut the back of my SUV and turned to face my friend. “A couple.”

“Third?”

“One got to home plate two years ago,” I whispered.

“How come this is the first I’m hearing about it?” Maddie practically shouted.

“Be quiet!” I looked around again, but all the cars were parked closer to the store, so we were safe. “The reason I didn’t tell you was because it was miserable. Alka-

Seltzer gave me more of a fizz than that guy.”

“Then why in the hell did you sleep with him?” Maddie’s voice was fierce.

“Because I wanted to make sure my lady parts were still in working order.”

“That’s what vibrators are for. How’d you get rid of him?”

“I tried for three months, but he kept calling. Luckily, he didn’t know where I lived. I was trying not to hurt his feelings, and then it turns out the rat-bastard was engaged the whole time.”

“Damn, Fallon, you definitely need a wingman, and I’m here for you,” Maddie patted my back.

“Juggling Mom and Dad and the work project I have going on is all I can handle. I’ll be lucky to duck out for coffee.”

“I’ll come rescue you. I’ve so missed you.” Maddie wrapped me in another one of her warm hugs. “I’m going to arrange something this weekend.”

I cringed. “I don’t want to go out.”

“No, this will be a girls night in. You’ll be covered in Avery girls.”

“Oh my God, that would be great!”

“I’ll even see if I can talk Chloe into showing up.”

“What are you talking about? Why wouldn’t she show up?”

“I’ll tell you when I tell you the time and place.”

“Okay.”

I watched as she sauntered over to her Jeep. I hadn’t noticed her cowboy boots until just now. In my designer heels, I was going to stick out like a sore thumb.

I shrugged and got into my SUV and headed home, passing truck after truck along the way.

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Chapter Two

I made it three days. That was all I could hold out for before I found myself driving past the Vickers' place. They lived in a small house that was built in the nineteen forties. It used to have the prettiest front yard on the street, bursting with vibrant colors from Isla Vickers prized dahlias, but now it was overgrown with weeds. Mrs. Vickers used to invite me over for lemonade when her arthritis was acting up, and I would help her out tending her garden. Most of the time I would just drop by unannounced. But I hadn't been there in over two years.

I'm a fucking loser.

I saw Fallon's fancy SUV backed in, underneath the carport. Sleek black and chrome Audi. Four years ago, Maddie had let it slip, on purpose I'm sure, at Maverick's Bar and Grill how well Fallon was doing in Chicago. Back before everything had fallen apart, Fallon had done so well with her undergraduate focus in cybersecurity she'd had a lot of job offers. Before our wedding she was still trying to find one that would allow her to telecommute. Fallon must have taken something in Chicago, eventually starting her own consulting company.

I'd researched the hell out of it. It was the real deal. She had impressive testimonials on her website from heavy hitters. Hell, there was even a magazine spread in Tech Leaders to Watch . The photos of her made my chest ache. She'd always been beautiful but now she radiated poise and confidence. She'd carved out a life for herself and didn't look back.

That was my dirty secret. I stalked her company. Her success. Her life. She was my

drug of choice, a craving that I couldn't quit.

And now she was back.

It took a moment for me to realize that the side door was slowly opening. Fallon's mom came out, clutching her sweater around her, then opened the front passenger door of the Audi. She turned and said something, then Fallon and Bob walked out. Bob was leaning heavily on Fallon.

Shit .

This was not good. Bob was a big guy and Fallon was small like her mother.

I didn't think, I just acted. I was out of my truck and sprinting across the street before I knew what I was doing. All three people looked at me as I walked up to them.

Fallon noticed me first. I drank her up, not caring how I must look. But Fallon just stared back. No smile, no frown, no reaction, nothing.

"Michael!" Isla smiled. "What are you doing here? Did Fallon call you to help?"

Bob was grinning. "Fallon can't do this by herself. It's good you're here. Her mother calls one of those transport companies to pick us up for my doctor appointments, but Fallon was sure she could handle this on her own. I knew she couldn't. But now I see why she thought she had this handled. She called you."

Fourteen years dropped away and I was a junior in high school all over again, listening to Mr. Vickers belittle his daughter, just like he used to. I looked at Fallon. She was much better at hiding it than she had back then, but underneath her icy expression, I saw the flash of pain.

“Yes, she called me. I’m sorry I was late,” I lied.

I walked closer to where Fallon was standing with Bob’s arm around her shoulders. “May I?” I whispered softly.

She inclined her head, her movements measured and restrained. I carefully eased Bob’s weight off her shoulders and shifted him to mine. He wasn’t light, but I easily transferred him to the passenger seat.

“Are you coming with us?” Isla asked. I read her hopeful expression.

“Of course he is,” Bob said, his grin smug.

Again, I glanced over at Fallon. I waited for her to say something. Her expression was carved from stone. I was doomed.

“I think Fallon’s got it from here.”

“But, it’s even harder to get Bob up to the entrance of the doctor’s office.” Mrs. Vicker’s voice wavered.

Aw, shit.

I turned to Fallon and lifted my eyebrows.

“Michael is following us in his truck,” she clipped out. I wondered whether she used this same tone of voice when she negotiated with clients.

“That’s right.” It was a good idea. Being in an enclosed space with Fallon definitely wasn’t a good idea until I had my head on straight. God knew when that was going to be.

“Drive slow so you don’t lose him,” Bob admonished his daughter. “No Chicago driving.”

Fallon nodded, then went around the front of her SUV, got into the driver’s seat, and started the engine. I knocked on the window. She rolled it down. I whispered ‘sorry’ low enough so her parents couldn’t hear.

She gave me a tight nod, then the window slid back up and she slowly pulled out of the driveway. I could see her white knuckles on the steering wheel.

When I heard Bob start to lecture Fallon on how to drive, I turned and jogged back to my truck. When I climbed into the cab, I let out a long breath. I had no idea how I was going to fix this. None. But just because I didn’t have a plan, didn’t mean I couldn’t win the battle. And dammit, I was going to win Fallon back, even if it killed me.

What in the hell had I done to deserve this? After three days, I was finally getting a grip on Mom and Dad—why did Michael have to show up? I snuck a peek at him as we sat across from one another in the doctor’s office waiting room. He was sitting with his ankle resting over his knee, leaning back in the chair like he didn’t have a care in the world. His henley shirt was dark green and it stretched across his broad shoulders. He must have gained forty pounds of muscle since I’d last seen him. I never knew I was into muscles, but I was now. Then there was the blonde scruff on his face. He used to shave on the weekdays but not on the weekends and I could still remember how that stubble would feel along the inside of my thighs.

Get it together, Vickers! Stop with the sex thoughts!

I looked back down at the tablet in my hand and stared at the e-mail that still wasn’t making any sense. I was smart, everybody told me so. That’s why they hired my company. So, I needed to quit lusting over a cheat, and stay on point. But why did he

have to push my buttons like no man ever had? I felt sweat beading on the back of my neck. I needed bourbon and my vibrator, but I sure as hell wasn't going to use my toy while I was at my parents' house. Well, there was always the old-fashioned way, no batteries needed.

I looked up at him again, trying to think negative thoughts. The jerk had been outside the house like some kind of stalker. How in the hell did he know I was home?

"A friend's mother came here. They really helped her." Michael said. He kept his voice low, even though the only other people in there were involved in their own deep conversation.

"Huh?"

"I just wanted to let you know that this is a really good facility."

Okay. Good. This is good. I can concentrate on this.

As soon as Mom had told me we were coming to the Cancer Institute at Knoxville's UT Medical Center, I'd done a hell of a lot of online research. Michael was right. It was top-notch. I'd also done a deep dive on Dad's oncologist. Dr. Patel had received her degree in medicine from the University of Michigan. I had no idea if it mattered, but the school did a lot of research in oncology, hopefully it rubbed off.

"Fallon?"

"Yeah, I read up on this place. You're right, this place is great," I agreed. "So's his oncologist."

Michael dipped his chin and stared at me.

“Are you doing okay?”

Shit, he had that concerned look on his face. That pretty face. I looked back down at my tablet. Seriously, who was he to have that look of concern?

Remember, he’s a cheat.

Why in the hell was he pretending to be concerned?

“Why are you even here?” I gritted out the question.

Michael dropped his leg, planted both feet on the floor, and leaned forward. “I was outside your house because I just hoped to get a glimpse of you, that was all.”

“Why? That doesn’t make any kind of sense.” I could hear my Southern accent getting thicker. It always did when I was stressed or angry.

“How can you say that? Of course it makes sense. For the longest time you were the most important person in my world. I had to see you.”

Somehow, I kept my jaw from dropping to the floor. I have no idea how, but I managed it. I looked around and that couple was still engrossed in their conversation. I took a deep breath. “Michael, I agree, we did mean something to one another. You chose to destroy that. That was your choice. Once we get Mom and Dad back to the house, stay away. If you see me walking down the street, cross to the other side. If you come in and see me in a restaurant, turn around and leave. Am I being clear enough?”

Michael rocked back in the uncomfortable chair and stared at me. He finally spoke. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“As a heart attack.”

He rubbed his knuckles against his chin. The look he gave me was considering, not chastened.

Dammit!

“I’m serious,” I growled, trying to figure out another way I could make my point.

“Okay. You’re serious.”

“Michael. You killed us dead. I never intended to come back, but I had to. The decent thing for you to do is to stay away.”

“I heard what you said.”

Gah! I hated when he said that. That meant he wasn’t agreeing with me. This was his doublespeak for ‘I’ll do whatever the hell I want.’

“Michael, you owe me this.” God, was I whining?

“It’s been nine years, Sunshine.”

“Don’t call me that!”

He nodded.

He still wasn’t agreeing with me. He was just nodding, or saying ‘I hear you,’ but no real agreement.

The bastard.

“I know what you’re doing,” I hissed.

He smiled slowly, and I felt my bones melt.

My parents came out the door, back into the waiting room. Dad was in a wheelchair. He was looking even more tired than when he’d gone in. I could see that Mom was rattled. It had not gone well. Michael and I stood up at the same time. As soon as Dad saw us—okay when he saw Michael—he plastered a big smile on his face.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Michael. Damned doctors. Always poking and prodding. I tell you what, they’re damned vampires.”

“What did they have to say?” I asked.

He turned to me and frowned. “No need to stir up a hornet’s nest. I tell you what, since Michael’s with us, maybe we can go out. I haven’t had a meal out in I don’t know how long. I’ve been hankering for a bacon cheeseburger from Pearl’s. Maybe some onion rings and a shake.”

“Bob, honey, that’s not going to be good for your digestion,” my mom said softly. She was right; I’d seen the finely cut up chicken and applesauce she’d been serving him for dinner. Heck, most of it came back uneaten. Dad was out of his ever-loving mind.

“Woman, I know what I can handle.” He winked at Michael. “What do you think? I’m buying.”

“I’m so hungry, I could eat two burgers,” Michael said. “I sure hope there’s leftovers. And you better guard your onion rings, Mr. Vickers, those are my favorites.”

“What’s with this Mr. Vicker’s shit? You used to call me Bob.” Dad grinned again. “I

suppose I could share some of my onion rings with you.”

Mom looked at Michael like he hung the moon. I have to admit, I was pretty impressed by the way he’d just finessed things. He was not the man I remembered. But hell, Michael had been twenty-two when I had known him last. Now he was thirty-one. Apparently, he’d done a lot of growing up.

Michael helped Dad into my SUV again, and I drove us to Pearl’s, with Michael following us. Looking at the parking lot, I could tell we’d arrive before the lunchtime rush. I parked in the handicapped parking spot.

“What are you doing?” Dad growled. “This is illegal. You don’t have a handicap tag. Nash’ll fine you for sure.”

“Nash?” I asked.

“He’s the sheriff, but you wouldn’t know, now, would you? He’s been the sheriff here for the last three years.”

“Dad, I’m just parking here until Michael helps you inside, then I’ll park in another spot.” I kept my voice even, but it was tough.

“See, Bob, she’s going to obey the law,” my mom said soothingly, in a rare case of defending me.

There was a knock on the passenger side window. Michael was smiling as he opened the door. “Y’all ready for lunch?” he asked. “I’m starving.”

“Damn right I am, Son. But I don’t need your help getting out. I’m feeling pretty good today,” my dad told Michael.

“You can just use me how you want. Maybe just for balance.”

“Yeah, that’d be good,” my dad admitted.

I watched as Michael once again handled my dad with such tactful consideration that dad didn’t even realize he was being helped. Despite being so sick, Dad was still a big man, and Michael held his weight like it was nothing.

When Mom and Dad were out of the car, Dad rapped his knuckles on the glass. “Move the car, Fallon.”

I nodded. Finding another spot would give me some time to get my temper under control.

When I walked in, Pearl was already smiling and talking to my parents and Michael, then she saw me.

“Fallon. I didn’t expect to see you again.” Her voice was cold. Pearl was one of the nicest people in town. She welcomed everybody into her restaurant and having her greet me like this hit me like a punch in the gut. It was stupid of me to have thought I’d get any other kind of welcome no matter how nice she was. My bad.

I could only give a chin tilt in response.

“She’s here to help out at home,” Michael jumped in. “She had to close up her office in Chicago.”

I frowned at him. How did he know that?

“Well, isn’t that something?” Pearl said sarcastically.

“Give it a rest,” Michael murmured.

She shot him a look of surprise. So did my parents. Hell, so did I.

“Bob, what was I thinking? Let me get you a seat.” Pearl smiled at Dad. It was a genuine smile, one that she shared with Mom.

Dad had to lean on Michael to make it to a booth, where he dropped down with a groan. Mom slid in beside him, which left me sitting next to Michael. His big body took up a most of the space, and I found our shoulders pressed against one another.

I hated it.

I loved it.

“Holly will be here to get your orders, but in the meantime, what can I get y’all to drink?” Pearl asked as she handed out menus.

“I’ll have a strawberry shake,” Dad piped up.

“Bob, are you sure?”

Dad glowered at my mother. “I’m sure, Isla.”

“How about you, Isla?” Pearl asked.

“I’ll have an iced tea,” Mom said.

Pearl glanced at me.

“Same.”

“Michael?” Pearl’s voice was as sweet as the tea would be.

“Dr. Pepper.”

“Coming right up.” Pearl looked around the table and smiled at everyone but me. Which was fine. At least I knew where I stood.

My hands were clenched on the red Naugahyde on either side of me. I jumped when Michael closed his hand over the one next to him. I felt the same old spark run up my arm. It was the same hand that had promised me the world, then cruelly yanked it away. I wasn’t sure if the sparks were fury... or something far worse. I pulled away and glared at him.

“It’s going to be okay,” he whispered.

“What?” my dad asked.

“Michael was asking what I was going to order.”

“Chicken fingers with honey mustard and tater tots,” my mom spoke up. I looked at her in surprise. She had a stricken look on her face. Like she had taken the Lord’s name in vain.

Great, just great. Mom remembering my favorite meal at Pearl’s was some kind of sin.

I feel the love.

This time Michael just stroked his thumb over my fist. I didn’t look at him. I couldn’t. I didn’t want to see his pity. Or worse yet, I couldn’t bear to see understanding and empathy like in the old days.

This was going to be the longest meal of my life.

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Chapter Three

“No alcohol?” I asked as Maddie set down a gallon of ice cream by the blender, along with chocolate sauce, caramel sauce, strawberry sauce, bananas, and cherries.

“Bella’s coming, so this is going to be a G-rated girl’s day. Each one of us is going to take turns painting her toes, nails, and painting her face, so we can concentrate on you.”

“So who all is going to be here? Trenda, Evie, and the twins?”

“Just, you, me, Trenda and her daughter Bella, and Zoe.”

“What about Evie and Chloe?”

“Chloe is going through some issues, so she can’t make it.” Maddie turned and went to another cupboard and pulled out some marshmallows. I could tell by her voice she didn’t want me to ask questions about Chloe, so I let it drop.

“What about Evie?”

“She’s living in San Diego most of the time with her husband Aiden and their two rugrats. But they have a house here, so she comes and stays at least four times a year.”

“Two homes? I’m impressed.”

“Her hubby is on the same SEAL team as our big brother, but Aiden’s loaded. It’s a long story.”

“Somebody in the military with money, who would have guessed it?” I teased. “It’ll be good to see Zoe and Tenda and meet Tenda’s daughter.”

“Bella’s a trip, you’ll love her. She’s eight, going on twenty-eight.”

We both looked up as we heard footsteps coming up her front porch.

Maddie rushed to the door and opened it.

“Hello!” I heard Tenda call out. “We brought cake.”

“No, Mama, we brought cupcakes.” A little girl’s voice piped up.

I looked up to see Tenda Avery looking as pretty as ever, but then saw a mini version of her holding up a bag of chocolate chips.

“Whoever you are, little girl, you’re my hero!” I cried out.

She started to giggle. “Mama said you were funny. Are you Miss Fallon?”

“I’ll let you call me Fallon, if you give me some chocolate chips,” I bartered.

“I’m Bella,” she said as she skipped toward the kitchen.

“You’re as pretty as your mother, Bella.”

She put the bag of chocolate chips in my hands, then walked around me to give her Aunt Maddie a hug.

“Did you bake the cupcakes, Lovebug?” she asked.

“I iced them! Are we making milkshakes? Mama, there’s ice cream!”

I loved how everything was an exclamation. She took excitement to a whole new level.

“Auntie Maddie, are the ‘Owies’ going to be here?”

Owies?

Trenda must have noticed my expression. “That’s her name for Chloe and Zoe.”

“Nope, just Aunt Zoe. Why don’t you call her and see why she’s late.”

Bella hoisted herself up on one of the barstools at the kitchen counter and concentrated on her mother’s phone. It was obvious she was familiar with it, the way she breezed through the passcode and the contacts.

After a few moments she looked up at all of us with a frustrated expression on her face. “She isn’t answering.”

“Leave a voicemail, Baby,” Trenda advised. “Tell her she’s missing out on cupcakes and milkshakes.”

Bella brightened and started to do just that. Before she finished, there was a knock on the door. Bella jumped off the stool, ran to the door, and grabbed the doorknob.

“Hold it!” My head swiveled to look at Trenda, and she looked panicked.

The little girl jerked her hand away from the door and shoved it behind her back. She

turned to her mother. "I'm sorry, Mama. I know better."

"It's okay, Baby," Trenda said as she bustled to her daughter's side. "We just need to stick to the rules and always be careful, now don't we?"

"Yes. I'm sorry I scared you."

"Open up, it's me."

I grinned as I heard Zoe calling from the other side of the door.

"Now can I open the door?" Bella asked Trenda.

"Yes, you can."

"What was that all about?" I whispered to Maddie.

"We've had some problems around here, it's always best to play it safe."

"Fallon!" Zoe yelled. I turned and found myself enveloped in a huge hug. God, I'd missed these women.

"You look freaking gorgeous," I said when I finally extricated myself from her grasp. She was wearing skinny jeans, high heels, and a tight sweater. She was always my fashion twin back in the day.

"Is freaking a swear?" I heard Bella ask the room at large.

"Uh-oh. I think you're going to be owing Miss Bella some money." Maddie laughed.

"No, Sweet Pea, freaking isn't a swear, it's kind of like darn," Zoe answered.

Bella frowned. "It sounds like a swear."

"What would happen if I did say a swear word?" I asked the little girl.

"If you were my friend, I would tell you that swearing wasn't a good thing to do."

She sounded so prim and serious that I had to work not to laugh.

"Okay. That makes sense."

"And then I would try to help you not to swear anymore."

This time I saw a little twinkle in her eye. The same twinkle that every single other brown-eyed woman in the room was known to have.

"And how would you go about helping me?" I asked.

"Uhm, I would provide a consequent. A negative one," she grinned up at me.

"You mean a negative consequence?"

"Yeah! Like that."

"Hmmm, like you'd take away my chocolate chips?"

"No, you'd have to give me a dollar for each swear. Uncle Drake has needed the most consequents. Uncle Aiden needs a lot of help too. But Aunt Zoe needs more help than Uncle Zarek."

I burst out laughing. "Hopefully I won't be as bad as your Aunt Zoe."

“As long as she never hears you talk about Michael,” Maddie muttered.

I looked over my shoulder and glared at my friend. “I don’t know what you’re freaking talking about.”

Could I have fucked up any worse than I had five days ago? I was still busy kicking my own ass. Of course, how was I supposed to know that Fallon’s parents were going to be such assholes to her? How could they not see what I saw?

I squeezed my eyes shut as I cut up the carrots for the beef stew I was making the crew for dinner.

“Damn!”

I looked down at my bleeding thumb.

“Dumbshit.” Zarek shook his head. “I saw you close your eyes. Are you going for a Darwin Award?”

“Look who’s talking.” I turned on the cold water and ran my thumb under the tap. I’d only nicked it. Still, I could have cut the fucker off, considering how sharp we kept the knives here at the firehouse.

“I admitted my mistake, can’t we drop it?” Zarek bitched.

“Only if you promise that it’s not going to happen again. Is Chloe home yet?”

Zarek gave a deep sigh. “No. What’s more, Evie is due to come out with her kids pretty soon, and now Chloe is talking about renting a place in Gatlinburg or Knoxville.”

I winced, thinking back to when the Rankin's first brought me home after two rocky stints with foster care families. It hadn't been easy – for them – or me, but they saved me, literally saved me. I could have ended up being a man like my rage-filled father had been, but I wasn't.

And it wasn't just them, Chloe and Zarek had played a part in that, too. I'd never been to school before the Rankins took me in; my father wouldn't allow it, so I didn't know how to talk to kids, let alone make friends. But between Dale and Melissa's patience and Chloe and Zarek's friendship, I'd learned how to be someone different, someone better.

Now here I was, talking to Zarek about the possible end of his marriage to Chloe. I'd been an usher at their wedding, eleven years ago. No, it wasn't possible for them to divorce. It just wasn't.

I turned off the faucet and dried my hands. The bleeding had stopped. "There's not a chance in hell that she would really leave you. You two were meant to be together. It'll all work out," I assured my best friend.

I could see the torment on Zarek's face. "It's not that. I'm really worried about her. She needs to be talking to someone. A professional. She took this last miscarriage hard."

I put my hand on his shoulder. "What is Zoe saying?" I asked, referring to Chloe's twin sister.

"Zoe won't say much to me. She said it's the sister code. But she said that she and her sisters have Chloe covered. I sure as hell hope so."

"If they're saying that, you've got to trust them. Those Avery sisters stick together."

“Enough with me. What’s got you ready to cut off your hand?” Zarek asked.

“Fallon.”

Zarek nodded slowly. “I figured. Zoe mentioned that Fallon had her hands full with her dad. He’s always been an onery bastard. But her parents have always loved you. Have you checked in on them?”

“Yeah,” I admitted. I turned back to start chopping up vegetables again. “That’s why I slipped with the knife. I screwed up the other day. I helped Fallon get Bob to a doctor’s appointment.”

Zarek grinned. “I’m surprised that Fallon called to ask you for help, but the fact that she did is great news.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “That’s not the way it went down. I happened to be outside their house when I saw her trying to heft her dad to her SUV, and she was having a tough time, so I got out of my truck to help. Let me tell you, she was not happy.” I picked up the knife, lined up some carrots on the cutting board, and started slicing.

“What in the hell were you doing outside her house?”

I finished up with the carrots and threw them into the crockpot, then I started in on the baby new potatoes. I always got those because I didn’t have to peel them.

“I’m going to stand here until you answer the question.”

“Fine. I was hoping to catch a glimpse of her, all right?”

“So, my friend is now an official stalker. That’s great news.” Zarek ran his hand

through his black hair.

“I’m not a stalker, I just have stalker tendencies.”

“I fail to see the difference. And be careful with that knife.”

“Anyway, she definitely doesn’t want to see me again. I fucked up big time. It was just like the old days where her dad totally blew her off and treated me like their long-lost son. I just don’t get them. Do you know all the great things that Fallon has accomplished?”

“Yeah.”

“Really?”

“My stalker friend has kept me informed and shown me the articles he’s printed out. So yeah, I’m aware.”

Fuck. He’s right. I had done that.

“Well, she’s pretty incredible,” I defended myself. “I always knew she could do anything. Before she even graduated from college, she had companies knocking on her door to recruit her. It was that one app she created in her junior year that put her on the map.”

“Didn’t she have something lined up where she could work from home?”

“Yep. That was Fallon, she always had everything lined up,” I sighed. “She’s amazing.” My words echoed in my ears.

“Yeah. She is. It makes a man wonder why someone would have put on a bullshit

performance to get out of marrying her.”

My balls shriveled up. Why had I ever told Zarek what I had done?

“You didn’t tell Chloe, did you?”

“You swore me to secrecy, remember? I took that shit seriously. What’s more, if I had told Chloe, she would have told Zoe, who would have told Fallon. I don’t know what would have hurt Fallon more—you actually fucking Lindsay, or you pretending that you were going to fuck her.”

“Lower your voice.” I looked around the common area, and the only person who was there was Rick. He was engrossed in some true crime show, so I was safe. “Why are you here anyway? Aren’t you off shift?”

“I left some shit in my locker. Figured I’d come up here and bust your balls. It’s not like going home is any kind of treat.”

I thought about what he was saying. It was the truth. Most of Zarek’s outside activities were couples’ things, and without Chloe he was kind of shit out of luck. “Maybe it’s time to get a hobby. They do quilting over at Dorothy’s Antiques on Tuesdays and Saturdays.”

The look on Zarek’s face was precious.

“How in the name of all that’s holy do you know that?”

“I go in to talk to Dorothy Sheridan from time to time. She is a fucking hoot. Every time I go, I get a great story.”

“What do you mean?”

“So, I walk in and it was two days after her great aunt died. She was on the phone with her cousin, talking about the services. I offered my condolences.”

“Okay...” Zarek tilted his head.

“Dorothy tells me that her one-hundred-and-four-year-old grandmother is upset about her younger sister dying.”

“Well sure she is...” Zarek said again.

“But here’s the kicker. Dorothy grins at me and tells me the real reason her grandmother is upset is that her one-hundred-and-two-year-old sister never did take care of herself.”

Zarek burst out laughing. “No shit?”

“No shit.” I chuckled. “That time I bought some cufflinks for my dad. I always buy something when I’m in there. It’s worth it just for the stories.”

“Well, I might go in to peruse some antiques, but I’m going to skip the sewing circle.”

I wasn’t surprised. “You could always go volunteer down at the food pantry,” I suggested.

Zarek tilted his head. “That might work. Anything to occupy my time on my off days. The silence at home is killing me.”

I understood. That was the reason I had adopted Harley a few years back. With the acreage I had it made sense to get a dog. She had plenty of space to roam, and she was a great companion. But I didn’t think it was a good idea for Zarek to make a big

decision to adopt a pet without Chloe's input, because I was positive that the two of them would work things out. They were too perfect together not to.

"I've got to go. I'm going to the gym," Zarek said.

"What about the weight room here?" I asked.

"Nah. I'm going to Knoxville. See if I can get some time in the ring."

I frowned. Now I knew that Zarek was in a bad space if he needed to go to Cappy's Boxing and MMA Arena. Zarek was good, but some of the guys there were animals.

"Stay safe."

Zarek gave me a chin tilt. "Always."

I finished chopping up the potatoes and cubing the meat then threw it all into the two crock pots. I set the temperature, then headed over to the lounge chair where one of my two books was. I was lucky, I could tune out just about anything when I was reading a book, so Rick's show was easy to block. But my thoughts? Not so much.

What was I doing thinking about Fallon all the damn time? Hadn't I firebombed that bridge nine years ago? Shit, three months after I chased her out of town, I'd joined the Army. What did I have to lose, right? Turns out, you can lose even more when you're in the middle of some desert with men you consider your brothers, and everything falls apart. I was glad to return home to Jasper Creek after I'd put in my four years.

So here I am, doing something important, in a town I love. A town that considers the woman I love a pariah, when I'm really the asshole.

But this was my second chance, and I was going to take it. Fallon might not see it that way, but I did, and I was going to pull out all the stops to win her back. Zarek was right. Me confessing that I hadn't slept with Lindsay wasn't going to get me back into her good graces. It would piss her off even more. Instead, I would have to learn the woman she was now and get this woman to fall in love with me.

Chapter Four

Dad had been down for three days after the doctor's visit. Mom had been a mess. Neither of them would let me help with dad. Stubborn old fools. I'd heard him vomiting right after we had arrived home from Pearl's. It had continued on into the night. I'd made mom her favorite, pea soup and hot buttered toast for dinner, and she'd actually let me massage her hands. It told me just how tough things were going with Dad. Dad continued to stay in his room, and I did the best I could to take care of Mom. She didn't have much to say, but at least she allowed me to care for her.

It was after they both went to sleep that I would work on the big consulting project that I still needed to finish. I had kept my project managers, Eddie and Vanessa on as full-time employees when I had shut down my Chicago office. They were in charge of the seven contract developers, and it was my job to interface with the picky client.

I knew I was going to have to fly out next week for a face-to-face with Marshall and his Board. There was no way out of it. I'd take Eddie and Vanessa. We were on track to have a working prototype by then, if Marshall didn't change his mind yet again. But he and I had discussed that, and if he did, I'd have no choice but to put him on the spot in front of his Board of Directors. They wouldn't be pleased with him, considering how much they were paying my company.

My cellphone pinged with an incoming text. It was eleven at night. A little late for a Wednesday. Hell, a little late for any day of the week. When I turned it over I saw it was from a Tennessee area code that I didn't recognize. Then I read the text.

Unknown: How's your dad doing?

Fallon: Who is this?

Unknown: It's me, Michael. I guess you deleted my number.

Fallon: You think? Dad's finally recovered from his lunch at Pearl's.

Michael: Ouch.

I waited for Michael to text something, because I didn't know what to say to him.

Michael: I'm sorry I horned in the other day. I shouldn't have done that.

Fallon: Yeah, it wasn't your best move.

I watched the bubbles popping for a long time, so I knew it was going to be a long text.

Michael: When I heard that you were back in town, I had to see you. I've thought about you a lot over the years. I've even thought about going to Chicago, but I figured you'd just kick me to the curb, or in the nuts. But now that you're back, I can't help myself. I need to see you. I need to talk to you. I need to hold you. Losing you was the worst thing that's happened in my life.

I pressed my phone against my forehead, and my eyes got gritty. I wondered what I would have done if he had said this right after I'd left. Hell, even a year after I left. If he sincerely apologized and told me what had gone wrong, what would I have said? But I'm not twenty-two, I'm thirty-one.

Fallon: I'm sorry you feel that way. I really am. But too much water has passed under the bridge.

More bubbles.

Michael: I get that. But in the meantime, I think you need help. I know you probably have Maddie, but I know she has a big job. Will you let me help?

Had he hit his head and scrambled his brains at some point when I was gone? The man was coo-coo for Cocoa Puffs.

Fallon: That's the worst idea I've heard in the last two years, and I work with deranged clients all the time.

Michael: But you do need help, don't you? You can admit that, can't you?

I rolled my neck, trying to release the tension. It wasn't working.

Fallon: Yes, help would be nice, but I'm thinking about hiring nurses to come in and help. I can afford it, and they would know what to do.

Michael sent me the rollie eye emoji and the laughing emoji.

Michael: I'd like to be a fly on the wall when you suggest that to your dad.

The tension in my neck was spiking upwards into my brain. Great. Just great. I was going to end up with a hell of a headache.

Fallon: It's your fault.

Michael: What's my fault?

Fallon: The headache I'm getting.

Michael: I'm sorry. But Fallon, you know Bob will never go for in-home care. He wants family, or someone like me, helping him.

Yeah, because he was the golden child, unlike me.

Fallon: What about your job?

Michael: I can trade shifts if need be.

Fallon: I don't even know what you do. In college you studied forestry.

Michael: I'm a firefighter.

I frowned.

Fallon: How did you get into that?

Michael: After my stint in the Army, I wanted to come back home. It seemed like a good fit.

Fallon: Wait a minute, you joined the military?

Michael: Yeah, didn't you know?

Fallon: Michael, I didn't keep up on you. Hell, I didn't keep up on anything about Jasper Creek except my parents.

Michael: I would have thought Maddie might have mentioned it.

I snorted.

Fallon: Maddie knew better than to mention your name. Even when she came out to visit, we talked about what she was doing, her job and her sisters. Your name never came up.

I waited for a response. I thought he might have just stopped the text chain.

Michael: Maddie mentioned you to me. I looked you up. I watched your career take off.

Fallon: Why would you check up on me? That doesn't any make sense.

Michael: One day I'll tell you. In the meantime, I'm serious about helping. From what I saw you have too much going on. Are you still working?

Fallon: Yeah, I have a big client that my team and I are working with, I have to go out of town to meet with their board of directors next week.

Michael: How can I help?

Fallon: Why would you want to?

Michael: I like your parents, but more importantly, I want to help you. Will you let me?

Fallon: I need to think about it.

Michael: Look, I need to go. I need to catch some sleep. But get back to me, okay?

I ran my finger down my phone cradled in my hand.

Fallon: I will. Good night.

Michael: Good night, Sunshine.

Agh!

Fallon: Don't call me Sunshine!

I waited for long minutes. Of course, there was no reply.

I tossed my cell onto my bed and watched it bounce. Michael needed to quit calling me Sunshine. A guy I dated called me that one time; he was lucky he didn't get throat-punched.

I looked at my laptop and nothing on the screen made sense.

Dammit!

It was now eleven-thirty. I normally worked til one or two in the morning. I needed to test what the team had developed in the last two days. I knew my quality control people were top notch, but this was my brainchild, and nobody knew it better. Still, if my brain wasn't working, it would be useless for me to go through the code.

"Fuck me," I mumbled. It was just another black mark in Michael's ever-increasing tally. At least it was a mark in the con column, because lately there had been too many in the pro column.

"He's a cheat. That should trump all the pros!" I hissed to myself.

I went to my suitcase. I found my bottle of Angel's Envy. It wasn't their small size, either. I looked over at my old high school desk that I'd been working on, where my tall water glass sat. Why hadn't I packed a whiskey glass? I damn well should have. I'd packed good bourbon, I should have packed one of my engraved crystal highball

glasses, I swear my drink always tasted better when I sipped it from one of those.

I took my unopened bottle over to the desk, downed the water that was left in my glass, then opened the bourbon and poured in a hefty shot or three. After the first long, fiery gulp I could feel the world coming back into focus, and what a lovely focus it was. I glanced at my laptop and shut it down. There was no point trying to work tonight.

This time I took a small, savoring sip and smiled as I set down the water glass.

“Much better,” I murmured.

I picked up my phone and read over the text string. Yep, he was the same good guy I’d loved all those years ago, only hotter. What in the hell had gone wrong? I needed to go to bed and get a good night’s sleep.

He cupped my jaw, and I arched into the touch, wanting more. I hadn’t seen Michael for two months, and just the feel of his hand on my cheek was overwhelming.

“I’ve missed you, Sunshine.”

I loved it when he called me that. My hands dug into his waist, twisting his T-shirt.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“A friend loaned it to me for the weekend.”

I stared up at him, then rested my head against his chest so I could listen to his heartbeat. Every time I was wrapped in his arms, I felt loved. Even more than that, I felt safe. He was my anchor in the storm that was my life.

“Do you want to look around?” He whispered the question.

“Is there a bedroom that you want to show me?”

He squeezed me tighter. “God, yes.”

Michael kept one arm around my shoulder as he picked up my suitcase and led me through a cozy living room and down the hall to a dream bedroom. Dappled sunlight filtered from a skylight and four windows. The soft slivers of sun added depth to the handmade quilt that covered the bed. Two of the windows were open and brought in the fresh scent of pine.

“Do you like?” he asked.

I spun around and clasped my arms around his neck. “I love.”

His lips crashed down on mine, and fire scorched through my veins. His tongue thrust into my mouth and I moaned as I tasted him. So good. So damn good.

One hand scraped through my hair, pulling out my scrunchie, then his fingers tangled in my hair. I couldn’t tell if he meant to pull my hair or not. All I knew is that it felt good. My neck arched, then he started trailing kisses down my throat. I shivered.

I don’t know how, but suddenly we were lying across the bed, his weight resting on me. I gloried in the feel of Michael on top of me, pressing me deep into the mattress. I was bombarded with sensation after sensation. I lifted one hand from his neck, trying to figure out where to touch him, but he pulled both of my wrists upward, then caught them in one hand over my head.

“But,” I tried to argue.

“Trust me,” he whispered.

I was lost. I hardly recognized Michael. Who was this guy? This man? In two months, he seemed to have changed in ways I couldn't have possibly imagined. Assertive, and sexy. My eyes fluttered closed.

“Always. I'll always trust you.”

“And I'll do my best to live up to your trust. I love you, Sunshine.”

Michael's hand stroked down the side of my body, then inward, and he began to unbutton the wide, yellow buttons on my sun dress.

“I love your dresses. They fit you, Fallon. They're happy, like you are.”

“You make me happy,” I gasped. It was true. For years, I hadn't known what happiness was, then one day I looked up during high school English and saw him. It was like I put on prescription sunglasses. Everything came into focus and the color became bright and vibrant.

Michael's hand cupped my breast over my frothy pink lace bra. His thumb grazed over my nipple and I pushed up, trying to coax him to apply more pressure. He didn't... the tease.

Michael chuckled.

He knew what he was doing.

He pulled back the cup of my bra, then he lightly stroked his stubbled cheek against my furred nub, and I shrieked. The feeling sent me into overload.

“Like that?”

“I, I-I’m not sure.”

“Then let’s try it again.” He smiled. This time his cheek brushed harder against my nipple. I drew in a deep breath to let loose again, then his mouth covered mine as he pinched the same peak he’d just teased. I would have lunged off the bed, if he hadn’t been on top of me. The pleasurable torture was beyond anything I could imagine.

I would have pulled him closer, but he still had my hands locked above me.

After long minutes, Michael pulled back and looked down at me. His pupils so large, his eyes were almost black, instead of their normal gray.

“The way you respond blows my mind. You were made for me.”

I was breathing so hard, I could only push out one word. “Same.”

Michael gave me his wicked grin. The grin that always hit me between my legs, no matter where we were, or who we were with.

“Let me go. Please,” I begged. “I need to touch you.”

He did.

I tugged at his head, trying to pull him down for another kiss, but he didn’t budge.

“Michael—”

“Uh-uh. I want to play.”

“So do I.”

His hands moved around my torso and unhooked my bra, then lowered the straps down my arms. He lifted me up and soon my bra, dress, and panties were somewhere on the floor.

I shivered. It felt weird, with me being naked while he still had all of his clothes on. He rolled to his side. His hand began to trail lazy patterns all over my body. He'd start at my jaw, then traced a line down my throat down to my chest, and around my breast, ignoring my nipple, before making a languid trip down my stomach. He circled and circled and circled my belly button, until I was panting with need. I lifted up, wanting more. Needing him to move his fingers down. Down to my sex.

Michael chuckled.

“I don't like this game,” I grumbled.

“I love touching you, Fallon.”

Finally, his fingers moved, spearing through my curls and parting the lips of my sex.

“So wet for me.”

“Yes,” I whimpered.

I spread my legs, eager for him to deepen his caress.

He slicked my juices around my clit, playing me like a virtuoso would play their favorite musical instrument.

I moaned, pretty sure I pleaded for more. God only knew what I was saying. What I

was begging for.

Michael chuckled. Two of his thick fingers speared inside of me, and I exploded. My world contracted to one precious point before expanding to encompass the entire universe. Stars flew by me, each one the color of Michael's eyes.

I felt him lift away from me.

“No! Don't leave me. I need you inside me.”

He chuckled. “That was the plan.”

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Chapter Five

“Hey, Mom, how’s my best girl?” I asked as I walked up the steps to the wide porch. I watched as her brown eyes lit up.

“Give me some sugar,” she said as she held out her arms for a hug.

Grinning, I pulled her into my arms and kissed her cheek. After having just seen Isla Vickers it was amazing to think that my mom was close in age to her. She was so vibrant, she reminded me more of Fallon. Of course my mom wasn’t ready to kick my ass and bury me in the back yard.

“What has you grinning?”

“Nothing much. Just glad to see you.” I put my arm around her and opened the storm door to usher her inside.

“So, it doesn’t have anything to do with Fallon Vickers being back in town?”

Nothing ever got past my mom. I just kept walking beside her as she headed toward the kitchen. I zeroed in on the cookie jar. She was the only woman I knew under the age of ninety who kept a cookie jar filled, and my dad and I were damned happy about it. I opened it up and saw that she had my favorites. Oatmeal chocolate chip.

I grabbed three and had taken a big bite out of one before Mom could get a plate, napkin and glass of milk shoved in front of me. I smiled. I loved being home. I finished the cookie, and I asked Mom where Dad was.

“He’s in his study. He was on the phone with Rupert last I heard.”

“So he’s going to be awhile.”

“Likely. Besides talking about our investments, you know they’re going to talk about hunting and golf.”

“Never have understood how Dad could stand playing golf.”

Mom laughed. “I hear you. I still feel guilty that he had that custom set made for me, and I’ve only used it four times.”

“You go fishing with him.”

She nodded. “That’s fun. The quiet and the sun. It’s relaxing. Plus watching your dad relax makes me happy.”

“Yeah, it seems like he’s working more since he retired.”

“It’s not that bad,” she disagreed.

I watched as she put together two ham sandwiches. By the amount of ham and cheese she loaded on them, I knew neither of them were for her.

“What about you?”

“I already had a smoothie. You take this into your dad and pull him away from his computer.”

I walked around the island and pulled two beer bottles out of the fridge, then opened them. By the time I turned around, Mom had already put the two plates onto a serving

platter for me to easily carry into Dad's office. She didn't miss a trick.

I kissed her on her cheek again, then walked to Dad's office and pushed in his semi-closed door with my shoulder. Dad looked up at me with a smile on his face.

"Are you happy to see me, or the food and beer?"

"It's a toss-up."

Dad started moving papers and folders to the side so that I could set things down.

"God bless your mother. She always knows when I need feeding."

"Same for me."

Dad laughed. "Anytime you show up, you need feeding."

"I'm a growing boy."

"You're over thirty," Dad scoffed.

"That's my point."

Dad took the two plates off the platter and set them in front of us. I handed him his beer, then pulled out a chair, sat down, and relaxed.

"What brings you over?" he asked. "Usually you come on Sundays."

"No particular reason. Just wanted to touch base with the two of you." I took a bite of my sandwich and thought a little more. "Actually, it might have something to do with seeing Bob Vickers so sick. Damn, Dad. The last time I was over there was a little

over a year ago and he seemed just fine. Same old Bob, big and full of bluster.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard how sick he is,” Dad said after he took a pull from his beer. “Damn shame. I also heard that you helped him out the other day.”

“How’d you hear that?”

“I was over at the hardware store talking to Dave Draper. He told me he’d seen you with the Vickers over at Pearl’s. Sounded like Fallon was getting the cold shoulder.”

I shook my head. “It was Pearl. She wasn’t cutting Fallon any slack.”

My dad gave me a hard look. “How long is Fallon in town for?”

“She intends to stay until Bob gets better. Isla is in no shape to take care of him, and he refuses any kind of in-home care.”

“That sounds about right. So what are you going to do about Fallon’s predicament with the town?”

Shit, Dad never pulled his punches.

“I’m going to do something. There’s no way I’m going to let this continue. She doesn’t deserve it.”

“You never did tell me what you’d done to have her run away. Not that that matters. What was more important was why you did it. I always did want to get to the bottom of that, but you hustled into the military too fast for us to have any kind of conversation.”

I gave him a weary smile. “Are you accusing me of having run away?”

“If the running shoes fit.”

I laughed. That was Dad, shooting straight.

“I fucked up, Dad. I got cold feet and set things up so that Fallon would see something that would make her assume I was sleeping with someone else.”

“You pulled this the day before the wedding?”

I hadn’t heard that tone of voice from my dad since I’d taken Fallon to a party during our junior year, where I knew there would be drinking. He sounded just as pissed now as he was then.

“Yeah.” I nodded.

Dad pushed his plate with his half-eaten sandwich away from himself. “I figured it was going to be something like that, but even though it was nine years ago, it still disappoints me.”

I looked down at my clasped hands. “If it makes you feel any better, I’m pretty pissed and disappointed with myself too.”

Dad sighed, and I looked up at him. God. Now he had an expression from the past on his face. It was the one that always choked me up. How could this man always show me such love and compassion?

“Son, do you know why you did it?”

I rubbed the back of my neck and took my time answering.

“I’ve had a lot of time to work it through. Look at it from an older perspective. All I

can tell you is that my thinking was totally fucked up back then.”

“Is it still?” Dad asked quietly.

“No.”

“Did you talk to someone?”

My head jerked back. “Like a psychiatrist?”

“Nope. Just like the counselor your mom and I had you talk to when you first came to live with us. Someone who could untangle your emotions. Seems to me that some of what you were feeling went back to when you were living with your real dad and mom. What you suffered. What you saw.”

“Like I said, I’ve thought it through. I’m good.”

He gave me a long look. It was his old Dad-look, the one I got when I was a teenager, where I was sure he could see right down to the core of me. “Before you start up anything with Fallon, you need to be damn sure you’re good, you owe it to her.”

“I know. And I am. I promise.” Yep, I was definitely reliving my teenage years.

He continued to look me over for another long moment, then nodded. “Okay, Son, then you go after her. This time don’t let her slip through your fingers.”

“I don’t aim to.”

Dad passed me back the platter, and in the process knocked over a stack of papers onto the floor.

“I’ll get them,” I said.

“No,” Dad said sharply. “I’ll get them.”

I was already bent down and scooping them up. That was when I saw a handwritten note addressed to Dad. Not a normal note, but something written in big letters with a black Sharpie. I pulled that out of the papers as I stacked up all the rest.

Rankin,

You son of a bitch.

You think your so much better

then all of us because your rich.

Your not.

Your going to pay for what you did.

“What in the hell is this, Dad?” My voice was sharp.

“It’s nothing.”

I looked at the jagged writing and shuddered. “You told me that you’ve gotten threats before, but I thought since you retired that those threats had stopped. When did you get this?”

“Yesterday.”

“Have you called Nash?” referring to our town sheriff.

“For this? It’s just some nut job,” my dad scoffed.

“What are you talking about? How did you receive it?”

“The bank forwarded it to me. If it had come to our house that would have been a whole other ball of wax.”

I relaxed. Dad hadn’t worked for the bank in over three years. Whatever asshole had sent this didn’t know squat about what Dad was doing these days.

“Do you think it has something to do with your days as the bank president?”

“Yep.” Dad nodded. “I’d get threats now and again from people we were forced to foreclose on. We would always do our best not to have to do that. That was what your great-grandfather always wanted when he founded Rankin Savings and Loan. He wanted it to be a bank that would always help people here in Jasper Creek.”

“You still need to call Nash.”

Dad sighed. “You’re right. I will.”

I relaxed even more. “Do you think that the Bucs have a chance this year?” I asked, referring to the East Tennessee State Buccaneers.

“I’m liking the new offensive coordinator they brought in. I was thrilled when they stole him from Ohio State.”

I grinned. “Same.”

We both sat back and started culling through the Bucs’ roster, the letter forgotten.

Chapter Six

I stared at the latest lab results and doctor's notes from Dad's patient portal at the UT Medical Center. Mom had been more than happy to hand this over to me, claiming it was like trying to read another language. Even when she'd brought the printouts to appointments or called the nurses, the explanations only left her more confused.

I copied the notes into my AI program, typing out a prompt to translate them into plain English that even a stressed-out daughter could understand. This program was my secret weapon—a paid subscription with all the bells and whistles. I'd used it for everything from debugging a tricky piece of code to comparing the ingredients in high-end cosmetics and finding out what lower cost brands had the same ingredients. I'd even joked once that it was better than therapy. Now, it was my lifeline for Dad's care.

My heart twisted as I scrolled through the AI-generated summary. First off, Dad had been wrong when he told me he was “for sure” going to die. The doctors weren't saying that—not yet. The Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma was back, and yes, it was more aggressive this time, but they had a plan. They'd harvested stem cells from his previous remission and that would allow him to endure chemo this time without destroying his bone marrow. Yep, Knoxville's Cancer Institute really was the shit, just like Michael had said.

I fought back a grin when I read some of the things that the AI offered to improve his mood: hobbies like knitting or model-building, journaling, or joining an online support group. I almost snorted. Dad? With knitting needles? Yeah, that was going to happen. And journaling? I'd be lucky if he didn't toss the notebook across the room. I

guess that would be better than having him stab me with a knitting needle.

I remembered he used to be on a bowling team. The idea of his old bowling cronies coming over... that had potential. I made a mental note to check with Mom about which friends were still around and willing to visit.

When I read over some of his symptoms like mouth sores, itching and rashes, fatigue, vomiting, swelling lymph nodes that could be painful, or pain in his extremities, I just felt bad for him. He was going to have it rough. He'd only started the chemo three weeks ago, according to the doctor's notes he was only on his first cycle, and he would need at least five cycles. If he was lucky, maybe only four.

Fuck.

This was going to be a hard road.

I transferred the information from my laptop to my tablet so I could go to talk to Mom. Getting up from my old wooden desk chair, I grimaced. I so needed a massage or a chiropractor. Thinking about the setup I'd had at my office and my home office with my Aeron chair made me want to cry. Maybe I should just buy one and have it shipped here. Damn, if I was going to stay here for the long haul, I probably should.

Mom wasn't in the living room, dining room, or the kitchen. When I looked out in the carport I saw that her station wagon was gone. How had I not heard her leave?

"Isla! I need you."

Well, that I could definitely hear. I went down the hall and knocked on my parents' bedroom door. "Dad, Mom's not here. Can I help you?"

"Where is she?"

“I don’t know. She took the car.”

A coughing fit started, the sound ripping through the air like sandpaper against raw skin. I winced but waited it out. Each ragged wheeze made me want to storm in and do...something. Anything. Not that I had a clue what that would be.

When the coughing finally stopped, I knocked again.

“Dad, can I please come in?”

“All right.” I could hear the reluctance in his voice.

When I opened the door it took everything I had not to grimace at the smell of sick. You could tell that somebody had recently vomited in the room. That, along with the smell of sweat and dirty sheets made it impossible to breathe in through my nose. I saw that Dad was sleeping on the left side of the king-sized bed. The right side of the bed was carefully made, a silent testament to Mom’s vigil beside him every night.

“Can I open a window?”

“No, that makes me too cold.” His tone was curt. Nothing new there.

“During Chicago winters I sleep with a weighted blanket. Why don’t I order you one of those to try, then you can have the window open? It’s May, so we’re having nice nights.”

“What in the hell is a weighted blanket?”

Yep, I remembered that scowl. It had been pointed my way for years.

“It’s really soft on the outside and has plastic pellets on the inside that will apply

more weight on you, making you warmer. It's great," I grinned. Hopefully my speech would convince him.

"Pellets? Why in the hell would I want to lay under something that is basically a bean bag chair? Think about it, Fallon, that's just not logical."

Dad's face, which used to be ruddy with health, was now pale and thin as he berated me. Somehow, his putdown didn't have the same effect. I couldn't tell if it was because he seemed so much weaker, or if I finally had my head screwed on straight.

"All I can tell you is that it works for me and tens of thousands of other people across America."

"Sounds like a bunch of suckers to me."

Okay, that one hit hard. Maybe I was still susceptible to him belittling me. Dammit, get it together, Fallon . Come to think of it, if he was going to play like that, then I could be upfront about things, couldn't I?

"Dad, I just think that this room needs to be aired out a bit."

He squinted up at me. "Why?"

Aw, to hell with it. He was always blunt. "There's a little bit of a sickroom odor in here. I just think if we opened a window for a little bit, it would freshen things up."

He wilted. I couldn't believe it, I saw him pull into himself, his shoulders shrank, and his head sank down until I couldn't see his neck. It was as if he were a turtle.

"Are you saying it stinks in here?" This time his voice quavered.

“No, I didn’t say it stinks. I’m just saying it doesn’t smell fresh, is all.”

He stared at me for long moments. “In that case, open both windows all the way. Open up the curtains, make sure we get a cross-breeze.”

“First, let me get you another blanket, before we do that. I’ll even see if I can rustle up two.”

I headed out the door and went into the empty bedroom. I could swear that Mom had a couple of bins in the closet with more bedding to go on the third guest bed. Not that she’d ever had two guests come and stay. I took a sniff in this room and figured it could use a good airing out too, so I opened two windows before opening the tote bins and grabbing the blankets for Dad.

When I got back to his room he was pushing himself up on his elbows, straining to sit up against his pillows.

“Do you need some help?”

“I’ve got it,” he snarled.

Yep, there’s the Dad I know and love .

“I’ve got your blankets.”

“Put them on the end of the bed, I don’t need them now.”

I sighed. “Is there anything I can get you to eat?”

“I’m fine.”

I turned my head and walked over to the window so I wasn't watching him struggle to sit up. I knew that would only piss him off more. I watched a robin hop from branch to branch in one of our trees.

"Actually, food would be good."

I turned around and saw that he'd pushed himself up so that he was resting against two pillows and the headboard.

"Is there anything in particular you'd like to eat?"

He gave me a crooked grin. "How about a bacon cheeseburger from Pearl's."

I barked out a laugh. "Uhm. No. Try again."

"Soup would be good. But not that godawful pea soup your mother likes, that shit is nasty. Chicken noodle."

I agreed with him, pea soup was nasty. "Anything else?"

"Buttered crackers? Maybe some juice?"

"What kind of juice?"

"Apple."

"Give me ten minutes to warm up the soup, and I'll bring it all in." I smiled. Now that he wasn't growling I figured I could try with the blankets again. "Are you sure you don't want the blankets covering you up?"

He shivered.

“Yeah, I’ll take just one blanket for now.”

I unfolded the red wool blanket and tucked it around him. “Better?”

“Better.”

“Okay, I’ll go get started on your lunch order.”

“Don’t give me any fancy city crackers either, I want saltines.”

I grimaced, but turned back to look at him and smile. “Will do.”

“Good,” he jerked his chin at me. Then winced as he struggled to adjust the pillow behind him. Dammit, in some ways he was the same old dad I remembered, but seeing him so weak and withered? It about broke my heart.

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Chapter Seven

Fallon had been gone for two days. I knew because I hadn't seen her Audi outside the Vickers' house for just as long. I'd finally caved and knocked on their door and asked Isla where she was. Apparently, she'd had to go to Chicago for some meeting, leaving her car at the airport. When I asked Isla if she needed anything, she said that she and Bob were good. But the strain in her voice lingered with me.

I tried to put Fallon out of mind, knowing I was due for a three-day shift the next day. It didn't work. She was there, in the back of my mind, no matter how hard I tried to shove her back into a box. Zarek immediately called me on it.

"I'm the one who's supposed to be distracted, not you," he grumbled.

We were both in the firehouse weight room. He was spotting me as I bench-pressed.

"I'm not distracted," I protested, frowning up at him.

"Sure, you're not. I've taken you down forty pounds in the last five minutes and you haven't even noticed."

I looked at the barbell in confusion, and sure enough, the bastard had stripped forty pounds without me even catching on.

What the hell?

"Look, I'm worried about her, okay?" I admitted. I picked up the towel and swiped

sweat from my face.

“What’s there to be worried about?” Zarek’s bitterness cut through the air like a knife through butter. I winced at the edge in his voice.

“I’m done.” I slotted the bar into the catch, sat up, and turned to face him. “Talk to me,” I demanded.

“What’s there to talk about? When I call, Chloe stays on the line just long enough to tell me she’s fine, then she hangs up. That’s it. Every damn time.”

“Zoe has to be giving you something. Anything. She’s her twin for fuck’s sake.”

Zarek nodded. “She says I have to give Chloe space. She swears that Chloe’s okay, but she won’t say much more than that.” His shoulders sagged under the weight of his frustration. “This shit is killing me. When we got married, I promised her, man. I swore to cherish her, to love her in sickness and in health.” His eyes, filled with anguish, locked on mine. “How can I do that if she won’t even let me hold her?”

I reached up and grabbed him by the back of his neck and pressed my forehead to his. “I’ve known the two of you for most of my life. There’s no way that you won’t work this out. You and Chloe were meant to be together.”

Zarek let out a shaky breath. His voice was barely above a whisper. “From your lips to God’s ears.”

I let him go, and he turned away, his shoulders hunched in defeat. Watching him leave the weight room, I could feel his grief with every step he took toward the door.

His words echoed in my head long after he was gone. Everything he’d said, all of his pain, made me realize that the possibility of a future with Fallon meant everything to

me.

Dad was right, I was going to have to do some real soul searching to figure out what made me sabotage our relationship nine years ago, so that we could have the life we deserved. The life she deserved.

If I couldn't give Fallon all the best things in the world. If I couldn't cherish and love her like the treasure she was, I should just walk away.

And I wasn't fucking walking away!

"I like this."

"What, Mom? I couldn't hear you." I paused, brushing dirt off my sunhat with the back of my wrist. I must have misheard her. Maybe all the time in the sun was making me hallucinate

"I said, I like this. It feels like old times."

I knelt up, blinking against the sun. The words caught me off-guard. For a second, I let myself believe her, even as something inside me braced for the inevitable. "I agree. It's a beautiful day to be working in the garden."

"It's been a while since I've felt up to this. Seeing your father smile gave me the motivation. Inviting Harry, Mo, and Skip over was a good idea on your part."

My shoulders tensed. Compliments from her were rare and often came with strings. I waited, like a rabbit sensing the hawk.

"That's good," I mumbled, my trowel digging into the soil.

“But you shouldn’t have made that fancy spinach dip. I told you to just melt the Velveeta. You should’ve listened to me.”

There it was. The put-down. I sighed, swallowing the urge to point out that the spinach dip had been nearly gone before we even stepped outside. Why bother? Some battles weren’t worth fighting.

“Michael was over while you were gone.”

That got my attention. My hands stilled. “He was?”

“Yes,” she said, brushing dirt off her dungarees. “He had a lot of complimentary things to say about the job you do in Chicago. Sounds like you’re important.”

I didn’t look up, just yanked a stubborn weed from its roots. What was I supposed to say to that?

“Michael showed us an article about you in some fancy magazine—your picture and everything. It was a nice picture, even with that bright red lipstick.”

“They had a makeup artist, Mom.” What the hell, why was I trying to defend myself? I was a grown-ass woman, for fuck’s sake.

She dusted off her hands and moved closer, sidling into my space even as I shifted away. “I meant it, Fallon. It was a nice picture.”

I kept my focus on the weeds, biting back a retort.

“What made you think to invite your dad’s friends over?” she asked, her tone softening.

“I read up on it. It was one of the suggestions I found.”

“What other suggestions were there?”

I glanced sideways, startled by the genuine interest in her eyes. She rarely lingered on anything I had to say. “Some easy hobbies he could do sitting down or in bed,” I said, a grin tugging at my lips. “Like knitting or building model airplanes.”

I nearly fell over when she giggled—a sound I hadn’t heard in years. It caught me so off-guard, I stared.

“What? You don’t think I can laugh?” she asked, still smiling.

“It’s just been a while.”

“You’re right,” she admitted. “It has. I laughed more when you lived here.”

“You mean when I lived here and Michael came over,” I corrected, my tone flat.

She frowned, sitting back on her heels. “You make it sound like I liked him better than I liked you.”

“That’s because you did. You do.”

Her expression grew sharp, but not unkind. “Fallon Jane, I never liked Michael better than you. I love you. You’re my daughter. If I seemed glad to see him, it’s because you were happy when he was around.”

“And because Dad was happy,” I mumbled.

Her gaze pinned me, steady and unyielding. “We’re not talking about your dad.

We're talking about me. I've always liked Michael Rankin, but I love you. You're my daughter, Fallon. That's never changed."

I managed not to roll my eyes, but my skepticism must have been written all over my face.

"Fallon, tell me you know that."

"Can we not do this?" I said, my voice tight. "I know where I stand. I know you and Dad always wanted a boy."

"Where did you ever get that idea?" Her voice cracked. "I was thrilled to bring a daughter home from the hospital. Don't you remember baking together? Or how about reading Little Women for Mrs. Oxley's class? You wouldn't have passed without us tackling that together."

"I hated that book," I said, lips twitching. "Even Jo seemed wimpy."

Mom laughed again, a softer sound this time. "I should've known you'd grow up to be a big-deal businesswoman."

"Yeah, but I liked Mrs. March. She was kickass, keeping everything together."

Her face fell, the laughter vanishing as quickly as it had come. "Your grandmother was like her. She made every one of us feel like we were her favorite."

"Do you regret moving from Connecticut?" I asked quietly.

She sighed, her gaze turning distant. "I'd have followed your dad to the ends of the earth. But yes, I wish I'd been closer to my family. I wish I'd been with Mom when she died."

I pulled off my gardening glove and laid a hand on her wrist. “She knew you loved her.”

She nodded but didn’t speak. Then, with a deep breath, she asked, “Why did you call off the wedding?”

The air seemed to still, the gentle rustling of leaves falling silent. “Why are you asking now?”

“I should’ve asked you then. Instead, I let your father’s anger carry me along. But I knew better. You didn’t want to be a big-shot career woman. You wanted to be Michael’s wife. You wanted to have his children.”

The words cut deep, because they were true.

Once.

“What happened, Fallon? What made you leave?”

I swallowed hard, the memories swirling, heavy and dark. “Why didn’t you ask me then?” I really wanted to know.

Her face crumpled. “Your father was so angry. How could you have left? How could you have embarrassed us like that? He was furious.”

“I tried calling the next week.”

“He wouldn’t take your calls.”

“I called when he was at work, Mom. You didn’t take my calls.”

She stared at the dirt between her knees, her silence louder than any words.

“I made a mistake,” she said finally, her voice hoarse.

Tears stung my eyes as I stood, brushing the dirt from my knees. Her face—so much like mine—was streaked with tears she didn’t bother to wipe away.

“You have to admit, you made a mistake, too,” she said, almost pleading.

I nodded, my throat tight. “You’re right. I made mistakes. But I was twenty-two, and I reached out. But you? You never reached back. I bet your mom would have.”

More tears fell as I turned and walked away.

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Chapter Eight

“Hi, Dad,” I said, shifting my truck into reverse. “Mom still making chicken and dumplings on Sunday?”

“She sure is,” he replied, his tone carrying the warmth of a ritual we’d both come to count on.

“Then I’ll be seeing you soon.” I smiled as I backed out of the driveway and eased onto the narrow road that would eventually lead to Oak Street.

“I’m calling to ask you a favor,” he said, his voice dipping just enough to catch my attention.

“Anything, Dad. You know that.”

“I got another letter.” His sigh crackled through the phone. “I made a copy and gave it to Nash, but he says there isn’t much the sheriff’s department can do until something happens.”

“That’s a load of horseshit,” I snapped, taking a sharp left onto Oak Street, familiar frustration bubbling up.

“This one mentioned your mother.” His words hit like a punch to the gut. “And I’m worried.”

I gripped the steering wheel tighter as I merged onto La Mars Highway, my tires

growling against the pavement. “The note mentioned Mom? And Nash still said he couldn’t do anything?” My voice rose, my pulse following suit. “I’ll call Simon.”

Dad exhaled heavily. “That’s what I was going to ask. You know those boys over at Onyx Security better than I do. Figured you could ask them to take a look.”

“I’ll handle it,” I promised, my jaw tightening. “I’ll see you soon, Dad.”

I ended the call and immediately dialed Simon Clark, the former Navy SEAL commander who ran Onyx Security. He’d built the company with Roan Thatcher, a good friend of mine. Normally, I’d have called Roan, but he was knee-deep in renovations at Jace Drako’s new house, leaving Simon as my go-to.

“Hey, Michael,” Simon answered, his calm, steady voice doing little to tamp down my growing agitation. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing good,” I admitted, the tension bleeding into my tone. “My dad’s been getting threatening notes. I was hoping Onyx could take a look.”

“Let me guess, Nash can’t do anything unless it escalates.”

“You’ve got it. I’ll pay you.”

“You don’t have to hire us for that. Does he still have the notes?”

“Yeah, he kept them.”

“Where’s he at?” Simon asked.

I rattled off my parents’ address, my foot pressing harder on the gas as if I could outrun the hot knife cutting into my chest.

“I can be there in half an hour. That work?”

“Perfect,” I said. “But can we keep it low-key? Mom doesn’t know about any of this.”

Simon chuckled, the sound easy despite the situation. “How much trouble did you get into as a kid?”

“Not much.” I sighed, knowing where this was headed. “Yeah, okay, point taken. Dad’s not exactly great at keeping things from her either.”

“I’ll follow your lead,” Simon said, the amusement fading from his voice, replaced by resolve. “But let me tell you—nothing gets by Trendera.”

I couldn’t help but smirk, even in the middle of all this. Trendera, the oldest Avery sister, could sniff out a secret before you even thought about keeping it.

“Thanks, Simon. I owe you one.”

“Anytime,” he said before hanging up.

I tightened my grip on the wheel and pressed harder on the accelerator, the trees along the highway blurring as I sped toward my parents’ house. Whoever was behind these notes thought they were clever, hiding behind words and threats. But they’d made a mistake this time. They’d brought my mom into it.

And now, they were going to find out just how bad an idea that was.

After leaving my parents’ house, I’d spent the night tossing and turning, my mind trying to work its way out of a house of mirrors. When I stumbled into the kitchen the next morning and cracked open the fridge, the almost empty shelves stared back at

me. Not even a sad slice of bread to save me.

Perfect.

I poured myself a cup of coffee, the rich aroma doing little to lift my mood, and decided to head to the Down Home Café. Jasper Creek wouldn't care that I looked like a cast member of *The Walking Dead*. Sure, they'd give me grief for showing up unshaven and wearing a t-shirt that probably had wrinkles older than some of the kids in town, but that was small-town love for you. At least I was wearing jeans instead of sweatpants to go with yesterday's t-shirt that I had picked up off the floor.

With my travel mug in hand, I climbed into my truck and set off toward the town square. The morning sun gleamed off the storefronts, but my mind was stuck on the conversation I'd had with Simon yesterday. He'd started by giving Dad props for getting Mom out of the house—a minor miracle in itself. But then he'd laid it out plain. Whoever was sending those notes wasn't playing around anymore. The escalation was real. The only silver lining was that the notes were still going to the bank, which meant whoever it was didn't have their home address.

Yet.

Sheriff Nash hadn't been much help. So Dad hadn't even bothered giving him the original of the latest note, not after Nash's "my hands are tied until something happens" speech. Frustrating, but at least Simon had the originals now. And, of course, Dad had insisted on paying for Simon's time. That man's pride was like granite.

By the time I pulled into the square, the Saturday morning crowd was already in full swing. Trucks and cars filled the parking spots, and clusters of people gathered outside the Down Home Café, sipping coffee and chatting. Seven a.m. was officially late to the party, and judging by the line snaking out the door, I'd be lucky to find a

seat at the counter. Friends and neighbors greeted me as I passed them.

“Hey, Michael, howzit going?”

“Good to see you, Mike.”

“How’s it hanging, Michael? Getting any lately?”

I cringed at the last comment and turned to see Burt, Jasper Creek’s reigning king of jackassery. We’d played high school football together, but while I’d grown up, Burt seemed to have hit the pause button at seventeen. He was on wife number three—or was it four?—and from what I’d heard, that marriage wasn’t exactly a fairy tale.

I offered a polite nod to everyone else and ignored Burt completely, hoping he’d take the hint. He didn’t.

“Fallon falling in line yet?” Burt continued. “Do you have her crawling to do your bidding?”

“Burt, watch your mouth, or I’ll let your mama know what you’ve been saying,” a sharp voice cut through the chatter.

Florence, with pink hair instead of purple and legendary death glare, looked at Burt so hard I thought he would catch fire. I guess that was good enough, but breaking his nose would make me happier. Burt shifted uncomfortably, like a kid caught sneaking candy before dinner.

“I was just teasing, Mizz Florence,” he mumbled.

“Don’t care,” she snapped. “Think before you talk, especially when you’re standing in front of decent folk.”

Burt's head dropped like a scolded child's. "Yes, ma'am."

Satisfied, Florence turned her attention to me, her sharp eyes narrowing. "Michael, don't you own an iron?"

"I'm not sure," I replied honestly, biting back a smile.

"Well, don't just pick up your shirt off the floor and call it good. You're representing society, son."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, doing my best not to laugh.

"Now, go put your name in with Little Grandma before I have to stage an intervention."

I weaved through the crowd and found Little Grandma perched on her usual stool by the hostess stand, her smile as bright and welcoming as ever.

"Michael, honey, it's so good to see you," she said warmly. "You flying solo, or did you bring some of those handsome firemen friends of yours?"

"Just me," I said, taking the menu she handed me.

"Good," she said, her eyes twinkling. "Go sit with Fallon. She's all alone, and she could use a friendly face."

I followed her gaze to a small table in the middle of the diner, where Fallon sat with her head bent over a menu. My chest tightened at the sight of her. "Me?"

"Yes, you. You're friendly. Now go on and mend some fences."

I blinked at her, stunned. How could she possibly know?

“How—?”

“There’s nothing that happens in this town that I don’t know about, boy,” she said, her voice firm but playful. “Now, get moving.”

I hesitated for a second too long.

“Boy, I’m throwing you a bone. Take it.” She gave me a pointed look and then winked.

Taking the menu, I smothered a smile of gratitude, and wove through the tables toward Fallon. Her shoulders were hunched, her body language screaming “leave me alone.” As I got closer, I caught some of the sidelong glares being thrown her way. My jaw tightened. How could they all be so damn judgmental? What’s more, it had been nine years for fuck’s sake.

Fallon didn’t look up until I pulled out the chair opposite her. Her hazel eyes met mine, a mix of surprise and irritation flashing across her face.

“What are you doing here? And why the hell are you sitting at my table?”

“All the other tables are full,” I said, leaning back in the chair as if I owned it. I shrugged, letting the corner of my mouth curl into a grin. “Figured you’d be generous enough to share.”

Her eyes narrowed, sharp as glass. Fallon was assessing me, weighing whether to argue or let me off easy. “Kind of presumptuous, don’t you think?”

“Maybe,” I replied, my grin widening just enough to tease. “But I’ve always been an

optimist.”

“What can I get you to drink?” Lettie’s voice broke the tension as she walked up to our table. She stood there with a coffee pot in hand, her expression halfway between pleasant and suspicious.

I’d left my travel mug empty in the truck, and caffeine was still very much a requirement. I flipped my mug over. “Fill ’er up.”

As Lettie poured, my eyes flicked to Fallon’s cup. It was sitting there, turned over, bone dry. I gestured toward it. “Fallon would like coffee, too.”

Lettie’s eyebrows lifted slightly as she tilted the pot over Fallon’s mug, filling it to the absolute brim—no room for cream or sugar. A quiet, pointed statement. Message received: another soldier in the Team Michael army.

Not cool.

“Isn’t it great to have Fallon back in town?” I said loudly, letting my voice carry across the diner. “I’ve missed her. She’s doing an amazing job taking care of her mom and dad.”

Lettie shot me a look that could have been a cross between disbelief and pity. She turned her attention to Fallon. “How’s your daddy doing?”

Fallon sat up straighter, but her voice was soft. “As well as he can, all things considered. I’m going to get a to-go order for him and Mom. He loves your food.”

That managed to coax a small smile out of Lettie. “Just let me know what you need before you’re done eating, and I’ll have it ready for you. And keep us updated on his progress. I’ll bring Mom and Little Grandma by for a visit when he’s feeling up to it.”

Fallon's lips curved into a wide, genuine smile, lighting up her face in a way I hadn't seen in far too long. "He'd love that. His old bowling team came by recently, and it really lifted his spirits."

"Then it's a plan. Are you ready to order?" Lettie asked.

Fallon glanced at the menu as though she hadn't memorized it years ago. Before she could respond, I jumped in. "She'll have a waffle with strawberries and whipped cream, and a side of bacon. Make sure the bacon's burnt."

Fallon's head snapped up, her eyes narrowing as she frowned at me. "You don't know that for sure. My tastes might have changed."

I smirked. "Have they?"

Her shoulders slumped in surrender. "No," she muttered.

Lettie chuckled, her sharp gaze bouncing between us. "How long were you two together before Fallon left?"

"Six years," I answered before Fallon could.

"I guess you'd know, then," Lettie said, her tone amused. "And do you want your usual, Michael?"

"Yeah, as long as Harvey hasn't cleaned you out of all the cinnamon rolls."

She grinned. "Harvey hasn't been in, so you're in luck. I'll bring one out with your western omelet, fried potatoes, and fried tomatoes."

Fallon snickered, her laugh bubbling up like it couldn't be helped. It hit me square in

the solar plexus.

“So, sue me, I know what I like,” I told her, feigning indignation.

Her laughter broke free this time, full and warm, wrapping around me like a familiar embrace. God, I’d missed that sound.

Lettie grinned knowingly and asked, “Do you want your cinnamon roll now?”

“Yeah. That way Fallon can steal some off my plate,” I said, shooting Fallon a mock-accusatory glance. My tone was light, but the teasing glint in her eyes made me feel like I’d scored a touchdown.

“Can you bring extra butter?” Fallon added, her voice syrupy sweet, though her smirk practically screamed mischief.

“Sure thing,” Lettie replied.

I turned my attention fully to Fallon. “You’re looking mighty beautiful this morning,” I said, my voice intentionally carrying across the room, making a bold declaration.

Fallon leaned forward, narrowing her eyes at me. “Stop it. I know what you’re doing,” she hissed under her breath, her expression caught between annoyance and embarrassment.

“I’ve missed you,” I said, again loud enough for the whole diner to catch it.

“Just stop it,” Fallon snapped, her voice sharp but barely above a whisper.

“Well, I have missed you,” I said softly this time, leaning in like it was a secret meant just for her.

She sighed, dropping her gaze to the table. “Stop trying to make people like me. I’m fine being the town pariah. I don’t care what they think.”

“I do,” I replied, my tone steady, certain. “I’m the bad guy here, not you.”

“Michael, it’s too little, too late. I’m past caring.”

I saw the hurt on her face before she could mask it, and it made my teeth ache.

Before I could respond, Lettie reappeared. She set a plate with the warm cinnamon roll onto the table, extra butter glistening on a small dish beside it. The scent alone was enough to make my mouth water.

“Here’s your cinnamon roll,” Lettie said, flashing a quick smile before heading off to tend another table.

I pushed the plate toward Fallon. She ignored it. I pushed it further toward her. “Come on, you know you want it.”

Her hazel eyes looked up at me, and I could see her wavering. I started to pull the plate back toward me.

“Give me that,” she cried as she tugged at the plate and carefully picked up the knife and sliced the roll in half with careful precision that could rival a surgeon. She slathered five— five —pats of butter onto her half as if it were a critical mission. I sat back and watched, half in awe, half in agony as she broke off a piece and popped it into her mouth.

Her lips glistened with icing and butter, her fingers catching the excess. And then she licked them clean—slowly, deliberately, like she knew exactly what kind of hell she was putting me through. The twinkle in her eyes confirmed it.

God help me .

I reached for her mug and swapped it with mine, setting hers close so she could add the gallon of cream and mountain of sugar I knew she preferred. She glanced up, startled, and then smiled, soft and genuine.

“I still hate black coffee,” she admitted, reaching for the creamer pods.

“So, nothing much has changed, huh?” I teased, watching as she methodically poured in enough creamer and sugar to turn her coffee into dessert. This was one of the ways that Fallon kept the curves I had always so desperately loved.

“Oh, I’d say some things have changed.” Her voice was measured, her eyes meeting mine with a steady gaze. “I’m not as quick to jump to conclusions anymore.”

The back of my neck prickled. “What do you mean by that?”

She swirled her coffee with her spoon, a faint smile tugging at her lips. “Just that I’ve learned not everything is as it seems. Dealing with tough clients taught me that. It’s one thing to deliver what they say they want, but getting to the heart of what they really want? That’s the key.”

I tilted my head, intrigued. “How do you do that?”

She set the spoon down, leaning back in her chair. “I dig into their history. Past behavior usually predicts future behavior. If they’re suddenly making a complete one-eighty, I figure out what’s driving the change. If there’s no clear reason, I tread carefully.”

“Sounds like a solid approach,” I said, nodding.

She took another sip of her coffee and studied me over the rim of her mug. “It’s helped in my personal life, too. I’ve learned to look beyond words and see what actions say about people. I wasn’t good at that when I was younger.”

The words hung heavy between us. A slight chill ran down my spine. “Interesting.” I couldn’t stop watching her—couldn’t stop wondering what she meant by “younger” Fallon.

“Yeah, isn’t it.” She smiled faintly, then reached for her half of the cinnamon roll. She broke off another piece and popped it into her mouth, leaving a glimmer of butter on her lips. I watched in pain as she licked her fingers again. Yup, she knew exactly what she was doing.

God help me.

Chapter Nine

“Shit, shit, shit.”

“I’m gonna need more to go on than you swearing,” Maddie said, her laugh muffled behind the rim of her glass.

“I told you what’s wrong,” I grouched, pacing the length of her living room like a caged lion.

“No, you really didn’t.” She twirled her margarita glass like it was a magic wand. “All you’ve done is demand tequila, cuss a blue streak, and declare that Michael Rankin is an ass. Newsflash: I already knew that. But details? None.”

I stopped mid-prowl, took a long gulp of my drink, and flopped onto her ridiculously plush couch. It swallowed me whole, as if conspiring to smother my frustration.

“Fine. First, he’s an ass.”

“Wow. Groundbreaking. Did you also discover that water’s wet?” Her eyes sparkled with sarcasm as she rolled them skyward. “What else you got?”

“He’s telling the whole town I’m wonderful. Acting like he doesn’t hold a grudge about me leaving him at the altar.”

Her brows shot up. “Well, you are wonderful. And damn right he shouldn’t hold a grudge. You’re the one who should be pissed. Honestly, though, I like that he’s trying

to sway the town's opinion. Shows some class. Maybe it's a good thing I didn't castrate him with a rusty spoon all those years ago."

"And second," I continued, ignoring her commentary, "I think he wants to get back into my pants."

"He has a penis, of course he wants in your pants. What else you got?" Maddie shrugged.

"I think he wants to get back together-together."

Without a word, Maddie stood, marched into the kitchen, grabbed the tequila bottle, and brought it back with her. She didn't bother with finesse this time, just filled her half-full margarita glass to the brim and thunked the bottle down on the coffee table.

"You know," I said, watching her glass practically overflow, "I think that's not a margarita anymore. That's just tequila. Straight up."

"I'm going to need it," she muttered, returning to the couch and plopping down beside me. "Because I have a feeling you're about to drop a third bomb."

I sighed, bracing myself. "There is a third thing."

Maddie took a bracing sip of her tequila—not margarita—and narrowed her eyes. "All right, hit me."

"I'm beginning to suspect he didn't cheat on me, I think it was a set-up."

Her glass froze midair. Slowly, she set it down on the coffee table, her eyes drilling into mine like I'd just suggested the moon was made of cheese. "You're delusional. How about that?"

“Nope,” I said, taking another defiant sip. “I think I’m right. Michael loved me. He wouldn’t have cheated.”

Her laugh was sharp enough to shatter her margarita glass. “Fallon, honey, you called me right after you saw him with Lindsay. You were hysterical. You saw what you saw.”

“Oh, I saw it, all right. He was on her front porch. He kissed her—ten seconds, max. Then he backed her into her house and shut the door. Believe me, that image is seared into my brain for eternity. But...”

Maddie’s brow furrowed. “But what?”

“She didn’t put her arms around him.”

She stared at me, slack-jawed. “What the ever-loving hell does that matter?”

“Have you ever been kissed by someone you liked and not put your arms around him?”

Her silence spoke volumes.

“Well, I haven’t,” I continued firmly. “I always put my arms around his neck.”

She tilted her head, considering. “Sometimes I grab the guy’s shirt. Maybe she did that. Would you have seen it from where you were?”

“Okay, maybe not,” I admitted. “But I haven’t told you the last thing.”

Maddie shook her head sadly.

“Don’t look at me that way. It’s not like I want him back. I’m not pining over him. I just want to close this chapter of my life.”

“And I believe the moon is made of cheese.” Maddie took another big sip of her cocktail, then swung it toward me in a grand gesture. “But please, enlighten me with the last thing.”

“Michael knew I was due at Dorothy’s Antiques before closing to pick up my brooch bouquet. You know, the one you talked me into getting?”

“It was going to be so pretty.” Maddie sighed. “I never got to see it.”

“I need you to focus, Mads.”

“I’m focusing.”

“Michael knew what time I would be at Dorothy’s; it was going to be right before she closed up. And as I pulled up to Dorothy’s store, that’s when I saw Michael’s truck in Lindsay’s driveway, and Michael on the porch.”

Maddie’s eyes widened.

“At just that time?” she whispered her question.

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you say something before?”

“Because I didn’t really think of it before? It never even entered my consciousness until Michael started acting all crazy about me now and I realized something seemed hinky.”

“So this could have been a setup...”

I slumped back into her couch and I felt my eyes begin to burn. “But that would be so much worse. Why would he do something like that to me, Maddie? We were each other’s everything. We were best friends. Why would he throw that away?”

Maddie’s gaze softened—just a little. “Fallon, he did throw it away. I mean, even if it was a setup, he threw it away.” She picked her margarita glass back up.

I fell quiet, my mind spinning. Things between Michael and me had been perfect—until they weren’t. Everything had been fine until we found the house. That’s when the shift happened, I realized.

Maddie snapped her fingers in front of my face, jolting me back to the present. “Earth to Fallon. Where’d you go?”

“Back in time,” I muttered.

“Care to share?”

I sighed, leaning into the couch cushions. “It started with the house. The wedding plans didn’t faze him, but the second we made an offer on that house, everything changed.”

“So that’s when he decided to become a manipulative asshole. Mystery solved.” She threw her hands up, splashing tequila into her hair. She didn’t even notice.

“Uh, you might want to...” I motioned toward her tequila-soaked locks.

She waved me off like a diva. “I’m accessorizing.”

“You’re a disaster,” I muttered.

“And you’re in denial,” she shot back, crossing her arms. “If Michael didn’t cheat, he wanted out. Just admit it.”

“The house was perfect. Four bedrooms, one already set up as a nursery. The kitchen and bathroom were remodeled—everything we wanted. And then, suddenly, he pulls away?”

“Sounds like cold feet to me,” Maddie said, shaking her head and looking at me with pity. It was kind of ruined when I saw tequila dripping off her ear.

“Maybe.” I rubbed my temples. “But it doesn’t make sense. He wanted that house. He wanted us .”

Maddie took another sip of tequila. “Or maybe he wanted out.”

I glared at her. “You’re not helping.”

“I’m not here to help. I’m here to drink margaritas and tell you the hard truth. Speaking of which...” She raised her glass in a mock toast. “To tequila—and clarity.”

I couldn’t help but laugh, despite myself. “You’re ridiculous.”

“And you’re stubborn. Guess we’re a perfect match.”

“Not even close,” I said.

Maddie sighed. “I need to drink tonight. You just gave me a perfect excuse.”

“What? Why?” I demanded to know.

“Never mind. Forget I said that.”

For the first time tonight, I really looked at Maddie and noticed the dark circles under her eyes, like bruises from too many sleepless nights. She was a social worker, primarily working in Jasper Creek and Gatlinburg, and tourist season was just ramping up. She’d told me enough stories over the years, so I knew what this time of year meant for her.

It meant more transient families cramming into dingy motel rooms or pop-up trailers near the mountains. It also meant more unsupervised kids, neglected because their parents were juggling two or three jobs just to scrape by.

I thought of the horror stories Maddie had shared before—the worst being a four- and five-year-old left alone for a week with barely any food. My stomach churned.

“God, Maddie, I’m a shit friend. I haven’t even asked how you’re doing. It’s been all me, me, me. What’s going on in your life? How’s work?”

She waved me off with a flick of her hand. “Same old, same old.”

“Yeah, right,” I shot back, folding my arms. “You look like you haven’t slept in days.”

“I’ve been in bed early lots the last couple of weeks,” she insisted, but her tone was about as convincing as a kid caught with cookie crumbs on their face while denying they’d had their hand in the cookie jar.

“Sure, but have you actually been sleeping?”

She took a long gulp of tequila, then set her glass down with a decisive thunk. I raised an eyebrow as she reached for the bottle to top it up.

“Oh, no, you don’t.” I snatched the glass and bottle away, marching to the sink. “If you think tequila’s going to solve this, you’re as delusional as a reality TV star thinking they’re going to win an Oscar.”

“Hey!” she protested, standing up and wobbling. “That was good tequila!”

“Talk to Auntie Fallon,” I said, ignoring her indignation as I poured the rest down the drain. “What’s going on?” I asked as I walked back into the living room.

Madie let out a dramatic sigh and flopped onto the couch like a rag doll. “Fine. There’s a little girl, Reagan. I just can’t seem to shake it, what’s going on with her.”

I nudged her knee. “Tell me about her.”

Maddie’s shoulders slumped. “She’s nine. I’ve had to remove her from her home three times for neglect. Each time, her mom gets her act together just long enough for Reagan to go back, only for the cycle to repeat.”

“Don’t you inspect the house before that happens?”

“Of course. Her mom makes sure everything’s picture-perfect at first. But by month four, Reagan’s back to skipping school, and the principal calls me.”

“How many chances does a parent get?” I asked, incredulous.

“With any judge but Stevenson? Three strikes and they’re out. But Stevenson... He always sends kids back unless there’s terrible abuse.”

“There have to be good judges,” I said, hoping to lift her spirits.

“Two. Abernathy’s one of the best, but he’s on vacation for two weeks. So yeah,

Reagan's going back to her mom. Again."

"At least she's not being abused, right?" I offered weakly.

Maddie's eyes darkened. "Cheryl, her mom, has a new boyfriend. Two charges for domestic violence, both dropped before trial."

"Think he threatened them?"

"I'd bet my tequila on it," she muttered. "If I had any."

I sighed. "No wonder you were drowning in tequila."

"I'm sorry for dumping this on you," she said, looking guilty. "You've got enough going on."

"Maddie, you're not dumping. You're my best friend. This street goes both ways. But that's not everything that's going on, is it?"

She shook her head, her dark hair flying. "It seems like old home week around here, is all."

"Why? Who else besides me is back in town?"

"Brady Beaumont," she said.

I blinked, the name stirring a vague memory. Then it clicked. "Wasn't he Beau's twin brother? Didn't he get kidnapped by his dad or something? I remember Mom and Dad talking about it when we were in middle school."

"Bingo."

I leaned forward, intrigued. “How long was he gone? Where was he?”

“Thirty years. Their dad took him to Alaska.”

“No shit.”

“Scout’s honor,” she said solemnly, holding up one finger. “Apparently, he goes by Kai Davies now—thought that was his real name. He was in Special Forces before some injury took him out. So Beau came home to see him.”

“Holy shit, Maddie. Beau’s back. But that’s wonderful,” I breathed. “When was the last time you talked to him? You two used to be inseparable.”

Maddie didn’t respond. Her dark brown eyes turned black.

“Mads? Talk to me.”

“I loved you to death. I adored my sisters. But Beau? Beau was my best friend in the whole world. But the day he left for boot camp? I never heard from him again.”

“That can’t be true.”

She didn’t say a word. Her pain filled the room, like a noxious gas.

“Oh Honey.” I hurled myself across the couch and pulled her into my arms. “Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“Because it shouldn’t have mattered. We were just friends. And he needed to go. After everything he’d been through with his mom dying? He needed to go.”

I held her trembling body close, rocking her, stunned she wasn’t crying. Finally she

pulled away.

“You should have told me,” I whispered. “I always leaned on you.”

Her lips twitched into a small smile. “I did put up with years of hearing about the perfect love story of Michael and Fallon.”

“I wasn’t that bad.”

“You scoured every store for china with hearts on it for your gift registry!”

“I did, didn’t I?”

“Yep.” Maddie gave a shaky laugh.

“No more holding things in, okay?”

“Agreed. I tell you, and you tell me. Even if it is to float ideas like Michael not cheating, instead masterminding some convoluted plot to get you to break up with him”

My heart beat faster. “Then you think it might be true?”

“Let’s just say, I’m not ruling it out. But you know what you need to do.”

I nodded.

If I wanted answers, I’d have to go straight to the source—Michael himself. And I wasn’t sure I was ready for that conversation.

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Chapter Ten

“You’ve got mail, Rankin,” the Captain called out.

“Huh?”

“Probably you’re AARP card,” Josie joked. She was the youngest member on our team, and she was constantly giving me shit for my age.

I walked over to the mail cubbies, pulled out a letter, and immediately froze. It was the same handwriting as the threats that my dad had received. I looked at the postmark. Yep, it had come from Knoxville, same as Dad’s.

“Well, aren’t you going to open it?”

I wasn’t really surprised that Zarek was looking over my shoulder. He always had been a curious bastard.

“Not here,” I whispered.

As soon as I said that, his eyes changed from twinkling to assessing. “Kitchen should be empty since it’s in the middle of a shift change.”

I nodded and we both headed upstairs. Since I had just arrived, I hadn’t had a chance to put my gear away in my locker, so I had what I needed with me. When we got to the kitchen I fished out my copies of the two letters Dad had received. I saw Zarek frown. “What are those?”

“Dad got these. They were delivered to the bank.” I handed them to Zarek. He took a moment to read them.

“I’m assuming the one that mentions your mom is the second one?”

I nodded. “Yep, he was definitely angrier in that one.” I looked it over again.

Rankin,

You better be listening to me

You and your fancy wife

took what was mine

You will pay.

You will rue the day you interfered.

“This guy is a total nutjob. Rue the day? At least you know you’re not dealing with a mental giant.”

I wasn’t so sure, my gut was telling me this was bad. I carefully opened up the envelope addressed to me, like Simon had taught me, then I read the note.

Mikey

Your time has come

You took away my life

Now I'm coming for yours

The note slipped out of my hands and slowly floated to the floor. I hadn't been called Mikey since I was adopted by the Rankins.

Zarek bent down and picked up the note. "What the fuck, man? Who is this guy? And why is he calling you Mikey?"

"It's my dad. Only my real mom and dad ever called me Mikey, and my mom is dead." I shook my head, trying to clear out my confusion. "I mean, my biological parents."

Zarek tilted his head. "I keep forgetting you were adopted. And the fact that you hardly spoke when you started school with us. You were a weird kid to begin with, but that didn't matter to Chloe and me, we liked weird."

Zarek's hand landed firmly on my shoulder. "I'm sorry your real mother is gone. If you ever need to talk about it..."

I shook my head, my throat tightening. "Not now."

"Okay." His grip was solid, grounding. "But when you're ready, I'm here."

"Thanks, man." I met his eyes briefly, grateful for the lifeline he always offered.

"So this note... you think it's from your dad?" His tone was careful now.

"It has to be," I said, my voice low, the realization settling in like a lead weight. When had he even gotten out of prison? He'd been sentenced to life. How was this possible?

I clenched my jaw, shoving the notes into my bag. “I’ve got to talk to the Captain. I need a couple hours to figure this out.”

“Understood. We’ve got your back.” Zarek’s voice was steady, and for a second, I felt like I wasn’t spiraling alone.

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“Thanks.” I nodded, my gratitude too heavy to put into words. With my heart pounding, I strode toward the Captain’s office, every step laced with the weight of the past and the storm brewing ahead. I needed Simon—or Roan—or both. This wasn’t just a letter. It was a warning.

“Yeah, he was released six months ago,” Roan said, his tone clipped as he looked up from his computer. “According to his parole officer, he’s checked in for every meeting on time. He’s also passed every home inspection with flying colors.”

“Where is he living?” Just the thought of the man had me shaking with horror. I hadn’t thought of him since bootcamp, when I’d been exhausted and hungry from training and had nightmares of my childhood where I had been exhausted, hungry and beaten.

“Nashville. I’ve got his address,” he said, tapping his screen. “According to his parole officer, he’s due for a surprise inspection.”

“Is there any way you could tag along?” I asked, my stomach knotting.

“No,” Simon answered. “But I’m having a friend hack into the parole officer’s system and see when the surprise inspection is scheduled and we can follow him to your dad’s.”

“Sweet.” That was the first smile I’d had all day.

“We’ll let you know when we have things set up, okay?”

I felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. “You’ve got it. Thanks.”

I turned back to Roan. “How’s Jace and his family settling in?”

Roan laughed and shook his head. “It’s crazy over at that house. Jace’s brother Bruno has his crew over there working on the kitchen that Jace’s wife Bonnie, wants. But when I go over there, the baby always seems to be crying, and the twins trying to help the contractors!”

“What about Bonnie?”

“She’s calm as a cucumber. It’s like she has eyes in the back of her head, she always knows what the twins are up to, and when the baby cries she hands him over to Jace and he immediately settles down. Jace is like an honest-to-God baby whisperer.”

“That I’d like to see.” I grinned. Jace was a huge guy with rough features and was a former Navy SEAL.

“When things calm down and they’re more settled, Simon is chomping at the bit to hire him.”

I frowned and looked at Simon. “There can’t be enough work in Jasper Creek for three of you.”

“Word has got around. We’ve got a waiting list all across Tennessee, and some out of state. Trust me, we need him. We really need more than Jace. We need someone, man or woman, who has skills. Former military training or law enforcement would be

best.” Simon gave me a pointed look.

“Nope, not me. I like my job as a firefighter.”

“You were a Ranger,” Roan protested.

“And that’s the reason why I came back to Jasper Creek to work as a firefighter and I didn’t apply to be a smokejumper. I had enough of jumping out of airplanes.”

“But—”

“Give it a rest, Roan,” Simon interrupted his partner. “Michael knows what he wants out of life, leave him to it.”

“Thanks.” I gave Simon a chin lift.

“Gotcha,” Roan said with a grin. “Ya gotta do what speaks to your soul. I respect that.”

Now that was the reason that Roan Thatcher was one of my best friends.

“Let’s get back to the letters,” Simon said as he picked up the one addressed to me. “I looked at the court transcripts of your father’s trial. Since you were only five years old, all of your testimony was done via closed circuit TV, so you didn’t have to see your father. I tried to get a copy of that, but I couldn’t.”

“Not even the techies from your old SEAL teams could get you a copy?” Roan asked with disbelief.

“Not so far.”

“If they do, don’t show it to me,” I said, a rock sitting in my gut. The last thing I wanted was to relive those days. Seeing my father kill my mom had been bad enough, but then those days spent reliving it as I was questioned over and over had been agonizing. They’d even asked me questions about my life before the murder. Something I’d been trained never to talk about. They’d had this lady come in and talk to me. She’d told me that the man in the robe wouldn’t hurt me and I had to tell the truth. That my father would be punished for what he had done to my mother if I told the truth and finally I had believed her, and sat in a special chair beside the man in the robe and answered all the questions. I told the truth about all the time I’d been beaten and how I’d learned not to cry. Only babies cried.

“Do you think your dad would hold a grudge after all this time?” Roan asked.

“Definitely.”

“Is he the type who would just kill you?” Simon asked quietly.

I had to think about it. I was just a kid when I knew him. But thinking about him through an adult lens, I realized he got off on power. He was one sadistic bastard.

“No, he wouldn’t just come after me. Not directly. He would want to make my life miserable. That’s why he’s targeting my parents. He wants to make me suffer.”

Simon nodded. “That’s my take, too. It’s good that, for now, he doesn’t know where they live, but unfortunately everybody in Jasper Creek knows where they live.”

“They’re not listed anywhere. I did an internet search, their address doesn’t come up,” Roan said. “And nobody in Jasper Creek would tell a stranger their address.”

“But I want to be safe. We need to install a security system in their house,” Simon said.

“It needs to be top-of-the-line.” I said, my voice sharp.

“That goes without saying,” Simon agreed.

“And you need one, too,” Roan insisted.

“I can take care of myself.”

“Nope, you need an alarm,” Roan argued.

“I have a dog.”

“Not good enough,” Roan scowled.

I sighed. “Okay, set me up with an alarm system.”

“We’ll set you up with Ace Alarm Systems. They’re the best. We’ll ask for a favor to put you and your folks at the top of their schedule,” Simon smiled. “In the meantime, watch your back.

“Always,” I said, my jaw tightening. Because if my father thought he could worm his way back into my life and destroy it, he had another thing coming.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:50 am

Chapter Eleven

Michael: Do you still like Frutti Pebbles?

Fallon: It's spelled Fruity Pebbles, and why do you want to know?

Ever since the conversation with Mom, I'd been having trouble sleeping, so getting a text from Michael was welcome, even if it was after midnight.

Michael: How about reality TV shows. Do you still like those?

Fallon: I only like the ones where the people aren't too stupid to live.

I didn't see any bubbles for a long moment.

Michael: So, I guess you're not watching many these days?

Fallon: Does the Great British Baking Show count? I love that.

Michael: You bake?

Fallon: No, but I love the show. I've even gone back and re-watched episodes. Do you still like watching things that explode?

Again, I didn't see any bubbles for a long moment.

Michael: My time in the Army cured me of that.

Shit. I should have guessed that. I twirled my hair until it pulled at my scalp.

Michael: Are you still there?

Fallon: Yeah. I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking when I asked that question. It's just hard to think of you ever having been a soldier. That was never something that was on your radar, back when you and I were together.

Michael: Things change.

Bubbles.

Michael: People change.

Fallon: Isn't that the truth. Are you comfortable talking about your time in the service?

Michael: With certain people. You would be okay.

It felt like a treasure chest had been opened up just for me.

Fallon: Anytime, Michael. I'm here for you.

And I meant it. I truly meant it. This was the man I'd fallen in love with. The man who had been my best friend. Of course, I would be here for him.

Michael: After my stint in the Rangers, I wanted to come home. I'd seen enough, lost enough. Nothing as bad as losing you, though.

Fallon: Again, if you want to get together and talk, name the time and place.

Michael: I will.

It was time for something lighter.

Fallon: So do you watch any reality shows? The Bachelor? The Bachelorette? Real Housewives?

Michael: Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives. I am proud to say that I have been to five of the dives.

I snorted.

Fallon: You always did have a cast-iron stomach.

Michael: Yeah, but now I know how to cook.

Fallon: You do? I don't believe it.

Michael: At the firehouse all of us take turns cooking. I'd be strung up by my entrails if I fed the folks crap, so I had to practice before I cooked, and make sure it was good.

Fallon: I'm surprised you didn't have your mom cook something and then try to pass it off as your own.

Michael: I thought about it, but everybody wanders into the kitchen while you're cooking, so that wouldn't have worked. Instead, I had to take cooking lessons from Mom. They like my chicken fried steak and gravy the best.

Fallon: If you cook it like your mom does, I can understand why.

Michael: When can I see you again?

I should have expected that question. Dammit. Why hadn't I?

Fallon: Mom's arthritis has been really bad the last couple of days. I need to get her in to see her rheumatologist. Mom isn't on any of the normal drugs for her disease and it's pissing me off. If this doctor won't help her, I'm going to find someone else. And one of our programmers quit, so I've got to find a replacement fast. We're already maxing out on overtime.

Michael: In other words, now isn't a good time.

Fallon: I promise, I'm not making excuses.

Michael: I didn't think you were. How's your dad? While you're taking your mom to the doctor, does he need some company?

Fallon: You'd do that?

Michael: Fallon, haven't you figured it out yet? I'm here for you this time. I'm not going to fuck things up.

That hurt. It hurt a lot. I didn't come back to Jasper Creek to hope. Hope was bad. For both of us.

Michael: Are you there?

Fallon: Yes.

Michael: Are you going to say something?

Fallon: Eventually.

I closed my eyes and pressed my cell phone next to my heart and figured out an answer.

Fallon: Yeah, Dad could use some company, but please don't get your hopes up, Michael. I don't want you hurt.

Michael: I love your heart. You have the kindest heart in the world. If I get hurt, it's only what I deserve. But you? I promise you, I will never hurt you again. I promise you that on my life. Good night, Sunshine.

I set my phone on the nightstand and scooped down under the covers.

This time, sleep came easily.

I listened as the technician from Ace Alarm went over the operating instructions of the system with my mom and dad. Luckily, it all seemed fairly straightforward.

"Eric, are you sure we need this?" my mom asked Dad.

"I need you to trust me on this."

I watched as she took a moment to assess him. She opened her mouth, then closed it. I was pretty sure the jig was up.

Dad moved closer to Mom and reached for her hand. "Lana, you still don't want to get a dog since Jefferson died and we only watch Harley every so often when Michael is on shift. I'm gone from home enough to where I'll feel more comfortable with us having an alarm system. Humor me, okay?" He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it.

Even after all these years, I watched as she melted.

“Okay, honey. If it will make you feel better, then absolutely it’s worth it.”

Dad put his arm around her shoulders and she rested her head against his chest. The technician looked over at me and smiled.

That was exactly what I wanted. And I wanted it with Fallon.

“Do you want me to go over the settings again?” The technician asked.

My mom stepped forward and set the alarm with no problem. All of us grinned. “I guess you have it down pat, Mrs. Rankin,” the technician grinned again.

“That’s my wife. She’s whip smart.”

The technician left, and Mom went into the kitchen to put together the shrimp salads she’d promised us for lunch.

“That was a close one,” my dad whispered.

“She knows something’s up,” I responded.

“Yeah, but she’s not going to ask, thank God. I would hate for her to worry about your biological father coming after us, or especially you. It would kill her.”

“And that’s why Simon and Roan are on this case.”

Dad stood taller. “I’ve signed a contract with Onyx. I want your bio dad found and prosecuted. I want this horseshit to stop.”

“And they’re just the men to do it.”

Dad nodded in agreement.

“Food’s up,” Mom called from the dining room.

It was a pain in the fucking ass to have only the Avery sisters as my friends here in town. Used to be I could call almost every person in Jasper Creek a friend of mine.

Quit your whining, Vickers!

I looked at the two dogwood trees Mom had ordered and were just delivered. They were almost as tall as me. They were gorgeous, don’t get me wrong. But how in ever-loving hell was I ever going to lift them to the spot where Mom wanted them planted? I mean, the delivery guys had been nice enough to put them in the backyard, but already Mom has changed her mind twice where she wanted them to end up.

“Fallon, I really think they should go over there, don’t you think so?”

Holding in all my frustration, I just nodded. What was the point of either fully agreeing or disagreeing, since she was just going to change her mind in ten minutes anyway?

“Have you got any ideas about who is going to help plant these?” I asked.

“Oh, you and Michael can handle this, can’t you?”

I pushed at the wooden box that the trees had arrived in with the toe of my sneaker. It didn’t budge. Not a smidgeon. “Uhm, I don’t think so, Mom.”

“But they’re still babies. I didn’t buy the biggest ones on the internet. These were the medium-sized ones.”

For the love of God.

“Mom, why don’t you take some time deciding where to plant these, and I’ll give Michael and Maddie a call, okay? We might have to wait until the weekend to get them planted.”

“That can’t be good for them. I’m sure I read where they needed to be planted as soon as they arrived.”

I watched as my mom’s hands fluttered in front of her chest, a sure sign of her agitation.

“Mom, think about—” I stopped myself. What was going to come out of my mouth was the same patronizing shit that always came out of Dad’s mouth.

“Mom, I don’t think that’s right. Are you sure you read that? I mean, after all, haven’t they been in these wooden boxes a long time?” I kept my tone easy and upbeat.

“Oh, you’re right.” She smiled at me. “Okay, you make your calls. I’m going to find the perfect spots.”

I turned to find some shade near the back porch.

“Fallon. Do you think maybe they would do better on the side of the house?”

I looked up at the sky.

Please God, give me strength.

“Mom, this is up to you. I know you’ll make the right decision.”

I walked around the house to make my calls from the front porch. I called Maddie first, but it went through to her voicemail. Then I called her older sister, Trenda.

“Hey, Fallon. I was hoping you would call. I was hoping we could do lunch sometime.”

“That would be great.”

“It’s a date. Are you calling to catch up, or is there something I can do for you?”

“I’ve got a problem. My mom bought two rather large trees that were delivered today, and she wants them planted in the backyard or the side yard. She hasn’t decided yet. I was wondering if you knew anybody who might help with this.”

“My husband, Simon, isn’t working this weekend. He could ask Roan if he could come over as well. Would that work?”

“That would be wonderful. But then I would be stuck with endless conversations on the best spot to plant the trees. And I mean endless .”

Trenda snorted. “I could see that with your mother. I’ve run into her in the grocery store more than once. I’ve been asked my opinion many times on which apple or orange or piece of meat she should purchase. I hate to admit this to you, Fallon, but these days, I hide when I see her.”

I burst out laughing. “That’s priceless.”

“Maddie mentioned Michael seems to be in your orbit lately. I bet he could gather up some of those hunky firefighters to come plant her trees for you.”

“Yeah, but I’m sure they’re on duty,” I mumbled.

“They take shifts. If Michael isn’t working, he should be able to wrangle up some others. Call him. He deals with emergencies for a living. He’ll understand.”

I gave a rueful laugh.

“What are you doing on Thursday?” I asked to change the subject.

“Having lunch with you?” Tenda answered.

“You got it in one,” I smiled.

Chapter Twelve

“Zarek, stop whatever you’re doing and get over to my house, I need your help.”

“Sure, man. What’s wrong?”

“We need to plant some trees.”

“What the hell are you talking about? It sounded like you had some kind of emergency. Chloe still hasn’t answered my call. I’m not about to leave the house until I get hold of her.”

“Take your cell phone and get the hell over here.”

“I’m not leaving until you tell me what is going on.”

I heard the defeated sound in Zarek’s voice, which convinced me even more that he was the right guy to tap to help me plant trees at Fallon’s parents’ house. He needed out of his head and out of his house.

“Zarek, Fallon’s mom bought a couple of big dogwood trees that need planting. Fallon called for some manpower. You, me, and Bruno are it.”

“If you and Bruno can’t handle it, then you need your man-cards taken away.”

“You’re not thinking straight.” And wasn’t that the truth? “I need you and Bruno doing the work, so I can spend my time trying to get back in Fallon’s good graces.”

“Haven’t you accomplished that yet? Where’s the Rankin charm that I know and admire?”

“I’m too far up shit creek, and not only do I not have a paddle, I don’t even have a canoe, so help a brother out. I really need you and Bruno doing the heavy lifting so I can sweet talk Fallon.”

“I can’t believe I have to be the one to tell you this, but you are missing a prime opportunity.”

I could feel my frustration growing. “What are you talking about?”

“Today is hot. This is your chance to work up a sweat and take off your shirt and tempt her with all your manly muscles.”

“Huh.” I thought about it for a moment. “You know, you might have a point.”

“Of course I do. That’s why I’ve been your wingman for so many years.”

I winced. “I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t mention that to Fallon. And anyway, I haven’t needed your wingman services for at least two years.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“Now, are you going to come help me out, or what?”

“I will.”

“How soon can you get here?”

“Give me twenty minutes.”

“Make it fifteen.” I said, then I hung up.

I pulled bottles of water out of my fridge and shoved them into my gear bag. Then I grabbed one more for me to drink. I leaned back against my quartz countertop and looked around my kitchen. It was just the kind of kitchen that Fallon had mooned over when we had put money down on our forever home nine years ago.

Huh.

It even had four bedrooms. Same as the other house.

Of course, this was new construction, with builder upgrades, so it didn’t have anything that was personalized, not like the other house had had. None of the cool old light fixtures, or all the different paint colors in the different bedrooms. But the bones of the house were the same. I think subconsciously I had bought this house with Fallon in mind. Had I been hoping for a second chance all along?

I finished the water, then went back into the fridge and pulled out some melons. I cut them up and put them into a plastic container and shoved that into the gear bag as well, then headed for the bathroom. I was just coming out when Zarek was letting himself in.

“What’s the point of having your fancy-assed security system if you don’t bother to lock your door?”

I shrugged. “I’m not thinking that Daddy Dearest will be coming at me on a Wednesday afternoon when half the retirees in the neighborhood are out watering their lawn.”

Zarek gave me a dark look. “You should take this shit seriously.”

“I do take this shit seriously. I want my mom and dad protected.”

“I read the note he sent to you. You told me it was your testimony that sent him to prison. He’s gunning for you, Michael. Don’t think otherwise. Lock your goddamn door and set your fucking alarm from now on.”

I held up my hands. “Fine. I will. Geez, Zarek, mellow out.”

“I won’t mellow out. You know just how precarious life is. You’ve seen it during your time in Afghanistan. I had a front row seat when Chloe and I lost two of our babies before they had a chance to live,” he choked out.

I hadn’t heard him sound like this since the last miscarriage.

“You’re right, big guy. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again,” I whispered.

“It better not. When’s Bruno getting here?”

“He’s not. He’s meeting us there. He’s doing a last walk-thru at his brother’s house to make sure the kitchen remodel is up to snuff.”

“How are Jace and his family settling in?”

“From what I’ve heard so far, good. Now, that’s been from Roan. He’s high on Jace joining Onyx Security. Bruno will have a better feel for him. My guess is that somebody who’d been with the SEAL teams as long as Jace had, and then got boarded out, it had to have hit him hard. I don’t know how long he’d been with his particular team.”

“What’s boarded out?”

“It’s just slang for having gone through the Medical and Physical Evaluation Board. The process sucks ass,” I explained.

Zarek nodded. “I could see that.”

“You ready to head out?”

“I see you’re wearing a dark shirt. Good call. You’ll be getting hot in that in no time.” Zarek grinned.

“I like this cunning side of you. Keep it up, I’m going to need it.”

Really, did he really need to take off his shirt? I mean it was hot out, but Bruno and Zarek had kept their shirts on.

Shit, Michael looked good. He’d gained weight from the last time I’d seen him shirtless, and it was all muscle.

So many beautiful muscles.

And they were all gleaming with sweat. Thank God I had sunglasses on, otherwise everybody would see my eyes popping out as I ogled the man like he was some stripper in Vegas.

Down girl.

But seriously, I’d only had two lovers since Michael, and neither one of them had really done much for me in the bedroom, not compared to Michael. Now here I was, face-to-face with my favorite fantasy, and it was even better than I had remembered.

“I think we need to plant some pansies at the base of the trees, don’t you?”

Huh?

“Are you listening to me?”

I looked over to where my mom was setting out a tray of glasses to go with the homemade lemonade. I don't think I had seen her this happy since I'd been home. I looked closer at her face, but no, she wasn't ogling Michael; I think it was just all the attention her yard was getting.

“Pansies. Yeah, I heard you.”

Kind of.

“Actually, geraniums would be better since they do well in the shade. I know I have some that I bought last week that are still in their containers back near the shed. Can you go get those along with some mulch and a trowel?”

“Sure. I'll go check on Dad first.”

“I just did. He's asleep.”

“Oh, okay.” I nodded. I pushed my sunglasses on top of my head and walked to the side of the house where the shed was. Because I grew up with Mom, I was able to easily identify which flowers were the geraniums amongst all the different flowers she had recently purchased. I turned to the shed and stopped short. The combination lock wasn't on the shed. I looked down on the ground, and it wasn't there either.

What the hell?

I couldn't imagine Mom unlocking the shed and then pocketing the lock, but then again, she'd been awfully stressed lately. I opened the door wide to let in light and

ducked my head to get inside. I knew the mulch was on the back shelf, and the trowel was with the gardening tools on the right next to the door. I grabbed the partially filled bag of mulch and started to turn when something scraped my ankle.

“Ouch!”

I turned, expecting to see some barbed wire or a thorny branch.

Nothing.

I took two steps toward the tool shelf, but my leg started to give way. Pain bloomed like a wildfire, hot and searing. I started to panic.

What the fuck?

That’s when I saw it. A copperhead slithering out of the shed’s doorway, its thick, patterned body moving with an eerie grace. I sucked in a deep breath—or tried to. My pulse shot up as I saw another one a few feet outside the shed, coiled like it was waiting for me.

I took a step backward, but my leg faltered as fire erupted in my veins, spreading upward. I whimpered; the sound barely audible to my own ears. I dropped the bag of open mulch and dirt dripped down my front, adding to my misery, as it finally fell on my foot.

“Ow.” My voice wavered, weak and small. Was that even me?

I looked out again and the snakes were gone. I stumbled out of the shed, my legs trembling. The grass waved like the ocean in a storm. The geraniums didn’t just shimmer in the sunlight, they glowed like neon lights in Vegas.

I took one more step, then crumpled onto the flowers.

“Michael!” I tried to scream, but his name came out as a hiss from my swollen throat. Could he even hear me? Could my mother?

I opened my mouth to try again, but pain ripped through my ankle and when I glanced down my gut clenched. My ankle was gargantuan and red. The lava inside was going to make it explode if I didn’t get help.

“It hurts,” I whispered as tears blurred my vision.

“Michael! Help me!” Was I louder? Please God, let him hear me this time . My breath hitched, my chest tightening. The air seemed thinner, harder to draw in.

“Fallon!”

Michael.

My eyes closed in relief.

“Baby, what happened?” His voice was in my ear, so close, but so far away. Was he really here?

“Talk to me, Fallon.”

“Fire,” I hissed through clenched teeth. The world spun as his shadow loomed over me.

“Snakebite,” a voice said. “Look at her ankle.”

A hand brushed against my swollen skin. Pain exploded. A scream ripped from my

throat, or maybe it was just in my head. Darkness started to seep along the edges of my vision.

“Fallon, stay with me.” Michael sounded frantic. “Zarek, she’s going into anaphylactic shock! Get the med kit from my truck. There’s EpiPens in it. Move!”

He sounded scared. I wanted to say something. Anything to make him feel better, but the words wouldn’t come. My lips felt thick, and my tongue was too big for my mouth. Michael’s hand stroked my hair. I didn’t know who he was trying to comfort, him or me.

But the fire inside was too much.

“Fallon. Baby. You have to stay with me. I’m begging you. Please.”

These were the last words I heard as the darkness swallowed me whole and the sun winked out like a dying flame.

Chapter Thirteen

Fallon's lips were turning blue.

"Breathe, baby. Breathe." I begged her.

Her breath was wheezing in and out.

"Zarek! Where is that goddamn?—"

"Here!" He slapped one of the injectors into my hand with the cap already removed. I slammed the tip into her mid outer thigh and kept it there for ten seconds, then watched her face. She wasn't showing any reaction. I placed her legs over mine to get them elevated.

"Zarek, give me your shirt."

He'd already been taking his off. He knew the drill. He was tucking it around her before I had a chance.

"What's happening? Can you save her? Help her. You have to save my baby." Isla's voice barely penetrated.

"We need to get Fallon to Sevierville," I clipped out. It had the closest hospital that could handle this situation. I was still looking at Fallon's face for any kind of change. Still nothing. Her lips were still blue, and she was barely getting any air.

“Zarek—” I raised my hand, and he slapped another injector onto my palm. I injected her with a second dose of epinephrine. Her body jerked upwards as she gasped in a deep breath of air.

“We’ve got her!” I moved to a squat and picked her up. My truck was a crew cab, but?—

“Bruno, you driving your suburban?”

“Yep,” he answered as he started running toward the front of the house. Zarek and I were close on his heels.

“Wait. Take me with you,” Isla called out.

I heard Zarek start talking, but I didn’t pay attention; my entire focus was the open door of the back seat of Bruno’s Suburban. I slid in, still cradling Fallon. Bruno had the motor running and just as he got it in gear, the front passenger door was yanked open and Zarek jumped in.

Good. I needed him making calls.

“How’s she doing?” he asked over his shoulder.

“She’s breathing.” I didn’t add that she was whimpering in pain and tears were streaking down her face and that it was killing me. I put my fingers to her neck. “Her pulse is thready.”

I listened as Zarek relayed that information to someone. Meanwhile Bruno was driving like he was trying out for a NASCAR team.

I bent down and started to whisper in Fallon’s ear.

“Stay with me, Baby. I love you, Fallon. Stay with me.”

“Michael!”

I jerked up to look at Zarek. “What?”

“Try to get her to tell us what kind of snake bit her. They need to know what kind of antivenom to administer.”

Shit, I knew that.

I looked down and saw that Fallon’s breathing was becoming more ragged. I could hear the whine as she tried to draw in air. Her face was swollen and her lips were twice their normal size.

“Fallon. Do you know what kind of snake bit you?” I asked loudly.

She was a Tennessee girl. We’d camped together. If she’d seen the snake, she’d know. But she wasn’t answering me, she was just struggling to breathe.

I tried a different tack. I bent close and whispered in her ear. “Fallon, I need you to help us. It’s really important. What kind of snake bit you?”

Still nothing.

I stroked her cheek—wet with tears and so hot to the touch that I wanted to cry. “Please Sunshine, open your eyes. I need you to open your beautiful eyes for just a moment.”

“Hurts,” she whispered on an almost silent exhalation.

“I know it hurts. We’re going to get you to a hospital real quick. We’re going to get you medicine to take away the pain. But, Baby, I need to know what kind of snake bit you. Can you tell me?”

She opened her mouth and gasped for air. Then, on the exhale, she hissed the word, “Copper.”

“Copperhead,” I yelled to Zarek.

Once again, he started talking on the phone, but I didn’t pay any attention. I started stroking Fallon’s throat as if I could ease air through her passageway. She moved a little closer into my embrace and I shuddered with gratitude that she found solace in my touch.

It felt like forever that I stroked her throat and whispered words of love, encouragement and prayer.

“We’re here,” Zarek yelled as the vehicle shuddered to a stop. Someone yanked open the two back doors and I was eye-to-eye with a man with a stethoscope around his neck standing next to a stretcher.

“We’ve got her from here.”

I opened my mouth to shout no when he said, “Let us help her.”

I blinked and it was as if I came out of a trance. Jumping out of the backseat with Fallon in my arms, I placed her on the stretcher. I ran beside her as she was whisked through the hospital entrance.

I tried to follow as they took her through another set of doors, but a woman, a nurse, blocked my way. “You need to stay out here. You’ve done a good job, now let us do

ours.”

I took a step toward her, then a strong hand pulled me back. I didn’t need to look to know it was Zarek. The nurse turned and used a badge to go through the double doors.

“Come sit down. Let them do their jobs.”

“I can’t.” And I couldn’t. I needed to be in there with her.

“Think for a minute. You’ve done everything you can. It’s in their hands and God’s.”

I stopped still and looked at my best friend. For just a moment the veil lifted from his eyes, and I saw into his soul.

“Where’s the chapel?” I asked.

It seemed like forever before Bruno tapped me on the shoulder.

“She’s alive,” were the first words out of his mouth.

I bowed my head and thanked God before I got up and followed him out of the chapel and back to the ER waiting room. A nurse waited there.

“You all did a great job on your friend. She’s doing good, but we’re keeping her for at least a day or two until we’re sure her breathing has stabilized.”

“Can I see her?” I wiped my sweaty palms down the front of my shorts, realizing at that point I was wearing a Jasper Creek Construction polo shirt. I didn’t even remember putting it on.

“She’s being admitted into ICU. It’s a precaution since the swelling is above her knee. If it goes down, she can be released to a regular room. As soon as we get her into her ICU bed, I’ll come back and get you.”

“Thank you.”

She smiled, nodded and turned away.

“Wait a minute.” She turned back and looked at me. “I mean it. Thank you. Thank all of you. I can’t begin to tell you just how grateful I am.”

She gave me an assessing look, then smiled. “Oh, I’ve got an idea. And you’re welcome.”

I watched as she went back through the double doors.

I turned back to Bruno. “Where’s Zarek?”

“He went to get Fallon’s mom. We didn’t want her to come until we had some definitive news. We also didn’t want her driving.”

“Good thinking.” I looked over the waiting room and saw a row of empty chairs near the back wall and started toward them.

“I’m going to the cafeteria for something to drink. What would you like?” Bruno asked.

“Nothing.”

“Okay, then I’ll decide. I’ll be back in just a minute.”

I nodded, not paying any real attention. All I was focusing on was those last moments when I held Fallon in my arms and her struggling for every single breath. Those moments when I wasn't sure that she would live.

It was time for a balls-out conversation. I needed to tell her how much I loved her, and how sorry I was for what I did, and beg for her forgiveness. Did I want her to take me back? More than anything. But having her alive and knowing she forgave me, that would mean everything.

But you want her back.

I slumped over, leaning my elbows on my knees. My inner voice was right; I desperately wanted her back. I wanted to go forward and build a life with her. Create a family with her.

Sweat bloomed on the back of my neck as I sat back up. I needed her.

Chapter Fourteen

How could I still be hurting? It had been three days since I was released from the hospital, and I still could hardly bare putting any weight on my foot. I needed to pee and walking was torture. And here I had thought the hated catheter in the hospital was horrible. What was I thinking? That had been a treat!

Fuck!

I needed Michael's help.

Again.

My eyes began to sting as my full bladder made me squirm.

I knocked my injured ankle with my good foot and muttered, "Fuck." I felt a tear run down my face. I leaned over and picked up my phone. Yep. It was time for another fucking pain pill which would just make me even more woozy and stupid.

Yay, me .

My head jerked up when Michael knocked on my bedroom door. My mom never knocked, so it had to be Michael.

I grabbed the tissue box beside me and wiped at the tears. Good. Gone.

"Come in."

He was smiling when he walked into my room. It was the warm, let-me-cheer-you-up smile.

Did he have to be so nice?

“Hey, Sunshine. It’s time for another pill.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “I don’t want one.”

“Remember what the doctor said, you don’t want to let the pain get ahead of you.”

He had a fresh glass of water and picked up the pill bottle by the side of my bed. Before he could hand me the water, I blurted out, “I need to go to the bathroom.”

He smiled. “Not a problem. Let’s get you over there. Or, do you want to wait and take the pill first so then it doesn’t hurt as much to put weight down on your foot?”

I shook my head. “I was stupid,” I muttered. “Waited too long.”

“You weren’t stupid,” he gently admonished as he pulled off the sheet covering me. I was in my pajama set, shorts and a tank top. I sat up fast and twisted so my legs dropped to the side of the bed. I let out a squeak.

“Fallon! You know better. Go slow.”

“Don’t yell at me,” I yelled at him.

“Sorry, Sunshine. I just hate seeing you in pain.”

“Doesn’t Dad need something?” Great, now I was sneering at the man.

“Your mom is in with him right now. I made them lunch and they’re eating it in the dining room.”

I opened my mouth to ask where my lunch was and then shut my mouth before I sounded like a petulant child. Or worse, my father.

“After the bathroom and the pill, I’ll bring in your lunch. I made Philly cheesesteak sandwiches.”

“With green peppers and onions?” I knew I sounded like a druggie who wanted a fix, but for fuck’s sake, it was cheesesteak. Who wouldn’t drool after that?

Damn, could my emotions be anymore chaotic?

“Of course that’s how I made it. And I’m putting extra provolone on yours.”

“You’re a god, Mr. Rankin.”

“You finally noticed, huh?” His silver eyes twinkled.

He got a pill from the bottle, then handed it to me along with the glass of water. I gratefully swallowed it down. Then he bent down and I put my arm around his shoulders while putting my weight onto my left foot.

“I’m sick of being pathetic. Not only is there pain, but my brain still can’t look at a line of code and make sense of it. Hell, I can’t even win at Sudoku!”

Michael laughed. “Hell, I don’t even bother with Sudoku, Wordle is more my level.”

I laughed. I’d always had to help Michael with his math homework.

We'd finally made it into the bathroom. I gripped the bathroom sink. "You good?" he asked.

"I've got it from here."

"Holler out when you need me to come get you." He reached up and for a moment his index finger hovered over my nose. I thought he was going to tap it, like he had so many times before. We both froze. Instead, he cupped my cheek and smiled. "Remember, cheesesteak is in your future."

I nodded. He shut the door behind him and I stood there in front of the mirror looking at myself. I was a mess. Not just because I desperately wanted a shower instead of the sponge baths my mom had been giving me, but because I had fallen back in time to when Michael would always brush his finger across the tip of my nose, then kiss me. It was our thing. Kind of like him calling me Sunshine. I wanted that. What was I even thinking?!

I'd been in so much pain, and so scared when we were driving to the hospital, that it seemed like some kind of frenetic dream. Even though, I really think I'd heard Michael say he loved me.

I'd been holding onto those imagined words for the last six days. All the time I was in the hospital and ever since I'd been home and Michael had been here. What did that make me?

Crazy.

I turned from the mirror and did my business, then called for Michael to help me back to bed.

"This cobbler is wonderful. Did it come from Down Home?" Fallon asked as she

took another big bite.

I loved seeing her enjoy her dessert. Today was the first day her appetite seemed to have really returned. Plus, her mood had really evened out and improved since she was able to work.

“Yep, I picked it up from the diner earlier today.” I nodded.

“And you warmed it up and served it with ice cream,” she sighed in approval. “We should be eating this in the living room with Mom and Dad.”

“Fallon, it’s almost midnight,” I chuckled.

“It is?”

She looked over at her phone on the nightstand and saw the time. “How in the hell did that happen?”

“You fell asleep working on your tablet, and I didn’t want to wake you for dinner,” I told her.

She gave me a guilty look. “I feel bad that you’re over here babysitting me. You’re having to take vacation days, aren’t you?”

I nodded.

“I should be good enough to take care of myself tomorrow.”

“Maybe. But your mom can’t take your dad to the doctor’s tomorrow or handle him the next day after his chemo treatment. You’ve seen how weak she is.”

I saw Fallon's look of frustration and waited it out. Fallon had never been one who liked to rely on others. But it used to be, she didn't mind relying on me.

"She fakes it when she comes into my room, but I can see how tired she is. Before the snakebite, I'd gotten her an appointment with a new rheumatologist." This time she reached for her phone but couldn't quite touch it. I snagged it off the table and handed it to her.

"Thanks," she mumbled. She started scrolling through her calendar. "Mom's appointment is on Tuesday the fifth. Shit, that's three days from now." She jerked up her chin and looked up at me with wide hazel eyes.

I gently took the phone out of her hands.

"I've got it covered," I assured her.

"Michael, you're not a member of this family."

"What if I tell you I want to be?"

She squeezed her eyes tight, then opened them again. She didn't say anything for a moment, then I saw a mask fall across her face, and she gave me a fake smile. One she probably learned at her mother's knee. "So, you're trying to tell me you like chaos?"

"Sunshine, I thrive on your kind of chaos."

"But—"

"Seriously, Fallon. Don't worry about this. I was a Ranger, and I work as a firefighter. Dealing with your cranky dad, a beautiful-cranky you, and your passive-

aggressive mother is a walk in the park.”

She snorted. “Passive-aggressive about sums it up,” she said with a giggle, as she picked up her dessert. “But I wouldn’t just call Dad and me just cranky. I think there are more colorful words to describe both him and me.”

I smirked. “Maybe. But at least with you, I get to see all these cute pajama sets.”

“And Dad?”

I rolled my eyes. “His ratty pajama pants don’t do anything for me, but I hate to see him so sick.”

“Sit up here beside me,” she whispered as she patted the side of the bed.

“I don’t think there’s room.” She gave a guilty look at the other side of her bed. “Tell me, did your office look like this?” I wanted to know.

“Worse,” she admitted.

“How in the hell did you find anything?” I asked as I started scooping up all of the printouts, books, brochures, notebooks, sticky notes, tablet and a laptop and putting them on her childhood desk.

“I could find anything I needed,” she defended herself.

“Yeah, but how long did it take you?” I teased. I picked up my dish of cobbler off her dresser and then settled onto the bed, both of our heads resting against the headboard.

“Fine, I admit it. It was Dexter who kept everything straight. It’s tough without him. He was my executive assistant. He kept me sane and organized.”

“You had a male secretary?”

“Executive assistant. And before you start getting any kind of stereotypes in your head, he played college ball as an offensive lineman while studying project management. He started out with me as an intern five years ago. He was my right hand. People have been trying to poach him for the last couple of years. I paid him as much as I paid my Project Managers, and he earned every dollar. When I closed shop, a friend of mine hired him as his Chief Operating Officer at his start-up. Dexter was thrilled, and so was my friend.”

I could hear the pride in Fallon’s voice. “So, you like mentoring?”

“Yeah. I really do. It was the part of the job that was most rewarding.”

I shifted so I was facing her. “You’re going to make a fantastic mother.”

Pink suffused her face. “Maybe.”

“I’m serious.”

She looked down at her bowl. “I’m all done.”

I took the dish out of her hands and placed it on the nightstand on my side of the bed, along with my own. When I turned back, I found her staring at me. The air got thick as we assessed one another.

“What?” I asked.

“Can you be honest with me?” she whispered.

My gut clenched. Here we go . I wasn’t ready, but I so wanted to do this.

“Absolutely I’ll be honest with you.”

Her hazel eyes shone with grief. “What happened between you and Lindsay that night?” She whispered the question.

I grabbed her hands and pulled them into mine. They were ice cold, and I knew it wasn’t because she had been holding a bowl with melted ice cream. I looked down and brushed my thumb over her knuckles.

I looked back up and swallowed. “After you saw me close the door behind us, Lindsay bitched me out to high heaven. Told me I was the lowest piece of scum on Earth for having pulled such a stunt.”

She flinched, then waited, forcing me to continue.

“You know Lindsay, she’d always been a straight shooter. She knew exactly what I’d done and why I’d done it. She didn’t actually call me scum, Fallon. She actually told me I was a douchebag for setting her up to be the bad guy, and not having the fucking balls to break up with you like a man.”

Fallon jerked her hands out of mine.

“Oh.” It came out on a puff of air.

“She was right,” I admitted softly.

Fallon’s gaze shifted until she was looking a thousand miles away over my shoulder.

“I’m so sorry, Fallon. If I could go back in time, I would.”

Her eyes flew back to pierce mine. “Would you? Would you really? Because if you

feel like that, why didn't you call me after I left?"

I raised my hands, palms up. "Please?" I beseeched. I wasn't sure if she would, but when she did place her fingers on top of mine, I felt like I had just won an Olympic medal.

"I don't know why I didn't call you," I whispered my truth.

Fallon nodded, as if she expected that answer. "Do you now?"

I wanted to say yes. I knew she needed me to say yes. My fingers tightened around hers, willing her to stay with me, even with what I was about to say.

"I'm still not sure what made me do it," I said at last. "All I knew at the time, is it seemed like the most important thing in the world to save you from me. To get you as far away from me as possible."

"Do you still feel like that?"

"No!" The word burst out of me. "This time I can tell you straight that I know I want us to be together, that I want us to last forever. I love you so much, I ache."

Fallon rubbed her thumb over the back of my hand. "But you still don't know why you thought I was better off without you before?"

I shook my head, scared shitless because I knew what she was going to say next.

"If you didn't know why you threw me away last time, what's to stop you from doing it again, Michael?"

I untangled our fingers and lifted my hand to cup her cheek. "Because I've lived nine

years without you, and every single day was hell. I can't stand the idea of ever being without you again."

Chapter Fifteen

I closed my eyes and nuzzled my cheek into the palm of his hand.

“Fallon?”

I opened my eyes and saw him watching me. I hadn’t imagined everything he’d said to me on the way to the hospital. He did love me.

My Michael loves me.

Tomorrow would be soon enough to try to untangle everything else, but tonight I wanted to bask in his love and be held by him. Have him touch me again... the way he used to, and not have it just be a dream.

“Kiss me.” It wasn’t a request, it was a demand.

Michael slid his hands into my hair and tilted my head. I watched in suspense as his head lowered and I felt the first brush of his lips against mine. It was just a tease, or perhaps it was just a hesitant hello. Whatever it was, it wasn’t enough. I pressed up, opening my mouth in welcome, and that was all it took. Michael ripped off the blankets covering me, and swept me up, then he settled me back down so that I found myself lying flat, looking up at his hungry gaze. Somehow, he still managed to put my injured foot up on the pillow. He was such a Boy Scout.

“Hello, Sunshine,” he murmured. His mouth crashed on mine, and a world of color rushed in, bursting through all my defenses, reminding me of what life had been like

and what it could be like again.

Lips, tongues, and teeth collided in a frantic effort to get closer.

To taste.

To lick.

To bite.

Michael was driving me insane with his voracious need. I needed to touch him. I felt the skin of his back beneath my fingers, then felt his palm on my naked breast.

I moaned with pleasure against his lips.

He lifted his mouth from mine. “Quiet, Baby.”

I dug my fingers into his scalp, forcing him back to my lips. Damn, my man could kiss. He tasted of peaches, mint and a flavor that was all his own, and I felt it right between my legs. The man had better be ready to deliver the goods, otherwise I was going to kill him.

Michael bit my lower lip as if he could pluck my thoughts from my head and was punishing me for them. Then he licked away the little bit of pain, and I realized he was playing with me. I snuck my fingers further up his t-shirt, glorying in the freedom to finally touch his body. But it still wasn't enough, and I whined.

He lifted his head again. “What?”

“Take off your shirt.”

He pushed into a sitting position, then whipped his shirt over his head and threw it on the floor. He looked across the room, then got up off the bed, walked over to the bedroom door, and turned the lock.

“Your mom never knocks.” He answered my unasked question.

“No, but she’s a sound sleeper.”

“Oh, have you had sex here in your bedroom before?” He raised a brow and I shoved a hand in my mouth to stifle a giggle.

“Smartass,” I finally mumbled.

He prowled back to the bed as I shimmied off my pajama top. He stopped and stared.

“Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

“Could I?”

“Oh yeah,” he breathed as he came down on top of me. When his chest met mine, I felt his rough hair rasp against my nipples and I cried out.

“Baby, you’ve got to be quiet,” he whispered.

“I don’t think I can.”

His gray eyes searched my face. “Ah, fuck it. Who gives a shit what they hear.” He drifted down and took my nipple into his mouth. I shoved my fist into my mouth as I revelled in the pleasure he was giving me.

As he licked and sucked my nub I clutched at his back, my nails digging deep. When

I could trust myself, I removed my fist from my mouth and started to encourage him.
“Yes, just like that, Michael.”

He sucked my nipple deeper into the hot depths of his mouth. “Perfection,” I hissed out the word. When he scraped the tip with his teeth, I slapped my hand over my mouth again to suppress my scream. Then the bastard had the nerve to change tactics and move to my other breast and I wasn’t going to survive!

I don’t know how long he pleased me, savored me, tortured me while I savored every long minute; all I did know is that I never wanted to leave his embrace. When Michael started to lick downward, I knew I was going to lose every ounce of control, and I needed to wrest some away from him.

I knew just how to do it.

“Wait, Michael,” I breathed.

“Why?” I could tell he wasn’t listening. His fingers were tracing the elastic band of my pajama shorts. Every touch lit flickers of heat straight to my core.

“I need to see your cock. I need to taste it. It’s been so long.”

His head shot up. Shocked silver eyes locked with mine and I wasn’t able to keep the wicked grin off my face.

“Fallon—” His fingers dug into the flesh of my hips.

“You can’t have it all your way, big guy. I’ve dreamed of you... a lot. There you were flaunting yourself in my backyard, showing off your muscles, slick with sweat, and all I could think about was licking you up.”

“When did you turn into a dirty talker?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. And I didn’t. “You bring out the worst in me.”

“I’m thinking I bring out the best in you,” he growled, his eyes alight with glee.

“Whatever. All I know is that if you don’t strip out of your sweats, I’m about to shout down the house. Dad might be sick, but he still owns a gun and he’ll come running.”

I watched with bated breath as Michael got up and stood by the side of the bed. He pushed down his sweats. He wasn’t wearing anything beneath them, so his cock bobbed up, swollen and proud. My heart began to pound. I reached out and encircled his girth the best I could, loving the feel of the warm skin covering such hard strength. I could feel his heartbeat.

“Fallon, stop.”

I forced my eyes away from his penis to look up at his face. “Stop what?”

“Stop stroking me. I won’t be able to last.”

I looked down and realized I was stroking him from tip to base, again and again and again. Each stroke felt like petting a tiger, dangerous and addictive.

“Fallon, stop,” he commanded again.

His hand covered mine, and I stopped, but not before I swiped a drop of pre-cum off the tip of his penis and sucked it into my mouth.

“Jesus, are you trying to kill me?” he groaned.

I slowly grinned. “What if I am?”

“Then I’ll die happy.”

“Fuck me, Michael. I need you inside me.”

He grimaced. “Dammit, Fallon. I don’t have anything to protect you with. I didn’t come to this house with anything more in mind than helping out. I don’t have any condoms with me.”

“I’m on the pill,” I quickly inserted. Fat lot of good it did for me. The last time I’d had sex with somebody without a condom had been Michael. But when I’d tried to come off the medicine it screwed too much with my hormones.

He stroked his knuckles down the side of my cheek. I shuddered at his gentle touch. “We have physicals with the fire department. I haven’t been with anyone since my last physical which was clean,” he whispered. Then his lip curled slightly. “Hell, I haven’t been with anyone since the last three physicals.”

I was shocked, but I didn’t ask any questions, I just answered in kind. “I’m clean, and it’s been a long time for me, too.”

Michael put his knee down on the bed and scooped me into the middle, then he lay down beside me. His lips met mine, and I was back to a world ripe with bold colors. A world that only Michael Rankin had ever shown me.

He was infinitely careful as he pulled down my pajama shorts and panties, making sure not to hurt my injured ankle as he slipped them off, and then threw them over his shoulder.

“God, you’re even more beautiful than I remember, Fallon.”

The admiration shining in his eyes made me melt even more. How could I have gone on so long without Michael in my life?

How could I have forgotten how much Fallon liked to be touched?

I trailed my hand from her uninjured foot and up her leg, to brush against the silky hair covering her mound. She shifted her other leg, and soon I saw the glistening welcome on her folds. I traced my fingers along the seam of her sex and she let out a hiss of pleasure as she spread her legs even wider.

“Sunshine, keep your leg on the pillow. Okay?”

“Fuck the pillow, I’ll keep my leg elevated tomorrow.”

I stifled a laugh and lifted my hand away from her.

“Not fair, Michael. Keep touching me.”

“Keep your leg elevated, and I’ll keep touching you,” I teased.

Fallon rolled her eyes at me, then positioned her leg back into the center of the pillow and tugged my hand back between her legs, then reached toward my cock. I batted her hand away.

“Uh-uh. You don’t get to play with me, until I’m done playing with you.”

What’s more, if she touched me, I’d go off like a thirteen-year-old-boy with his first porno magazine.

“Well, hurry up, then.”

I barked out a laugh. There wasn't one thing about this woman that wasn't wonderful.

Wasn't lovable.

I parted the lips of her sex and pushed two fingers in, fast and deep.

"Ahhhh!" she moaned.

So slick.

So tight.

I started a rhythm that soon had her head slowly turning back and forth on the pillow, her blonde hair glinting in the lamp light.

"More?" I asked.

"God, yes."

I drove her faster, feeling a heady joy as I watched her pleasure ramp up. Then I moved my thumb and rasped it against her clit. She gave a muted shriek as she plunged over the edge into orgasm.

Her cry shot straight to my cock.

I swooped down and covered her mouth with my own. She tasted like sunshine.

In and out, I thrust my tongue into her mouth, and I mirrored that action with my fingers plunging into her sheath. I could feel her delicate muscles trembling around me, and I pressed in deeper, finding a spot that made her shake harder.

I lifted my mouth. “That’s it, baby, give me your pleasure,” I crooned.

I swirled and swirled, making sure my fingers touched that spot inside her that was driving her crazy, while my thumb continued to rasp her clit in tiny, tight circles.

I could see her orgasm coming, and with my other hand, I brushed back the hair from her face and whispered in her ear.

“Fallon, come for me.”

She looked up at me and I could swear I saw her looking at me with love in her eyes.

Please let it be true .

Then she thrust upwards and her arms encircled my neck, pulling me down to her so she could muffle her sobs between my collar and jaw.

“Michael!” she finally shrieked into my ear as she climaxed. “Take me.”

I couldn’t wait another moment. Not when I pulled away and saw the need so clear on her face.

“Now, Honey. Now ,” she begged.

I lifted over her, positioning myself against her slick heat. Slowly, I entered her tight depths and knew I was going to lose my mind.

This moment meant everything.

She curled one leg around me, her fingers clinging and digging into my back muscles, pulling me in.

“More,” she whispered.

I pushed to the hilt and felt heaven.

She let out a startled mewl but then smiled. “So good.”

“Thank God.”

I began to move, and she met me stroke for stroke. We moved as if we were listening to a song written only for us. Timeless and beautiful.

I felt sweat coating my lower back, as fire licked through my body and settled at the base of my spine. I wasn't going to last. Fallon's gorgeous face, with eyes that glittered green and lips red and swollen from all our kisses, looked up at me. I dipped in for another kiss that left me barely hanging on.

“Fallon?” I prayed she was close again.

She thrust up against me, one heel digging into my ass, and then I felt her fingers in my hair, yanking at the strands. At the same time, I felt her sheath begin to pulse around my cock and I knew I was seconds away from ecstasy.

“Fallon!”

She bit my chest, then the most extraordinary woman I've ever known let out a joyous shout that was my name, over and over again.

Unending bliss poured through my body, beginning the hard work of knitting my soul back together.

Chapter Sixteen

Michael was in my parents' bedroom getting Dad sorted after coming back from the hospital, and I was doing my damndest trying to take my mom's mind off things.

"You really don't have to make anything for me, Mom. Michael said his mom is bringing over dinner tonight, and I'm not hungry right now."

She continued to take out cans from the pantry and put them on the counter. From my vantage point at the kitchen table, I counted over fifteen different cans of soup, vegetables, and fruit spread out on the countertop. I figured an intervention was required.

"What's the latest gossip at church?" I asked. Used to be this was worth a couple of hours' worth of conversation.

"Fallon Jane, you should be ashamed of yourself, church is a place of worship not a place to spread rumors."

"Mom, I wasn't asking you to spread rumors. I was just asking you what was going on with the different parishioners. We haven't really talked about the folks here in Jasper Creek much since I got here."

She pinned me with an assessing look. "This past Sunday, people were asking why Michael Rankin was staying here at the house. That was the main topic of conversation. I told them that he was just being neighborly after he had saved your life, and all."

I could feel myself blushing. “I’m sure that stopped them from talking.”

“It did. Of course, if they had asked me today after what I heard last night, I would have had to ignore all of their questions or risk being struck down by the Lord for lying.”

Aw, shit!

I waited for Mom’s lecture. Instead, a small grin spread across her face. “You sure make a lot of noise, Fallon.”

“Mom!” I squeaked out my protest.

“Well, you do.”

Now would have been a great time to retreat to my bedroom, except for the fact that Michael had helped me out to the table and my crutches were in my bedroom. So here I was stuck at the table with my feet up on a pillow in another chair, held captive by my mom. And I was pretty sure she was teasing me.

“It’s not what you think,” I said weakly.

“So, I’m wrong? You and Michael weren’t making love?”

Well shit, how was I supposed to answer that question?

“Did Dad hear?”

“No, his pain medication was really working last night. He was out for the count. Not me though. So, it seems like you and Michael are getting along better, am I right in thinking that?”

I nodded. What else could I do?

“That’s good.”

“I wonder what Michael’s mom will be bringing for dinner,” I said, hoping to deflect the conversation. But as soon as the words were out of my mouth, I cringed. The idea of seeing Michael’s mother when she probably hated my guts made me ill.

“You always raved about her chicken and dumplings; she’ll probably make those for you.”

I couldn’t even look at Mom. I couldn’t look anywhere besides at my feet. The ill feeling that had been with me the first few days after I left the hospital was back with a vengeance.

“Fallon, are you okay?” my mom asked.

“Is something wrong?” I heard Michael ask as he came into the kitchen.

“We were just talking about your mother, and Fallon started looking peaked again. Honey, do you need a pain pill?”

I shook my head. “I think I just need to go lie down,” I said.

“Are you sure?” Michael asked. “Mom’s really looking forward to getting a chance to catch up with you. I’ve been bragging on you.”

I looked up at him, and I could see he was serious.

What in the hell?!

“I don’t think I’m up for it,” I whispered.

“Fallon, what’s wrong?” Michael asked as he squatted down beside me.

I knew why he was asking like that. I’d already gotten an earful from him when he’d gotten back from the hospital with Mom and Dad and realized I’d taken a bath and washed my hair, all on my own. He’d been pissed. We’d had a bit of a fight about it. Damn man was positive I’d overdone it, and now saying I needed a nap was proving him right.

“Nothing’s wrong, I’m just a little tired.”

“Did you reinjure your ankle? How’s the swelling?”

He flipped up the hem of my maxi-dress so he could examine my ankle.

“Isla, can you get the icepack?” he asked.

“Seriously, Michael, I’m fine,” I protested.

“You’re not fine. You overdid it. You should have waited for me before you took a bath today.”

My mom snorted as she handed him the icepack. Michael didn’t even notice she was laughing.

I swear that someone could’ve fried eggs on my face with how hot my cheeks were.

He pulled a dishtowel off the counter and wrapped it around the icepack and gently rested it against my ankle. “There, that should help. I’ll go get your pills from your bedroom,” he said as he stood up.

“I don’t need a pill. I just wanted to go to lie down for a bit. But the ice should take care of things,” I relented. I’d face his mom like a big girl.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“I’m—”

The doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” my mom said as she headed for the front room.

Michael must have noted the pained expression on my face, because he bent down beside me. “What is it, Fallon?”

“Your mother must hate me,” I wailed.

“Is that what this is all about?”

I nodded.

“I talked to her and Dad last week. I told them what happened. Trust me, my mother does not hate you. As a matter of fact, I would appreciate any kind words you could say on my behalf.”

“Michael, what were you thinking?”

“I was thinking it was about damn time I manned up, is what I was thinking.”

“There you are,” Lana Rankin said as she preceded my mom into the kitchen. She looked as pretty as a picture. She was wearing a pretty sweater twin set, and the warmest smile imaginable.

“Oh, Honey, look at you. Michael told me you could have died.” Lana angled down and enveloped me in one of her warm hugs that included the scent of Chanel No. 5. I felt like ten years had melted away. As she pulled away, I could see the tears in her eyes.

“It was Michael who saved me,” I whispered.

She looked over my head and gazed at her son. They might not look anything alike, but there was no mistaking the love between them. “Michael did good that afternoon,” she choked out.

“Yes, he did,” my mom said firmly. “Michael is a hero, Lana.”

“He was that day,” Lana said.

Mom gave her a curious look and before anything more could be said, I stepped in. “What did you bring for dinner?”

“Your favorite.”

“Chicken and dumplings?” I guessed.

“Oh, Honey, that was Michael’s favorite that you always asked for. But I knew that what you really liked best were my smothered pork chops with onion and mushroom gravy.”

Michael glanced over at me. “Is that true? You always said you liked Mom’s chicken and dumplings best. Did you really like her pork chops better?”

I grimaced.

“That was just how Fallon was, Michael. She wanted you to have what you wanted. Didn’t you ever wonder why I would have pork chops so often when the two of you came over?”

“I just thought you forgot what she liked,” Michael said.

Lana chuckled and I joined in. I should have realized the woman never missed a trick. “Michael, I left the food in my car, can you go get it?”

Michael brushed a kiss against his mother’s cheek and left the kitchen to do her bidding.

“Now tell me really, how are you? Is my son making a nuisance of himself?”

My Mom snorted. “Based on the sounds I was hearing from Fallon’s sickbed last night, I think the kids are doing just fine, Lana.”

Lana looked down at me, her brown eyes twinkling. “So, it’s like that, is it?”

God save me.

“Thanks for the banana cream pie, Lana,” my dad said for the third time.

“Bob, you’re so welcome. I was hoping it might be gentle enough for your stomach,” she said as she bent over and kissed him on his cheek.

“Let me walk you out to your car, Mom.” Michael’s hands were full of all of the empty dishes that she had brought with her.

“Okay, Honey.” Lana smiled up at her son.

“Fallon. Isla. It was so good spending time with both of you. Next time, hopefully Eric will be in town and I’ll bring him, or all of you will come over to our house.”

Mom followed her toward the front door, leaving Dad and me at the kitchen table.

“How are you feeling?” I asked him.

“Exhausted. I’ll start really feeling like shit tomorrow,” he sighed.

I laughed. “Aren’t we a sad pair.”

“The Vickers’ family has seen better days,” he agreed. “Michael’s mom is quite a lady. Reminds me a lot of your mother.”

I raised my eyebrow.

“Your Mom will often times take food or meals to people around town if somebody is sick at home. She used to have you go along with her, remember that?”

I nodded. “I liked it when we would bake cakes and cookies.”

Dad chuckled. “So, did I. But you never left enough for me, as far as I was concerned.”

“Mom would catch you trying to steal some out of the Tupperware she had set out to take, and get mad at you.”

“But never too mad.” my dad winked at me.

Who was this man, and what had he done with Bob Vickers?

“Please don’t say you’ve finished off the pie, Bob,” Michael said as he and Mom came back into the kitchen. “I didn’t get a big enough slice the first go around.”

“There is still some left for you, Michael.” Dad grinned. Then he yawned.

“Bob, do you need to—” Isla started. As she began clearing plates from the table.

“No, I’m fine.” But it was clear he was exhausted. The day had caught up with him, despite all the time he had spent in bed after the trip to the hospital. “Michael, I haven’t thanked you for saving my daughter’s life,” my father choked out. Were those tears in his eyes?

“Bob, you don’t have to thank me.”

“But I do. I don’t know what I would have done, if I’d lost Fallon.”

They were tears!

Michael moved around the table and rested his hand on my dad’s shoulder. “It was my honor,” he whispered.

Dad nodded. “Actually, I am tired,” he said. “I’m going to need some help getting back into bed.”

“I can—” Mom started.

“No, let Michael,” Dad replied. “I’m going to be too heavy for you, Honey.”

Michael helped lift Dad out of his chair and they started down the hall together. After they were out of earshot, Mom looked over at me. “Michael’s a good man,” she said.

“Yes. Yes, he is,” I agreed.

Chapter Seventeen

Things were finally back to normal. The project that my company had been working on was going to make the deadline, and we'd get our on-time bonus. I was already considering one of three different clients to take on, and I was now down to taking over-the-counter pain killers.

Michael had been back to work and was due home any time now, and Dad had already had his bowling buddies over this morning. I just wished I wasn't walking around with a limp.

The door to my bedroom opened just as I had finished my call with Eddie and Vanessa. I looked up to see Mom with her gardening hat on.

"You ready?" she asked.

"More than. I need some vitamin D." I smiled up at her.

She came into my room and handed me my sun hat. "I set up a chair so you can prune the roses while I plant pansies along the front hedge."

"Sounds good," I said as I got out of my chair. "You seem to be doing a lot better with the medicine that the new doctor put you on."

"I am." Mom nodded vigorously. "Thank you so much for getting me that appointment."

“You’re welcome,” I said as I followed her out of my bedroom toward the back door.

“Oh, can you call Michael and have him drop by Draper’s Hardware and pick up a combination lock for the shed? Ours went missing the day you got bit.”

I frowned. “What do you mean it went missing? Didn’t you take it? It wasn’t on the shed when I went into it that afternoon.”

“Honey, you’re wrong. Of course it was. I always lock the shed. We have poisonous chemicals in the shed, I don’t want any of the neighborhood children to get in there. Not that I think they would, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

“No, it wasn’t there, Mom.”

“Fallon, it was. Honey, your memory of that afternoon is really cloudy.”

“My memory was cloudy after I got bit. Trust me, I remember everything clearly before I got bit. I remember you setting out the lemonade. You asking for the geraniums to plant under the dogwood trees. You asking for the mulch and the trowel. And I distinctly remember the lock not being on the shed and how surprised I was.”

“Fallon, that’s just plain weird. Ask Michael if he took it.”

“Did he know the combination?”

“It hasn’t changed in fifteen years. I’m sure he did.”

I picked up my phone to call Michael. It went to voicemail, and I asked him if he had the lock, and if he didn’t, I asked him to buy one.

I didn't waste any time after I got Fallon's voicemail. I headed straight to the Onyx Security office. Simon was there and he looked up from a file that he was reading when I knocked on the doorjamb of his office.

"Hey, Michael," he said as he closed the file. "Did you get another letter?"

"Something worse, and I don't think I'm overreacting. I think Sid planted copperhead snakes in the Vickers' shed."

Simon got up from behind his desk and stepped to the front, then leaned back against it, folding his arms across his chest.

"How do you figure that?"

At least he didn't immediately think I was crazy. That was a start.

"The combination lock for the shed was missing when Fallon went into the shed. I've been over there for years. That building was always locked. Always."

"Damn, Michael. That would take some real effort. Possession of poisonous snakes is highly regulated. He'd have to find someone who sold exotic animals, get them, transport them, and release them into the shed. Seems more likely that the snakes just got into the shed somehow."

"The shed isn't wood, it's totally manufactured, and Bob put it on a cement pad. It's solid. There isn't any way in but the door. As for transporting them, wouldn't whoever sold them provide him with the container to transport?" I asked.

"You're right," Simon nodded. "How substantial was the lock?"

"He'd need bolt cutters to get it off."

“You said the shed was manufactured. What’s it made out of?”

“My guess is galvanized steel. I’d need to ask Bob.”

“Let’s go take a look.”

We left the office and Simon followed me out to the Vickers’ house. I parked in the driveway and Simon parked out in the street. He followed me to the side of the house where the shed was. Once we knew what we were looking for, we could clearly see the scrapes in the metal where the bolt cutters had been used to cut the lock off.

“Oh my God. He did do this. He knows about Fallon,” I breathed out.

“Yeah,” Simon agreed. “But he didn’t give a shit who got hurt. It could have been her mom or dad just as easily as Fallon.”

“But he didn’t take credit for it,” I pointed out.

“My take is that he’s just wanting to rile you up. He wants you on your back foot so he can keep coming after you. If he knows who Fallon is and where she lives, he knows where you and your parents live.”

I nodded. “I want her staying at my house. I have the alarm, and I have Harley. I’m going to talk to Dad about not taking any more trips so he’s there with Mom all the time.”

“That sounds reasonable, but what are you going to do about your job?”

“I’m going to talk to the Captain about taking a leave of absence until this is over with.”

“Is that really feasible?” Simon asked as we walked to the front of the house.

“Yeah. Hell, I’ve got so much personal time off accrued, I could be gone with pay for damn near six months.”

Simon nodded. “Sounds like a plan.”

Fallon looked at the notes in her hand. “Why didn’t you tell me about these before?”

“Because I thought I had Simon and Roan taking care of things. There was no reason to bring it up.”

She looked up at me, her hazel eyes glinting. “Michael, where are you and I going?” she asked as she threw the notes down on my coffee table.

I had been able to talk her into coming over to my house so we could discuss things. Instead of continuing to sit on my couch, she was now pacing my living room, limping back and forth.

“What are you talking about? You mean us? You know where we’re going. We’re trying to move forward. Start fresh.”

“That’s what I thought, too, but how can we do that when you’re lying to me? We’ve had enough lies in our past without you doing it now.”

“I’m not lying. And anyway, this doesn’t pertain to our relationship.”

She stormed over to where I was seated and leaned over me. She looked like a Valkyrie as she pointed her finger at me. “Are you trying to say that your biological father who killed your mother, who is out of prison and gunning for you, doesn’t pertain to me?” she shouted. “That’s a pretty big thing in your life. As a matter of

fact, I'd say that's the hugest thing you've got going on in your life right now, and you didn't tell me about it."

I stood up, and we were face-to-face. "The biggest deal in my life right now, is you. Getting a second chance with you fills my thoughts night and day. I was happy to ask for time off, since I need all my concentration on my job when I'm there, but right now I can't give it because of all my feelings for you. Winning you back is all I think about." My voice was hoarse.

"Well, you're doing a piss poor job of it." I watched in horror as her face crumpled. "Michael, don't you understand? You still haven't told me why you drove me away from you nine years ago. Even when we were together then, you never talked about the time before you were adopted. And now all of a sudden, you're telling me that your biological dad was in prison for killing your mom and for some unknown reason he's out and is out to get you, your parents, and me? How can you possibly think that we have any kind of foundation for us to be together?"

Tears were streaming down her face. I reached for her and she backed away, almost falling as her right leg gave out on her. I grabbed her, pulling her into my arms. I was wrecked by everything she'd just said; shattered at the thought that just when I thought I had her back in my world, I'd lost her.

Fallon's body shuddered against me, her sobs shaking her body. I picked her up and sat us down on the couch. I cradled her on my lap, holding her close and once more praying to God that I wouldn't lose her.

I came out of my trance and felt the warmth of Michael's arms around me as I sat on his lap. Sheltered and safe.

"I have a story to tell you," he whispered into my ear.

“Okay,” I murmured.

Michael started talking.

“My first memory is my mom yelling at me to hide. I know this wasn’t the first time this had happened because I recognized the sick feeling in my belly. I remember thinking the monster was back in the house.

“I couldn’t breathe right. My mom was crying, so her yells were hard to understand, but the way she pushed me under my bed was easy to comprehend. Then she was begging Sid not to hurt her. Sid was the name of the monster.”

I gripped Michael’s forearm, my nails biting into his skin.

“I heard the crack of a fist hitting flesh. It was so loud I jerked and hit my head on the bottom of the bed, but I didn’t make a sound.

“‘Where is he?’ the monster screamed. My mom said she didn’t know. I heard another loud sound, and my mom groaned. I knew I wasn’t supposed to move or make noise. Not when I was under the bed.

“‘Where is he?’ the monster kept screaming. My mom kept saying she didn’t know, and that was when she fell down beside the bed. Her face was turned to me, but it looked wrong. Her pretty silver eyes had puffs around them.”

I whimpered. Listening to what Michael was saying was like having razors slice through my skin. I motioned for him to lie down until we were facing each other on the couch.

“I crawled out from beneath the bed to get to her,” he went on.

I tightened my arms around him and whispered, “Oh no, Baby. How old were you?”

“Two or three. I’m not sure. When I got near my mom, the monster picked me up by my arm and it hurt real bad. I remember thinking he ripped my arm off.”

I squeezed him tighter.

“Mom yelled, ‘Sid, don’t hurt our baby.’ He yelled back, ‘There’s no baby. There’s just this useless piece of whiny shit.’

“Mom tried to get up, but he kicked her and she fell back on the floor. Then he dropped me beside her and kicked me in the stomach. I threw up. He bent down and wiped my face in my puke. I must have passed out, because that’s it. That’s all I remember.”

Michael stopped talking. As we lay side-by-side on the sofa, I rocked him. Rocked the little boy who had suffered such a brutal past.

“So, there it is, Fallon. My first memory. That’s why I never shared.”

This time I didn’t cry, but I so wished Michael would cry. He needed to for that little boy.

“How old were you when you were taken away from them?”

“Five. It was the night I watched my dad murder my mother.”

Chapter Eighteen

“Well, at least you set your alarm, there is that,” Zarek said as he trudged into my house behind me, petting Harley along the way.

“What are you talking about?”

“You look like shit. I thought your big plan was to take time off and protect your woman. Where is she? And if she’s not here, why aren’t you where she is?”

“Apparently, we’re at a ‘stand-still.’ Her words, not mine.” I went over to the fridge and pulled out my third beer for the day, and it was only four o’clock. “Want one?” I asked Zarek.

“No. Too easy to go down that path.” He peered into my recycling bin and saw the empty beer bottles. “I’m thinking you don’t need a beer, either,” he said as he took it out of my hand and put it back into the refrigerator. “Let’s go to your backyard and throw the ball for Harley.”

I shrugged. Why not?

Zarek reached into the fridge and pulled out two sports drinks, handed one to me, and then I followed him out my back door, carefully setting the alarm.

Harley was jumping up and down when he realized it was playtime. Zarek threw the tennis ball a good long ways. “So, explain what a ‘stand-still’ means.”

“I confessed about the set-up that I pulled with Lindsay.”

Zarek looked me up and down. He took in my ratty Army t-shirt and unwashed jeans.

“You’re not limping, so I’m assuming she didn’t castrate you, so there is that.”

“Yeah, we got past that part. Then she asked me why I did it.”

“Did you tell her that you were an ignorant asshole who can’t recognize a miracle when he has it in the palm of his hand?”

Harley dropped the tennis ball at my feet. I patted her head, and then threw the ball farther than Zarek had, not that I was keeping track.

“I told her I didn’t know why.”

“Then what happened?”

“We made love.”

“You are one lucky son of a bitch,” Zarek said as he shook his head.

“For a little bit. Then I had to tell her that Sid had planted the copperheads. I had to come totally clean about Sid’s threats, and that she and her family were in danger. She went ballistic. She told me how we couldn’t be together with me keeping so many things from her. My childhood, the reason I pulled out of the wedding, and the fact that Sid was gunning for me.”

Harley came back, happy as hell, dropping the ball at my feet. I nudged it over to Zarek. He picked it up and threw it out for her to chase. They kept that up for another ten or fifteen minutes. I knew my friend, he was waiting me out.

Finally, it worked. “I told her about my first memory with my real mom and dad. It wasn’t pretty.”

“I can’t imagine it was,” he muttered.

“I hated telling her that.”

“The dredging it up?” Zarek asked.

“No, just contaminating her with that filth. I never wanted that part of my life to touch her.”

Zarek knelt down on the grass and started petting Harley on her stomach. She was in ecstasy. “Do you really think that? Really?”

“Well sure.”

“Think about that. If anyone else said that. Or, spin it around and if it was Fallon thinking that way about her biological parents, would you see it as filth?”

I rubbed the back of my neck, but the muscles were like granite. “I get your point.”

“Do you?”

I shut my eyes. I remembered how Fallon looked at me after I got done telling her about my first memory. The warmth and compassion. The way we’d made love. Scratch that, the way she had made love to me. It had been precious.

“Was she happier that you’d shared? I know I would give my left nut if Chloe would open up to me. I mean really fucking open up to me, so we could clear the smoke and see each other for who we are.”

“Yeah, she was happier,” I admitted. “But that was three days ago. She left in the morning, telling me that until I could tell her more... Tell her everything, that we couldn’t move forward.”

“And meanwhile Sid has her in his sights. You’ve got to be freaked.”

“I’ve been watching their house every night. Ace Alarm Systems will be installing their alarm next week. Bob insisted on paying.”

Zarek snorted. “How much did they quote him?”

“A quarter of the actual cost. I picked up the rest,” I admitted.

“Did you come clean with her parents about why the need for security?”

“Yeah, Fallon and I explained about the notes, but we didn’t tell them about the copperheads.”

“What did they think about this guy being your biological dad?” Zarek asked.

“Bob’s not firing on all cylinders because of the chemo, and Fallon’s mom was relieved and happy that I was taking care of things. Neither one of them asked anything too deep as to why Dad was in prison, or why he was targeting me and mine.”

My friend stood back up and threw the ball again.

“What does Fallon think about you spending the night outside the house?”

“She keeps calling me and telling me to go home, which I don’t. But then we’ll usually talk for an hour or more.”

“So at least the lines of communication are open. Good job.”

I dug my knuckles into the back of my neck. “Not so good of a job. Zarek, I still haven’t figured out what panicked the hell out of me and made me want to get out of my wedding. I mean, one minute it couldn’t come fast enough, and the next minute I wanted Fallon far away from me. I needed her as far away from me as possible.”

“Hmmm,” he rumbled.

I gave him a sharp look. “What.”

“Your wording is odd, that’s all.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You’re not saying things like, I couldn’t stand the idea of marriage. You’re saying I needed to get Fallon far away from me. Of course, if you felt like that, you could have just left her at the altar. That would have taken care of it.”

I shook my head. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s like you did the worst thing imaginable to get her to hate you. To grind your relationship into the dust. To make sure she would get as far away from you as possible. Why would you do that?”

“Have you not been fucking listening,” I yelled. “I don’t fucking know!”

“Maybe a beer is in order.”

Dammit, I hated running late. I hated it. I mean, I could afford to miss my plane. The meeting wasn’t for two more days, but I wanted to get into Chicago early so I could

take Vanessa and Eddie out to dinner that night.

I'd gotten to the Knoxville McGhee Tyson Airport with an hour to spare, but parking was going to fuck me over. They'd admitted me into the parking lot, but damned if I could find a parking spot, so I was going to have play the game of following people around who looked like they were getting into their cars to leave. I hated this game.

Ah-ha!

I finally saw a family that looked promising. I stopped my car, flipped on my blinker, and waited. I saw the gray van behind me, waiting. Idiot should go around me, but whatever. It took the family a bit to get their stuff loaded and back out, but finally I had my spot.

I grabbed my briefcase and got my light carry-on out of the backseat so I could haul my ass to the terminal. It sucked that I was still limping a little, but what can you do?

I took a picture of my stall number with my cell phone, so I could find it when I came home. I started toward the parking lot exit so I could cross to the terminal. I looked up. It looked like it might rain.

It better not .

I did my hair for tonight's dinner, and I didn't want to show up looking like a poodle. Just hold off until I'm at the ticket counter , I begged the sky gods. My phone rang and I looked at the number.

I heard tires squeal behind me.

Oh shit!

I turned, hoping I wasn't going to see a wreck.

It was the gray van. Barrelling straight toward me.

My breath hitched.

I stumbled back and my right leg wobbled as I dropped my suitcase.

The van kept coming. Too fast.

Then—impact.

Not metal. Muscle.

A solid weight slammed me into the trunk of a car, knocking the air from my lungs. The world spun as I slipped down and my shoulder and hip crashed into asphalt.

I screamed.

I looked up and saw the taillights of the gray van as it crashed through the security arm of the tollbooth.

“Lady, they tried to kill you,” a kid who had to be in high school, maybe college, shouted at me. He sounded even shakier than I felt.

“You saved my life,” I whispered.

“They tried to kill her,” he shouted out. I saw that we were gathering a crowd.

I tried to get up, but my shoulder and hip were killing me, along with my ankle.

“Don’t get up,” a woman said as she knelt beside me. “Wait for the paramedics.”

“No, I’m fine. I just need my phone.”

I pushed up off the pavement, but my arm wasn’t working right. It better not be broken, or I’m going to be royally pissed off.

“Miss, you really need to stay still and wait for the paramedics,” the woman said.

“And the police,” the young man inserted. “They tried to kill you!” he said for like the fortieth time.

“Can you find my cell phone?” I begged the teen.

“Sure thing.”

I turned to the woman who looked to be about my age. “Can you help me sit up?”

“I’m in nursing school. You need to stay right where you are until you’re examined.” She was very kind, but she was pissing me off. Michael’s bio dad had just tried to kill me, and I wanted to call Michael. Now there was something to go on, unlike the notes and the snakes. There would be video of this.

The man would be going down!

The kid came back and handed me my shattered cell phone and I burst into tears.

Chapter Nineteen

This time when I got to the hospital, Fallon wasn't in the ICU, barely breathing. Instead, she was waiting in the lobby for me, holding her coat around her, a bandage on her forehead and her arm in a sling.

I saw red.

As soon as she saw me, she grinned. "We've got him! There's video of him trying to run me down. He's going to end up going to prison again, this time for attempted murder!"

I carefully wrapped her in my arms and breathed in her fresh, sunny scent. Only this time it was marred by disinfectant and the smell of blood.

"Did you hear me? It's over."

"I heard you, Fallon." I whispered into her hair. I'd relayed the information she'd given to me to Roan as soon as she'd called me. I was on the way to the hospital thirty seconds after her call. Unfortunately, Roan had called me fifteen minutes before arriving at the hospital saying that the cops had already found the van abandoned, and it was stolen. But they would be checking it for prints. I didn't have a lot of hope.

Roan also told me that the cameras at the airport showed someone wearing a beanie and a medical face mask driving the van, so there was no hope of visual identification. Roan was still waiting to hear whether Sid was found at his apartment.

Again, I didn't hold out a lot of hope. My guess was that he would show up with some bullshit alibi that would be impossible to disprove. Or worse yet, just never return to his apartment at all.

"Let's get you home. You're shivering," I said to Fallon.

"I need to get my SUV," she protested. "It's over at the airport parking lot."

"I'll have Zarek and one of the other guys at the firehouse take care of it. I want to get you home first."

"Can you take me to a phone store, first? My phone was destroyed, and I need to replace it. I'm supposed to be at a meeting in Chicago the day after tomorrow, but I might skip it if Eddie and Vanessa are up to speed, but first I have to check in with them."

"Are you sure you're up for a trip to the store?"

"I have to be."

I picked up her scuffed-up briefcase and carry-on, then put my arm around her and escorted her out to my truck. We went to the phone store in Pigeon Forge and got her set up, then I took her back to my house. She didn't want to worry her folks more by letting them see her with her arm in a sling. I agreed. I knew Bob had just returned home four days ago from another dose of chemotherapy, so having him and Isla worry all over again for Fallon's safety wouldn't be a good thing.

"You're not saying much," Fallon said when I got her settled onto my couch with a mug of hot chocolate.

"I don't know what I more I can say, except how thankful I am for that kid who saved

your life.” I started a pot of coffee brewing for myself.

“Come sit next to me,” Fallon coaxed.

“As soon as I have my cup of coffee,” I promised.

I saw her start to get up off the couch and rushed over. “Fallon, for the love of all things that are holy, I’m begging you, stay seated. First, he almost killed you with the snakes, and today he almost ran you over. You’re injured, and all I want to do is take care of you.”

That wasn’t all I wanted to do, but I wasn’t going to tell her that part.

“I’m fine,” she protested.

I sucked in a deep breath through my nose. “I know you are, Baby.” I got up and picked up her purse from where she’d left it, near my front door. “Here you go. Why don’t you make those phone calls you said you needed to make when you got home.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot.” She grinned. “Thanks for reminding me.”

I tapped the tip of her nose with my finger. “That’s why we make a good time.”

I went into the kitchen to make a couple of calls of my own. First to Roan. He gave me the bad news that yes, Sid did make it back to his apartment, and he had someone who’d provided him an alibi for when the hit-and-run took place. I asked for one more piece of information, then I called Zarek. I explained the situation, and he agreed to be over at my house in a couple of hours.

“All done,” Fallon chimed from the living room.

I walked out of the kitchen with an ice pack. She gave me a look of disgust and for the first time since she'd told me she was in the hospital, I laughed.

“You heard the doctor, you’re supposed to ice your hip.”

“I am so sick of icing my body.” The way she jutted out her lower lip made me want to kiss it, or better yet, bite it.

“Why don’t you get into something more comfortable and then lie down and then I’ll get you situated with the ice pack?”

“Are you talking bed-comfortable?” she asked.

There was a definite invitation in her voice.

“I’m talking alone-in-bed comfortable,” I corrected.

“I’ve read that orgasms are nature’s best painkillers. I think we’re both in pain.” She reached for my hand to pull me down to the couch, but I wasn’t having any of it. I pulled her up to her feet, waiting to see if she was steady, and she really wasn’t.

I picked her up.

“Michael, put me down. I’m more than capable of walking.”

“I know you are, Sunshine, but resting your ankle and hip is good for you.” She gave me an assessing look, then wrapped her good arm around my neck.

“Sorry my bed isn’t made,” I said as I put her down. “But I washed the sheets yesterday.”

“Since we would have just messed up the bed together anyway, I don’t see any problem,” she teased.

“Let me go get your suitcase. That way you’ll have something to change into after you freshen up.”

“I love the idea of a shower.”

I paused. “Wait for me. I don’t want you to take a fall in the bathroom.”

She gave me a slow grin. “I love the idea of waiting for you, Mr. Rankin.”

When I got back with her suitcase, she was in the bathroom with the shower running to get the water hot. She was naked except for a pair of brief silk panties. All of her bountiful curves were on display.

“You’re staring,” she whispered.

“No man would blame me, that’s for damn sure.”

Fallon rubbed her hand across her soft stomach. “I think you’re biased. Most men aren’t as attracted to women with all this.” She lifted her arms wide.

I drank in her bountiful breasts and hips that framed a waist that cinched in. She was right, her shape wasn’t normally shown on magazine covers, but it had always done it for me. Then I frowned as I moved forward and saw the ugly bruise that was forming on her right hip. The same side as her swollen ankle.

I traced the bruise with a gentle finger.

“I’ll wait out here while you shower, to make sure you’re steady.”

Fallon stuck out her lower lip again. “You mean you’re not going to join me?”

“No water sports for you when you’re this injured. You need to be in top physical form when competing for the gold.”

She snickered, then bent down and quickly pulled off her panties. I opened up the shower door for her, and she stepped in.

I handed her a washcloth and she thanked me. Then I closed the shower door. I saw her reach for my shampoo.

“Wait a minute,” I called out.

She turned around and frowned at me. “What?”

“Let me get you your bath products. I like how they smell on you.”

She shrugged, and when I was back her hair was wet, and she was waiting for me. I opened the door and handed her the body wash, shampoo and conditioner.

“Thank you, Michael.”

I was righthanded, and I’d injured my right shoulder, so the idea of holding my travel blow dryer hurt just thinking about it. Why was I not surprised that just as I finished combing out my hair, Michael was knocking on the door and asking me if I needed help to dry my hair?

It was like we’d gone back in time when we could read each other’s minds. Only, I couldn’t read his anymore. I still didn’t know why he’d pushed me away so cruelly.

“Yeah, I could use help with my hair,” I admitted.

He came up behind me so he could look over my shoulder in the mirror. God, he looked so good. He was holding the blow dryer that I'd left in my open suitcase.

"I love these pajama sets. Have I told you that before?" He trailed his fingers along my tank top's collar.

I cleared my throat. "You might have mentioned it a time or two."

"Good," he smiled. "Come into the bedroom and sit down on the bed. I don't want you to stand up any more than you have to."

I sighed. "That sounds good." I followed him into the bedroom and found the bed made.

"Sit right there." He pointed to a spot next to the headboard. He plugged in the dryer and started to use my brush to dry one lock of hair at a time. It seemed to take forever, and it felt like some kind of erotic scalp massage.

I don't know when he had turned off the blow dryer and was just brushing my hair. But he was.

"Fallon, let's get you into bed with that ice pack."

"No, let's both of us get into bed, without the icepack," I countered.

Chapter Twenty

“Fallon, you said so yourself, we have too many unresolved issues between us.”

“Not for this. Never for this. I love you, and I want to make love with you. You told me you loved me, was that a lie?” Her hazel eyes were almost green as they stared up at mine with such agonizing want.

“No, that’s the one part about me that you will never have to worry about. I adore you. I love you. You are the other half of my soul...”

She stroked her thumb over my bottom lip. “But?”

“But, you’re right, I’m fucked in the head. Just like you said.”

She jerked backward, shocked. “I never said that!”

“You did. But it’s okay. I’ll get myself together. For you.”

I pulled off my t-shirt and dropped it. Then I pulled down my jeans and briefs and stood before her naked. My cock bobbed right in front of her face. She circled it with her fingers and pulled me closer, toward her full pink lips.

My head dropped backward as I was enveloped in the hot, wet cavern of her mouth. She traced the head of my cock with her tongue, swirling along the edge, coaxing my response, as if her life depended on it.

Fallon sucked me in deep. Then deeper.

She made a soft noise as I hit the back of her throat. I pulled back... out.

“No,” she protested. “I want to do this for you.”

“If you keep that up, I won’t be of any use to you,” I teased. “Arms up.” She obeyed me blindly, and I pulled her tank off her body. Dropping that, I then knelt in front of her, pulled off her sleep shorts, and spread her thighs.

I took a deep breath and smelled her apple body wash mixed in with the heavenly scent of her musk. So good. I couldn’t wait another second. I parted her folds. Wet, pink perfection. I had to take just a moment to stare. I shuddered at the lush beauty laid out before me. It was like a banquet. God, I needed a taste.

Fallon began to squirm. I moved my hands to her hips in order to hold her in place but immediately remembered her bruise.

“Stay still,” I murmured against her inner thigh as I placed one, then two kisses against her satiny flesh.

She squirmed again, then I placed my hand on her soft belly, loving how it felt compared to my more muscled body. As soon as she settled, I helped myself to one long, slow lick.

She tasted so good. So very, very good. She was squirming again, but I gave up trying to stop her, because now she was lifting to get closer to me. Using my thumbs, I opened her up even more and pierced her core with my tongue.

“Michael,” she shrieked.

She liked that.

I did it again and again.

When her fingernails dug into my scalp, I felt like I had won an award. I moved to take her clit between my lips and suck it while laving it with my tongue, then I pushed two fingers inside her and she screamed. I think it was my name, but I couldn't make it out.

I was pretty sure she had one more orgasm in her, so I crooked my fingers, and found the right spot inside her and grazed against it.

"It's too much," she wailed.

I circled her clit with my tongue.

"It's too much," she whimpered again.

I continued to rub inside her, then I rasped her clit with my teeth and she let out a much softer cry, but this one sounded more joyous.

As I positioned her onto the bed, determining how I could take her without hurting her shoulder, arm or ankle, I pushed a pillow under her hips, then cocked out her left knee so that she was spread for my entry.

"Oh yes," she murmured. She reached out to touch me to guide me home, but she winced.

"Let me run the show, Fallon. I don't want you to be hurt."

"You could never hurt me," she said as she looked up at me. Her eyes were glazed

with passion. If she'd said that, I knew she was out of her mind with want.

"I won't hurt you again, I promise."

"Now, Michael. I need you so much."

I pressed my length inside Fallon's body, and once again I felt a sense of homecoming. I nuzzled her neck with kisses. I whispered endearments and praised her beauty and kindness.

"Move," she begged.

I did, slowly and surely, I savored each movement as I revelled in her tight clasp. But all too soon, I felt the fire shoot down to my lower back, like lava. I was so close.

"Yes love, come for me," she whispered.

That wasn't good enough. She needed to come with me.

Sweat burst across my lower back, as she clenched around me. Nothing. Not one thing, had ever felt better than Fallon's lush flesh clamping down on me. I watched her closely and saw she was reaching for her pleasure again. I swiped my thumb against the tip of one of her breasts and she arched up.

She was going to burn me alive.

"Michael," she cried out. I saw tears drip down her temples as I buried myself deep inside her, our bodies twisting together, trying to get even closer. I yelled out my release the same time as she did, and still we pressed against one another, as if we were trying to wring out that last bit of pleasure that we could from one another.

She was asleep by the time I left her. I got up and got a washcloth to clean her up, then covered her and wrapped her up under the covers the way she liked. I put on my clothes and went to the living room to wait for Zarek.

Zarek had asked me if I knew what I was doing when I'd left him there to watch over Fallon. I assured him that I did.

I did the speed limit as I drove the seventy-three miles into Knoxville, flashes of Fallon standing up in the lobby of the hospital earlier that day with a bandage on her forehead and her arm in a sling.

A worse memory—the moment I found Fallon gasping for breath amid crushed geraniums, positive she was going to die. Die as I was forced to watch the life drain out of her, the same way I watched when my father squeezed the life out of my mother. Strangling her.

A horn honked behind me, and I realized I was no longer doing the speed limit, I was ten miles below. I sped up and took the exit I needed to get to Sid Martin's apartment. The closer I got to his address, the worse the neighborhood got. Roan had told me that Sid was working as a sanitation worker at a sausage plant outside of town.

It was ten o'clock when I got to the dilapidated one-story apartment complex. I shuddered. Each unit looked to have a door and two windows. It looked like some motel built in the forties that had been converted into the saddest apartments I'd ever seen. I pulled in and parked my truck under one of the two parking lot lights that worked.

In my walk over to the apartment that was Sid's I saw two drug deals go down. I ignored them. But it made me realize that around here you would probably be able to find a friend of a friend of a friend who sold exotic animals.

I was careful not to walk directly up to Sid's apartment, rather, I came around from the side. Both of his windows had sheets over them, and I could see part of the duct tape that held them closed.

Classy.

I pounded on the door from the side, ensuring I couldn't be seen through the peephole.

"KPD," I yelled. "Open up."

I knew from the file that Roan and Simon had put together that Sid worked the night shift, therefore he should be up, getting ready to clean out meat drippings from grinders and drains. Oh joy.

I pounded again. "Knoxville Police Department. Open up."

"You already cleared me," Sid was saying as he opened the door.

And there he was, the monster from my childhood. Sid Martin. My father.

The man who used to tower over me, with a voice like thunder that would roar through our little house, making Mom and me tremble. The man who broke bones and split lips.

"Mikey. Nice of you to stop by." Sid smiled.

How could a monster have a white smile like his? I stared into his gray eyes and I saw them dance with mirth.

"Thought I might get a visit from you, sooner or later."

I never realized that we had the same face. The same cleft in the chin. The same eyes, the same square jaw. I remembered him being a giant who could, and often did, crush me like a bug. Only now he was thinner. Older. His dark hair was greasy and threaded with gray. Instead of looking like a man who I knew to be fifty-four, he looked over seventy.

Like a puzzle piece snapping into place, I realized why I had always avoided having my picture taken. Because I would end up with mementos around the house that would remind me of him.

“You turned out good-looking. Not like that ugly, useless bitch of a mother.”

“Shut the fuck up. Don’t you dare talk about my mother that way.”

“What are you going to do about it, Mikey? Hit me? Abuse your law-abiding father who deeply regrets his past sins and just wants to live in peace. That won’t play very well with your job.”

My spine locked.

There he was. When he wasn’t ranting and raging, he would sound like this. All tricky and fake. I remember my Mom always loving on him when he sounded like this. But even as a young child I never trusted him like this. I’d known he was a monster, no matter what guise he was in.

I pushed at the door. Hard. Shoving Sid backward, and I slammed the door shut behind us both. “Let’s get some things straight, shall we?”

“Think you’re a big man, do you?” Sid taunted. “Did a little time playing Army, and now you’re playing fireman and you think you can scare me. Well, I’ve met really scary men during my time in prison, and you’re just a pussy compared to them.”

“You stay away from my parents, and you stay away from Fallon. You don’t, and you die. It’s as simple as that.”

Sid laughed. “You won’t kill me. You don’t have it in you. I know you. I saw the woman that birthed you. I saw what a sniveling brat you were. You don’t have it in you to kill me.”

I thought about my time as a Ranger. I advanced on Sid until he was backed up against a wall. “You know nothing about me. You don’t know that I can kill you from one thousand meters away, or I can kill you with one hand right now. You don’t know what I’m capable of in order to protect those I love. If you value your life, you’ll stop what you’re doing and leave the state tonight.”

“If I leave, there will be a warrant out for my arrest for breaking my parole,” he whined. His words didn’t match what his eyes were telling me. He didn’t give a shit about his parole. He only cared about getting back at me.

“This is your one and only warning, Sid. When I leave through that door, all bets are off. You do one thing wrong and you’re a dead man.”

Sid laughed at me. “I’ve been a dead man for twenty-four years and it was all because of you. You have no idea what I went through in prison. You’ll pay for that.”

Now his gray eyes looked flat and dead.

I should probably just kill him right now and get it over with .

That stopped me up short.

Am I just like him?

The thought hit me like a freight train. My breath hitched. My vision tunneled.

How much of him was inside me? How much of his blood, his violence, his darkness lived in my bones?

But I knew, didn't I? I've always known.

I swallowed hard, then turned around and left. I needed to get back to Fallon.

Chapter Twenty-One

When I woke up, I was alone in bed.

Strange .

I got up and went to find Michael. Coming down the hall, something smelled amazing. Was he cooking? I could hear the TV on, too.

Whoops! I took a step back into the shadow of the hallway when I saw Zarek sitting on the sofa watching a ballgame. I needed to be wearing more than Michael's t-shirt before I faced Zarek.

"I see you," Zarek called out.

"Well, I don't want you to see too much. Hold on, I'm going to throw a few more clothes on."

"Don't feel like you have to on my account." I could hear the humor in his voice.

When I came back out, the TV was off, and Zarek was in the kitchen pulling a lasagna out of the oven. So that's what smelled heavenly.

"Did Michael invite you over to eat and watch the game? I didn't know he had that in the freezer."

"He didn't. I made this from scratch and brought it over when Michael asked me to

come stay with you when he went out for a while.”

“Out? Where did he go?”

“Out.”

“Is this the bro code? Not telling me, I mean.”

“Kind of. He asked me not to tell, so I’m not.”

Zarek put the lasagna down on a trivet, then took down two plates and cut out two large pieces for each of us. My mouth was watering. I picked up the two plates, walked over to the dining room table and set them down. Zarek came out with warm bread, grated Parmesan cheese, and a bowl of salad.

I went back in the kitchen to get napkins or paper towels. “What do you want to drink?” I asked him.

“Water’s fine.”

I brought out the paper towels, silverware and glasses of water. As we got down to the business of eating, I grilled him about being a firefighter. He entertained me with funny stories and I found out that he actually had rescued a cat out of a tree.

I started yawning before the dessert portion of the meal. “It’s chocolate mousse,” he tempted me.

“I can’t stay awake. I’ll have to pass.”

“Why didn’t you pester me to find out where he had gone?” Zarek finally asked.

“It was the bro code. I think you keeping his confidence is a good thing. I’ll find out from him tomorrow.”

Zarek gave me a gentle hug good night, and as I walked down the hall, I heard the TV turn back on. I crawled back into bed and fell immediately asleep.

Hours later, I felt Michael pull me into his arms. His front to my back. I snuggled closer, glorying in his embrace.

“How was your visit?” I asked him, knowing he had gone to see Sid.

“He’s evil. Hate isn’t a strong enough word for how I feel about him.” Michael gritted out the words.

I wiggled around so I could face him. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Just hold me,” he whispered.

I held him until dawn lit the sky.

It was two days after the alarm system had been installed and since then, Mom had set it off three times. Obviously, there were still some kinks that needed to be worked out.

My arm was no longer in a sling, and Dad was jonesing to get out of the house, so I was taking my parents downtown to the Down Home Café.

“Is Michael working?” Dad asked.

“No. I think he’s working on a project with his dad,” I answered. “Anyway, isn’t it nice just the three of us?” I asked.

“It sure is,” my Mom answered from the back seat of my SUV.

Ever since our gardening confrontation, Mom had been working hard to be more supportive of me, even on the silliest things. I mentioned that I liked the blue hand towels in the guest bathroom better than the yellow, and she’d tripped over herself to agree. It was an awkward, uncomfortable mess. Plus, Dad had been going stir crazy, so that was making it worse for Mom and me.

I was really hoping this lunch might mellow things out.

“I’ve missed having Michael around the last week and a half,” Dad said. “You should try harder to mend fences, Fallon. He didn’t deserve what you did. He’s a really good man.”

I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up on end.

“Yes, he is,” I gritted out the words. There were no spots close to the diner, so I parked in the handicap zone.

“You can’t park here,” Dad said loudly.

Here we go again with the parking . I groaned inwardly.

“I’m just dropping you and Mom off so you can put our name in for a table, then I’ll park my car somewhere else, like I always do,” I assured him. “Why do you always think I’m going to break the law?”

“You ran off the night before your wedding, didn’t you? You slunk off like a thief in the night. That showed that you had no honor. Breaking the law, like parking in a handicap zone, is something people with no honor would do.”

Dad's eyes glittered with anger as he glared at me.

"I'm not going to park illegally. My honor means a lot to me. I value it. Being trusted and respected is one of the ways I have done so well in business. Now, are you finally going to ask me why I left town, or are you just going to throw out firebombs?"

"What's there to ask? You ran a way, like some damn cat burglar."

"Fallon, honey. Start the car, and let's head back home. We don't want to be airing out our dirty laundry outside of the diner," Mom said.

Dad turned in his seat to look at Mom. "Everybody in town knows what happened. There aren't any secrets."

"In that case, Dad. Why don't you and Mom get out of the car and put our names in, and I'll park. I'll meet you inside."

"Fallon, I don't think that's a good idea," my mom whispered.

"It's a great idea, Isla. My appetite is finally back, and I want some diner food. I'm not leaving." He opened his door, got out, and then opened Mom's door. I watched as they both headed into the restaurant. I could feel a headache rolling in, and it was going to be a doozy.

When I got inside the diner, there wasn't anybody in line.

"Fallon, you're looking pretty as a picture," Little Grandma called out.

I loved this woman. She was who I aspired to be. She was kind and wise, and knew what was going on in this town, but never spread gossip.

“Your folks are in the corner pocket near the window,” she told me. “Here, take a menu. Lettie will be by to tell you the lunch specials, but you don’t need to listen to them. Have the country ham with red-eye gravy. You can’t go wrong with that.”

I mustered up a smile. “Thanks for the tip. That’s what I’ll order.”

“What’s wrong, Honey?”

“Nothing, ma’am.”

“You look like you’re experiencing some heartbreak. I thought things were looking up between you and Michael. Maybe not quite smooth sailing yet, but looking up.”

This time she shocked a smile out of me. “How did you know that?”

“Everybody loves our food, so we have a lot of guests. People like spending some time with me here at the hostess stand.”

“Well, your sources are right, things are improving,” I admitted.

“Has he grovelled?”

I frowned. “Little Grandma, what are you talking about?”

“When men really make a mess of things and come close to breaking their woman’s heart, the only way they can get back into their good graces is to grovel. Has he grovelled?”

“It’s not that way,” I whispered. “He has some issues he’s working through.”

“Issues, pishoos. Don’t psycho-mumble-jumble me. The man was a jackass. Broke

your heart. He needs to grovel. Without the grovelling you're never going to feel comfortable taking him back, even if you understand his issues .”

Little Grandma said the last word like it left a sour taste in her mouth. I laughed. I'd have to think on what she had to say. Maybe talk it over with Maddie.

“Now, if it isn't Michael that has you looking so down in the mouth, is it your folks?”

I looked across the restaurant to where they were sitting. They were both just sitting at the table, looking out the window, not talking to each other.

“Yeah, it's my folks.”

“Seems to me, your folks are pretty darned lucky to have a daughter who shut down her office in Chicago so she could come take care of her Daddy.”

I shrugged.

She hopped off her stool and took my arm. “Let's get you over to your table. I haven't had a chance to talk to your Daddy much since he got sick.”

I followed Little Grandma to the table and watched with surprise as she sat down in the fourth chair. Lettie, her granddaughter and head waitress, hustled over to our table. “What can I get you all?”

“I'll have hot tea and a biscuit,” Little Grandma said. “Fallon will have the country ham and red-eye gravy.” The little dynamo turned to me. “What do you want to drink to go with it?” she asked me.

“Sweet tea would be great.”

“And a sweet tea for Fallon,” Little Grandma said.

“I didn’t see country ham and red-eye gravy on the menu,” my dad complained.

“It’s one of today’s specials. I was getting ready to tell you about them,” Lettie explained. “Besides the ham, we also have shrimp and grits.”

“I’ll take the shrimp and grits and a sweet tea,” Dad told Lettie.

“What about you, Miz Vickers?” she asked Mom.

“I’ll take a turkey sandwich with sweet potato fries and a glass of sweet tea.”

“Got it. Your orders will be out soon.” She pushed her pencil back behind her ear and hustled over to the kitchen window.

I watched as Little Grandma placed her hand on my dad’s. “Tell me Bob, how are you doing really? There’s a lot of different stories flying around, but what is the real truth?”

“I think the reason there were so many rumors is because Isla and I didn’t know day-to-day what was going on. It seemed like the doctors were constantly e-mailing us information that we couldn’t decipher, and we would have to wait forever to get a hold of a doctor to have them tell us what everything meant.”

“Is that still going on?” Little Grandma asked gently.

My Dad grinned big as he focused his attention on me. “Not recently. Fallon’s been a Godsend. She did something that puts everything into words that Isla and I can understand. After all of Fallon’s help with Isla’s arthritis doctor, I’m thinking about having her come in on my next follow-up appointment for me.”

Damn! I sagged back into my chair. Did my dad just compliment me?

“Bob, I don’t understand why you’re so surprised. Your daughter graduated Summa Cum Laude. She’s always been a marvel.”

“Yes, well. That was with all that math and computer stuff. It wasn’t like she got a degree to become a doctor or a lawyer.”

“Robert Vickers,” Little Grandma said harshly. “I can’t believe you just said that about your own daughter. She is a prize, and you should value her. Seems to me that you never did realize how lucky you were, to have such a wonderful daughter.”

My dad was turning all kinds of shades of red. If it had been anyone else in the town saying this to him, he would have shouted them down. But Little Grandma was the town matriarch. And she had home field advantage and Dad knew it. He was stuck sucking it up, and I thought he might actually explode right there in the corner of the diner.

“Begging your pardon, Mrs. Magill,” my mom started. “But we love our daughter. And we surely do appreciate her coming home and helping us out.”

Lettie sniffed as she set down a biscuit and a cup of tea in front of Little Grandma. “I’ll be back with your teas in just a moment.”

“My wife is correct, Mrs. Magill. We love Fallon.”

This time it was Little Grandma who gave the disbelieving sniff.

Lettie came and passed out the teas.

“Little Grandma,” I said. “Didn’t I hear that you recently had another great-great

grandchild?" I asked. I was desperate to change the topic of conversation.

She turned to my dad. "Like I said, Bob. She's a prize." She turned back to me. "Yes, I did. His name is James Oliver Rafferty." She put her hand into her voluminous sweater pocket and pulled out a flip style cell phone. "Let me show you some pictures. He was just born two weeks ago. He was over eight pounds when he was born."

Mom squeezed my hand, and I looked over at her. She mouthed the words, 'Thank you'.

Chapter Twenty-Two

If I'd thought the air had been thick in the SUV driving to the diner, it was nothing compared to driving home. I knew Little Grandma had been trying to help, and it had felt really good having her defend me like she did, but boy I was going to end up paying for it tonight.

As soon as I backed into the carport, Dad had the passenger side door open, and he was getting out of my SUV. I immediately saw he was struggling to stay upright. He'd definitely overdone today.

"Dad, wait for me," I said softly.

"I don't need your help," he bit out.

I watched as Mom pulled one of Dad's arms over her shoulders and she took his weight so that they could get into the house. I hurried out of my vehicle, knowing what was coming next if I didn't get my ass into the house. But the alarm sounded before I could get inside in time.

Dammit!

"Fallon, turn that goddamn thing off!" Dad hollered. I heard my parents' bedroom door slam shut.

I pressed the code necessary to unarm the alarm, and my phone rang. It was the security company. I gave them the security word and told them that it was a false

alarm, explaining my mom had her hands full as she came into the house.

I closed the front door and waited for Mom to return to the kitchen. After four or five minutes, I realized I was waiting in vain. Apparently, I was being snubbed.

Fine, just fine. I had work that I needed to get done anyway, but Mom and Dad were pissing me off. It was more than past time for us to have a conversation, Little Grandma was right. I went into my bedroom and grabbed my tablet and sun hat. Nobody ever said I had to create a presentation inside when it was so beautiful outside.

Mom had chosen the perfect spots for the dogwood trees. I pulled one of the lawn chairs under one of them and got to work.

“Fallon?”

I must have been really into things, because I hadn’t even heard the back door open or Mom cross the yard.

I jerked up. Once I had my heartbeat back under control, I gave her a half smile. “Hi, Mom.”

“Can you come inside? Your dad and I would like to talk to you.”

I took a deep breath, then nodded. Dad was waiting at the kitchen table. He was still in the same clothes that he’d been wearing when we’d gone out for lunch.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Hi, Fallon. Why don’t you take a seat.” He motioned to the chair across from him. Mom sat between us. “Your Mom and I have been talking.”

I nodded. I mean, what was there for me to say?

“She’s been talking to me for a while now. Apparently, you two talked a few weeks ago out in the yard, back before you got bit.” He wiped his hand over his face, then looked back up at me. “You know that we wanted a daughter, right?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, all we wanted was a healthy baby. Boy or girl, it didn’t matter.”

I looked over at Mom. She was staring at Dad like she was willing him to say certain things to me. “Yeah, okay. So, you were fine having a daughter,” I nodded. “But I’ve got to tell you, it never felt like you were fine having me as your kid.”

Dad reared back in his chair like I’d taken a slap at him. He looked over at Mom.

“See, I told you,” she said.

“Fallon, of course we were happy with you.”

I swallowed what little spit I had in my mouth. “Were you happy with me , Dad? Because most of the time it seemed like I was a nuisance.”

“Of course I was happy with you. I was just working a lot. Trying to put food on the table. I didn’t have a lot left over to cater to you.”

Anger flared up. “I never asked you to have a tea party with me, Dad. I did ask you to look at a paper of mine when I got an A on it. Not read the damn thing but look at the A at the top of the page. Then I was hoping sometimes you might be able to come to a soccer game of mine one Saturday, since you didn’t work on Saturdays.”

Dad didn't respond by immediately defending himself. Again he looked over at Mom. Then he turned back to me. "I didn't look at your papers?" he asked.

"I remember three distinct times you blew me off. All three times I was in elementary school. You can be damn sure by the time I hit middle school I knew better. But by high school I finally did something that made me a superstar in your opinion. You were finally proud of me and showed it."

Dad brightened. "What did I do?" he asked, as he fell into the trap.

"I brought Michael Rankin home as my boyfriend. You finally had the perfect son you wanted. The captain of the football team. That day you gave me a big hug, then promptly ignored me every day after to focus on Michael."

"It wasn't that bad," my mom defended.

I skewered her with a look. "It wasn't?"

"Your dad could just relate to Michael easier," she said weakly.

"Was that it, Dad? You could just relate to him, and it made it easier for you to ignore me? What about the way you belittled me?"

"I never belittled you," he roared. He was like a cornered lion. A sick, old lion. I should have felt sorry for him, but I didn't. This was probably my only chance to have this conversation, and I wasn't going to back down.

"Hell, Dad, you even belittled me today when you poo-pooed my degree in math and computers. Who does that? That was a hard degree, and I graduated at the top of my class. What the fuck, Dad? It's like you worked to actively hate me."

“I did not. I loved you,” he roared again. “I mean, I love you. Right now, today. And back then. I’ve always loved you.”

“Then why didn’t you show it?”

“I always showed you I loved you. I came in and tucked you in when you were little. I always came in and looked under your bed for monsters. I showed you I loved you.”

“Why did you put me down? Why weren’t you proud of me?”

“You were always so strong. You were so much smarter than I could ever hope to be. You didn’t need my praise. You could do anything. And you did. You have.”

He reached out and grabbed for my hand. I let him take it. His grip was so much weaker than I remembered.

“I am so sorry that I didn’t give you the recognition you deserved.”

I was having a tough time taking in the fact that my father had just apologized to me. His watery blue eyes were begging for forgiveness.

“Fallon. I love you, and I’m proud of you. I am so sorry that I didn’t show you that the right way before. And now? The way you came home, and how you’ve been here for me and your mother for the last six weeks has been amazing.” Dad was fighting back tears. “Thank you.”

Mom grabbed my other hand. “Your father’s right. I prayed for a miracle, and you have been one of the miracles God has granted.”

“I couldn’t ask for a better daughter,” Dad continued. “Say you’ll forgive me.”

“Forgive us ,” my mom chimed in.

The block of ice that had encased the piece of my heart where my parents were lodged started to crack. “You don’t need my forgiveness. We’re family. I just needed to know that going forward, that I’m enough for you.” My voice broke.

“You are,” Mom assured me.

They both squeezed my hands tightly and I felt like I was outside again, under the summer sun.

“If only you hadn’t—” my dad stopped.

I frowned

“What, Dad?”

“I just don’t know why you ran away. Why did you leave Michael that way? Make us understand.”

I looked from Dad to Mom and then back again. “Michael will need to be here to have that discussion.”

Despite retiring, Dad had to go out of town on business. He might not be the president of the bank anymore, but he still had to go to certain quarterly shareholder meetings, so that had my ass planted at my childhood home with Mom.

I was just settling in to turn on a ballgame, when Mom sat down beside me on the couch. She plopped something on my lap. I looked down and groaned.

“I’ve been good all day, what did I do to deserve this?” I asked as I looked at the

photo album.

“It’s either this, or some of your dad’s home films.”

“You win. You win. The photo album.”

Mom grinned. She loved looking through these albums. I looked at the dates on the spine and realized this was the one from when I first came to live with them. They’d taken a picture of me that first day, when I showed up with a black Hefty bag holding all my clothes and the three toys I owned. Back then, Mom and Dad were foster parents who usually took in kids who were in transition.

“You were so quiet and scared that first day,” Mom whispered as she traced my face on the photo. “I couldn’t do anything that would get you to smile. Not even a Wolverine bedspread or chocolate cake and ice cream could get a smile out of you that first week.”

I put my arm around my mom’s shoulder. “I was scared spitless. Everything here looked like it did on TV. I didn’t think it could be real, and I was waiting to be kicked out. I was afraid if I showed I liked something, you’d take it away from me. That’s what my biological dad would do.”

Mom turned to the next page. “This is three weeks in. I remember being so excited the day I took you to the mall and bought you all new clothes. Your old clothes didn’t fit you. They were all too small and were practically rags.”

“It was the first time I’d ever been to the mall. You let me ride one of the mechanical horse rides and one of the car rides inside the mall. I remember you putting in the quarters and feeling like I was king shit.”

“Yeah, but it all went wrong as soon as we got home.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, you wanted to throw away my old clothes. I threw a fit.”

“You never could explain why. All I knew is that I needed to leave them alone. Can you explain it now?”

“I was sure that one day you would kick me out and I wouldn’t be able to take the new clothes, so I had to keep hold of my old clothes.”

Mom’s head dropped. “I should have been able to figure that out,” she whispered. “I should have known to reassure you more.”

“The only thing that was going to reassure me, was time. Plus, I didn’t know it then, but you were doing the real thing that was going to make me feel secure. You were working to adopt me.”

“Yeah, both your father and I knew we wanted you to be our legal son. We would have kept you as a foster child forever, but we wanted to make it legal so that the state could never interfere.” She turned the page.

There I was with Zarek and Chloe at the skating rink.

“How are they doing?” Mom asked.

“It’s still tough.”

“That’s too bad. How about you and Fallon?”

“As soon as we can sort out a few things, I intend to take Fallon away for a week.”

“Sort out things, like whatever kind of threat is going on?” she asked.

I nodded.

“And you and Fallon?”

“I want to marry her, if she’ll have me.”

“She’d be stupid not to. You’re the second-best man I know,” she grinned.

“Is there a reason for the walk through memory lane?” I asked.

She turned a page, and I saw a younger me in a Wolverine costume for Halloween. It was better than any of the other kids’ store-bought costumes, because Mom had made it.

“Yeah, there is. When you explained to your dad and I what you had done to sabotage your wedding, it was clear you didn’t know why you did it. Do you know now?”

“Not entirely, no,” I admitted.

“But you have some ideas?”

“Well, it’s because of my biological dad, and him killing my biological mother.”

Mom nodded. “And?”

“I was trying to push Fallon away from me. For some reason I was thinking that I was bad for Fallon, and I wanted her to get away from me. When I think back to how I was thinking and feeling that night, I was intent on her hating me. I wanted her to never want to see me again.”

Mom flipped the page of the photo album again. This time it was her, Dad, and me in

front of the Christmas tree. It was the year I was officially theirs.

“It almost sounds like you were trying to save her,” Mom murmured.

Her words stabbed straight through to my heart. She was right. That is exactly what I was doing. I had been saving Fallon.

From me.

No, not me, from the monster I had confronted yesterday.

Mom patted my chest, right over my heart.

“You good?” she asked.

“Yeah, Mom. I am.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

“What the fuck were you even thinking?!” Roan yelled at me.

My friend had been waiting outside my house when I got there this morning. I’d never seen him pissed before, let alone furious. I opened the door and waved for him to go inside. I closed the door and headed for the kitchen.

“I thought I would scare the shit out of the pissant and he’d stop.”

“You threatened to kill Sid, and I have it on tape!”

I gave a fierce grin. “You have his apartment wired?” I took two mugs down from the cabinet and set them on the counter, then grabbed the carafe of coffee and pushed the sugar bowl toward Roan.

“Yeah. We do. But so far, besides listening to The Wheel of Fortune, Judge Judy, him whacking off, we heard you threatening to kill him.”

“Do you think I convinced him to leave town?” I asked Roan hopefully.

“Nope,” he said as he doctored up the mug of coffee I had just poured for him.

“You know that much sugar isn’t good for you.”

“Neither is threatening to kill someone. Shit, Michael, he could have recorded you.”

“He’s not that bright. I might look like him, but the brains must have come from my mom’s side of the family. Or it all comes down to nurture.” I took a sip of my black coffee. “I could see it in his eyes. He was happy I was there. He liked that I was mad at him. He wanted me quaking in my boots that he would hurt someone I loved.”

“Which is another reason I’m pissed at you. You played right into his hands. I’m thinking that it’s not nurture, it’s nature, and you’re not as smart as I always thought you were.”

I stared out my sliding glass door to my back yard. Harley was running around, chasing something.

“I had to do it, Roan. I hadn’t seen him since the day he’d killed my mom. I needed to meet the man he was today. Get a measure of him, eye-to-eye.”

“Okay. What did you find out? Anything new?”

“He has no soul. He doesn’t care if he lives or dies. He just wants to punish me.”

“And the bad part of what you just said?” Roan prompted as he took another sip of his sugared coffee.

“That he’s willing to be a martyr to the cause. He’s willing to die for it. I ran across enough of those in Afghanistan. But I saw something else. He doesn’t want to just shoot anyone from a distance. He wants to toy with them. That’s why he wanted to be the one who was in the van trying to run Fallon over.”

“What about the snakes?”

“Shit!

“Fuck!!

“Shit! Fuck!”

“Stop swearing and tell me what you’re thinking,” Roan demanded.

“Tell me, did Sid have a computer?”

“Yeah, kind of pricey, too,” Roan admitted.

“We need to get over to Fallon’s house. I’m betting he had cameras in the shed to feed video when the door opened.”

“Shit, fuck, piss,” Roan yelled. He stalked across the kitchen and poured out the coffee into the sink. I did the same. We left the house, me re-arming the alarm, and we headed over to the Vickers.

Simon was already at the house when we got there. Fallon and he were in the shed, and he was doing a FaceTime with someone as he pointed his phone along the inside of the shed.

“Stop,” the voice on the phone said. “There. Do you see the black electrician’s tape?”

I don’t know how the person caught that, but there it was.

“I’m betting they had a wireless HDMI transmitter on their camera. They had it set up so that it had a motion sensor detector.”

My blood ran cold. Sid would have seen every moment where Fallon was close to death. He would have fed off my second-by-second agony as I tried the best I could to keep her alive. No wonder there was such glee in his eyes. No wonder he made

another attempt on Fallon; he knew she was my Achilles's heel.

"Is there enough to get a warrant to search his place and confiscate his computer?" I asked.

Simon snorted. "Not hardly." He looked over at Roan. "So, when you were planting the wire, you didn't notice any surveillance equipment at his place?"

Roan shook his head. "Just the desktop computer. If he's smart, he has all the other equipment stored off-site."

"He can't afford a storage unit on the wages he's making," I interrupted. "The stuff's probably in the trunk of his car."

"I still haven't been able to tap any of our usual IT folks from the teams," Simon said with frustration. "Too much going on in this big bad world. I'd like to get a look-see into Sid's computer."

"I might be able to help with that," Fallon said.

Roan, Simon, and I turned to look at her.

"One of my projects was for the government. It's not something I can brag about on my company website, but we did some work in cyber-security."

"You're a hacker?" I asked.

"Hacker is a word with such a bad reputation, I like to think of myself as a digital locksmith, unlocking doors that were never meant to stay locked," Fallon said as she flipped her hair over her shoulder.

Simon let out a big laugh. “I can see how you fit in with all the Avery sisters.”

Sid’s apartment smelled like cheap beer, burnt coffee, moldy pizza, and crusty gym socks. Even worse than it did two nights ago. The three of us stood just inside the door, reluctant to go in and be contaminated by the stench.

Simon was the first to move, his sharp eyes scanning every corner of the dingy one-bedroom like he was clearing a breach. Roan lingered by the entrance, his hand resting casually on his hip, but I knew better—he was ready to draw if something went sideways.

Me? I headed for the desk and stared down at the computer that had been where my sick fuck of a father had probably watched Fallon’s agony with glee.

“He’s gone,” Simon muttered, striding toward the desk. “Packed up and skipped town.”

Roan exhaled sharply. “Damn. I was hoping for at least a little more drama.”

Simon shot him a look. “Speak for yourself. I prefer my psychos exactly where I can see ’em.”

The computer was dark, and I pressed a key on the keyboard, but it didn’t come to life. I looked around back to see if it was plugged in. I shouted out a laugh when I saw the bolt cutters laying behind the desk, and the computer cord cut. Really? This is how this genius decided to wipe the computer?

When I showed Simon and Roan the cut cord, they both laughed. I pulled the other end of the plug from the back of the tower.

Simon’s phone rang, and he stepped away, while Roan and I looted through the desk

drawers. Candy wrappers, pens, and two notepads with the names and numbers of restaurants that delivered.

Before I could answer, Simon let out a low whistle. “Well, this just got interesting.”

I turned as he pocketed his phone.

“Sid’s former cellmate? His kid is a hacker. A good one.”

I crossed my arms. “How good?”

“Good enough to get himself arrested for breaking into a government database when he was sixteen,” Simon said. “Roan, your guy just confirmed that Sid’s been in contact with him.”

Roan’s expression darkened. “So that’s who’s been helping him with all this tech bullshit.”

“Looks like it.” Simon shook his head. “This kid could have given Sid the tools to wipe this thing remotely. Hell, for all we know, he’s still watching us through a backdoor feed.”

I felt my jaw tighten. “That little bastard could be watching Fallon right now.”

Roan swore. “We need to get this piece of junk back to your place, stat.” He motioned to the computer tower. “If Fallon’s as good as she says, maybe she can find something on here, even if it’s just a trail of breadcrumbs.”

“Do, you think he ran for good, or just laying low?” Simon asked me.

I studied the apartment again, searching for signs of finality. The fridge was still

plugged in, though mostly empty except for an expired carton of milk and a half-drunk bottle of something that might've been whiskey. The closet door was open, a few wire hangers swinging gently from the rail.

“He didn’t take everything,” I mused. “But he took enough.”

Roan hummed in agreement. “Bet he left in a hurry. Maybe the weasel got spooked.”

Simon nodded. “Agreed. Let’s get the comp out of here.”

I bent down to pick up the computer, but Roan stopped me with a hand on my shoulder.

“You sure you wanna be the one to carry Sid’s junk?” he asked, smirking. “What if his bad juju rubs off?”

I scowled. “I’ll risk it.”

Roan snorted. “Worst case scenario, you start writing unhinged letters in all caps with even worse grammar than you already have.”

I shot him a glare. “I don’t write in all caps.”

“You do when you text.”

“That’s for emphasis, asshole.”

Simon chuckled as he picked up the monitor, tucking it under one arm like it was a football. “Man, you two bicker like an old married couple.”

“And yet, you still tag along on dates with us.”

Simon flipped him off as we made our way out of Sid's apartment, hauling the potentially compromised hardware with us.

By the time we pulled up to my place, Fallon was already waiting on the porch, arms crossed.

"That was fast," she said, eyeing the computer tower as I carried it inside.

"Sid might have wiped it," I said. "Or some hacker wiped it remotely, or it's in fine running order and it'll be spying on you, so keep your clothes on while you're working on it."

Her lips twitched. "You boys really know how to bring me gifts."

Roan grinned. "What can we say? We're thoughtful."

Roan dropped the monitor onto the dining table with a thud. "You think you can get anything off of this?"

Fallon stepped forward, placing a hand on top of the tower like she was sizing it up. "Depends. If he wiped it the lazy way, maybe. If he used a secure erase program with multiple overwrites, it's gonna be a lot harder."

I clapped my hands together. "Great. Now, in terms I can understand?"

Fallon smirked. "If he just hit delete, I can recover stuff. If he did it right, we might be out of luck."

Simon rubbed his chin. "You said you had government contracts before, right?"

Fallon nodded. "Yeah. And some of those included recovering wiped drives."

Simon let out a low whistle. “Now that’s promising.”

I watched as Fallon pulled her laptop from her bag and hooked it up to the computer tower with a few cables. She moved with quiet confidence, her fingers flying across the keyboard as she powered it up.

“Let’s see what Sid tried to hide,” she murmured.

We all watched as the screen flickered to life, the cursor blinking like it held all the secrets we needed.

Roan leaned against my kitchen counter, arms crossed. “Anyone else feel like they’re in one of those heist movies where the hacker works their magic while the team stands around looking pretty?”

I smirked. “Speak for yourself, Thatcher. Some of us are just naturally pretty.”

Fallon looked up at me and gave me a secret smile. Then she turned her attention back to the computer and was soon biting her lip in concentration, eyes flicking across the screen as she worked.

Then she stilled.

“Well?” I asked.

She exhaled. “It’s wiped, but...” She pointed at something on the screen. “There are fragments. If I can reconstruct them, I might be able to see what he was working on before he cleared the system.”

Simon grinned. “And how long will that take, Ms. Digital Locksmith?”

Fallon's lips curled into a smirk. "Buy me dinner, and I might have it done by dessert."

I chuckled. "Fair enough. But first? Let's make sure Sid doesn't have any more surprises waiting for us."

Because something told me this was only the beginning.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Okay, it was taking a hell of a lot longer than I had anticipated, and the boys were long gone. No big surprise there. They had taken off separately. Michael had been the last to leave, but eventually he did. Over the last weeks, he had told me about his time as an Army Ranger and I realized just how active he really was. No wonder he was a firefighter.

The fact that his biological father was on the run was driving him insane. And he was wrecked that Sid had tried to kill me twice. I pointed out that it could have been anyone who could have gone into the shed that day—including him. It was just the luck of the draw it was me, but it didn't seem to matter to him.

Simon had found a lead that Sid might be in Nashville, but Michael was thinking he would stay closer to Jasper Creek, so he was focusing on Pigeon Forge. Michael was using his fireman buddies network to see where someone might hide out in Pigeon Forge, and the consensus was some homeless shelters, so that's where Michael went to look.

That left me here with the alarm system and Harley.

I was getting close to reconstructing the system. There was one file I was teasing out. But I needed a snack. A big snack. I threw a microwave pizza into the oven and scored when I found a roll of cookie dough in Michael's refrigerator. I had hit a hacker food extravaganza.

My shoulders were killing me, and I felt a tension headache coming on, so I needed a

break. While I was waiting for the pizza to cook, I took a third of the cookie dough and put it into a bowl, took it to the couch, and called Maddie.

“I was wondering when you would remember me,” Maddie teased. “There you are, going out to lunch with my sister, and ignoring me.”

“Whaaa, whaaa. I want you to know I am going to buy and play the world’s smallest violin to go along with your whining.”

Maddie laughed.

“What’s been going on?”

“Not much,” I lied. I didn’t want to rehash everything. I needed to take my mind off my life. “Tell me about you. Have you spent any time with Beau?”

“Uhhhh....”

“Oh, that sounds promising,” I crowed.

“No. I mean yes.” She paused. “I mean no. Aw, shit. I don’t know what I mean,” she wailed. “It’s all so complicated.”

“How’s he doing? It must be tough coming back after all this time and being confronted with a brother that he thought was lost to him.”

“That’s part of the complication. Seriously, Fallon. I don’t know how to help him, and he doesn’t want my help. He only seems to want one thing.”

“Ahh. I see.”

“Yeah.” Maddie sighed.

“How do you feel about that?” I asked.

“I want to rip his clothes off with my teeth, then lick him up like caramel pudding.”

I giggled and took a spoonful of cookie dough.

“He’s living less than a mile from my place, and he drops by unannounced.”

“The horror,” I laughed.

“What are you eating?”

“Cookie dough.”

“Oh. I’ve been doing that, too.”

“Yeah, but I bet you don’t gain any weight.” I looked down at my boobs and knew that if I kept up the stress eating, I would go up another cup size and possibly another jean size. I needed to get things under control. Not that Michael seemed to mind.

“Are you with me?”

“Kind of.”

“Tell me about you and Michael,” Maddie practically begged. “I can’t handle talking about Beau anymore.”

I took in a deep breath. “I was right. He didn’t sleep with Lindsay that night. It was a set-up.”

“That fucking asshole!” Maddie yelled through the phone.

“Yeah. But I’m sleeping with him anyway.”

“Girlfriend...” Maddie admonished.

“The good news is, my girly parts are in great working order.”

Maddie sighed. “I want to know if my girly parts are in good working order.”

“So, sleep with Beau.”

“I’m considering it. Trust me, I’m considering it.”

I heard the oven timer buzz. “Honey, the pizza is done. I’ve got to go. I have a project I’m working on. It’s got a harsh deadline.”

“Okay, call me as soon as you can. I need another tequila night.”

“You’ve got it.”

After I hung up, I took another spoonful of dough, then went to the kitchen and took out the pizza. After having two pieces and two large glasses of water with a couple ibuprofen, my headache was a thing of the past, so I got back in front of the computer. It took me another hour to figure out what was in the file, and when I did, my blood ran cold.

Because what I had found was a nightmare.

Ace Security’s codes. Michael’s parents’ house. Michael’s house. My parents’ house. The addresses, the access logs. Sid could walk in like he owned the place. He could

already be inside.

My stomach flipped.

I grabbed my phone and hit Michael's number, my pulse pounding in my ears.

"Fallon?"

"Michael—he has the codes." My voice came out breathless, a whisper of sheer dread. "That's what I found on the computer. A file with all of Ace Security Systems' access codes and addresses. To every customer. He can get in anywhere."

Silence.

Then, Michael cursed so violently I flinched.

"I'm an hour away," he growled. "Lock everything down. Do not open the door. Do not go near any windows. I'm coming."

I was already moving, racing down the hall toward the gun safe Michael had insisted I learn how to use. Harley was up from her spot on the couch, like she knew things were bad. I was in the guest room checking the windows, when I heard it.

The front door opened.

My heart stopped. My body froze.

The alarm didn't go off.

Oh, God.

Harley growled, a deep, guttural warning, her hackles raised.

I had my new cell phone in one hand and Michael's gun in the other. I was going to drop one of them at any moment because my hands were so slippery with sweat.

Michael was still on the phone.

"Fallon? Why is Harley growling?"

"Someone's in the house. Be quiet, Michael."

I was by the window next to the bed. I slid down, hiding myself behind the bed. At the last second, I stuffed the phone behind the pillow where it couldn't be seen, but Michael could still hear everything.

Including Sid yelling as he searched for me.

"Where are you? The pizza is still hot, I know you're here. I know it's you, Fallon. I recognize your fancy car."

I heard him go room to room, calling my name. He finally reached the bedroom. Harley growled, giving away my hiding place. When Sid came around the bed, I pointed directly at him.

He laughed at me. "You're not going to shoot."

I shot.

The loud sound had me closing my eyes, and the recoil pushed me sideways into the wall. The gun slipped out of my hand. When I opened my eyes I saw Sid standing over me, laughing.

“You’re a lousy shot.”

I took my first good look at him.

Tall. Broad. A cruel mouth twisted in a grin beneath a salt-and-pepper beard. His eyes—Michael’s eyes. Only colder. Dead inside.

Sid Martin.

“Harley, no!” I shouted as she lunged for Sid. Sid kicked out and Harley went down.

I went to pick up the gun, but Sid was too fast. He scooped it up and pointed it at me.

I swallowed hard. “Are you going to kill me now?”

“Nope. I want to live stream that shit. Leaving him a body is too easy.”

The cookie dough I’d just eaten lurched back up my throat, and I barely swallowed it down before it could make a return trip.

“But not just you. His fake mama, too.”

My stomach dropped.

“She’s in the car. So get your ass up. You’re coming with me. If you don’t come easily, I’ll do more than just kill his mama. She’s a pretty thing for someone so old.”

Nausea threatened to overwhelm me. “Where are you taking us?”

“Somewhere with an internet connection,” he laughed. “Somewhere private.” He gestured with the gun. “Now get up, and let’s go.”

He grabbed my arm and yanked me up. I let out a squeak of pain as he jerked my injured shoulder. I was forced to step over poor Harley, who was whimpering in pain.

“Tell me where we’re going. Should I take a jacket?”

“Shut the fuck up. You’re going to be dead soon. It won’t matter that you’re going to be cold.”

There you go Michael. A clue .

Chapter Twenty-Five

No.

No.

I slammed the gas pedal down, my truck tearing down the highway at a speed that could get me arrested, but I didn't care. I barely saw the road. My vision was swimming red.

I had heard it all. Heard that son of a bitch's voice. Heard the moment Fallon realized what she had to do.

She had set the phone down so I could listen.

She knew I was there.

She knew I was powerless to stop it.

She had done it anyway.

I gritted my teeth, rage clawing through my veins, the wheel creaking under my grip.

Sid had her. He had my mother.

And I was too damn far away to stop it.

She'd had to go with him.

That bastard had forced her hand. He had used my mother as leverage.

And Fallon, my fierce, stubborn, brilliant Fallon, had made the only choice she could.

A choice that was going to destroy him.

Because I was coming for him.

And this time, I wasn't going to hesitate to kill him.

As I drove like a madman, I started making calls. I knew Simon was in Nashville, so he was out. I wasn't sure where Roan was, so I called him, but didn't get an answer.

I had Zarek on the line in a second.

"What's up?"

"Get over to my parents' house now. Call an ambulance. Sid kidnapped my mom. She was with Dad. I don't know what happened to Dad. Get over there now."

"On it." He hung up.

My next call was to Bruno. In five swift sentences, I explained the situation. "I've got two former SEALs who'll be coming locked and loaded with me. I'm going to call Bernie Faulkes to see where that psycho might have taken your mom and Fallon."

Made sense. Bernie knew every nook and cranny of Jasper Creek. If anybody would know a hiding place, it would be him. And if Sid said it would be cold, that meant he was heading to the Smoky Mountains.

“Where are we going to meet?” I asked Bruno.

“Parking lot of the Whispering Pines. That’ll put us at the base of the Smoky Mountains proper.”

“But that assumes he’s walking,” I protested. “Sid is taking them in a vehicle. He has to be using some equipment to live stream. He’s going to need to drive. I think we should drive up to the old cabin that Simon and you lived in. That will get us into the Smoky Mountains. A lot of the older folks have abandoned their cabins because of the harsher winters. I think he’s going to take them to one of those.”

I could almost hear Bruno thinking over the phone. Roan was buzzing in. “Bruno, got to take another call. I’ll meet you and your buddies at the old cabin.”

“Agreed.”

“Roan,” I growled out his name.

“I found the hacker kid working with Sid.”

“Found him, as in you have your hands on him?”

“Yep.”

“Ask him if Sid knows how to live stream.”

“Why?”

“Don’t fucking ask questions. Just do it!”

I heard Roan talking and somebody mumbling. “The kid said yes, but he fumbles

with it. Sid is always calling him for help.”

“Perfect. Stash the kid somewhere safe. Sid has my mom and Fallon. He intends to kill them while live streaming it for me. He’s going to be doing it somewhere in the Smoky Mountains. We’ve got the beginnings of a search party to look for him. In the meantime, if he calls the kid, maybe we can track his signal, or the kid can get him to tell him his location. Or fuck, find out if the kid knows where he might be going.”

“On it. Where are you all meeting for the search party?”

“Simon’s old cabin.”

Zarek was calling in. I hung up on Roan.

“Tell me.”

“He’s alive. They’re airlifting him to Nashville. He’s lost a lot of blood, but no major organs were hit.”

“He’s over sixty.”

“Michael, your dad is in good health. The paramedics felt good about his chances. Now tell me what’s going on with your mom.”

“Sid has Mom and Fallon. We’re pretty sure he’s taken them to some cabin up in the Smokies. He had a twenty-five minute head start on me, is all. We’re meeting up at Simon’s old cabin.”

“He’s probably driving your parents’ Range Rover.”

“Do me a favor and call Bruno and let him know that’s what they’re searching for.

Before you go to the meeting point, can you go to my house. Sid kicked Harley. She didn't get back up."

"How do you know?"

"Fallon kept the line open the entire time Sid was talking to her. She even took a shot at him. She missed, but by God, she tried. But he kicked Harley. She also got the clue to me that it was going to be cold where he was taking her, but it needed to be able to have wireless capability."

"She's smart. She's probably going to end up saving both herself and your mom."

I repeated back what he had once said to me.

"From your mouth to God's ears."

When I got to Simon's old cabin, there were seven men. I didn't see Bruno or his brother Jace, and I had expected to. Bernie Faulkes was coordinating things, which made sense, since he knew the mountains like the back of his hand.

He jogged over to me.

"The search is in good hands," he said first thing. "Jace Drakos, Bruno's brother, used to be one of the best trackers for the SEALs. He took point. Unfortunately, we haven't had rain lately, but even without it, he was able to figure out the Range Rover's tire prints and he knows where they went. Only one cabin up that way, according to satellite photos. He and Nolan O'Rourke, who used to be part of his SEAL team have taken point. Give me your phone and I'll plug in both of their numbers into your phone so you can catch up to them."

I nodded. I had to get to my mom and Fallon. I had to.

Just like I thought he would, Sid took us to a cabin in the mountains. He tied me up first, followed by Lana. I don't know what Sid had done to her, but she was bleeding steadily from her head. I kept telling myself that on every TV medical drama I'd ever watched, they always said that head wounds bled a lot, but that wasn't the problem. The problem was how listless she was and how glassy her eyes were.

I watched as Sid fiddled around with the laptop, trying to get an internet connection. He had everything he needed to connect with the satellite remote network, but it was clear he didn't know what he was doing. But when you considered the fact he went into prison when AOL was the hot item, no wonder he was confused.

Lana would bleed out before he would get things hooked up.

"Please untie me, I need to help Lana."

He twirled around. "I told you to shut up. I need to think."

He took out his phone again to make a call. It was the fifth time he tried; I don't know why he was bothering, it was obvious he didn't have a signal.

"She's going to pass out. Then you won't be able to have your show. I need to help her. She needs water and a blanket," I insisted.

"Shut the fuck up!" he roared.

I flinched. He picked up the gun lying on the table, swung around, and took a shot at me. Well not at me, over my shoulder. But he made his point. I shut up.

I continued to watch him plug things in incorrectly while keeping one eye on Lana.

Until she slumped over in a heap.

“Done!” Sid crowed. Sid turned and laughed when he saw Lana. Then he picked up a roll of duct tape from the table and headed for me.

“Showtime.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

I gripped the wheel so hard my knuckles turned white. Fallon and Mom were out there, somewhere up the mountain in the darkness, at the mercy of a monster. Every second counted. My mind raced through every scenario, and I prayed that Jace and Nolan were good. I knew SEALs were good, but I believed in Army Rangers.

I called Jace's phone and Nolan picked up. I recognized his voice.

"It's me, Michael."

"Where are you?" he asked.

I gave him my GPS coordinates.

"You're not far behind us. We just heard a gunshot."

My heart leapt into my throat and I slammed my accelerator to the floor. Fishtail after fishtail, but I kept my truck on the dirt track, always heading forward and up the mountain.

"I see your taillights. Is it just you two?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Are you armed?"

“We have an arsenal.”

I relaxed, just a tiny little bit.

They started to brake, and I did as well. “I have a visual on the cabin,” Nolan said. “It was where we heard the gunshot originate. We’re going to go on foot from here.”

I shoved my truck into park and practically fell out of the driver’s side door before racing toward Jace and Nolan.

Jace put a Sig Sauer pistol into my hand, and all three of us were immediately creeping toward the cabin.

We advanced, sticking to the tree line.

“Either of you been to this cabin before?” Jace questioned in a whisper.

Nolan and I both shook our heads.

“We’ll go in from the trees on either side, then peek in the windows. We’ll communicate via phones. We’ll go in on my mark. Plan?”

Nolan and I nodded in agreement.

All three of us faded into the forest. It took about three minutes for us to ghost our way to the sides of the cabin and look in the windows.

“I’ve got visuals,” Nolan said.

“Me too,” Jace said.

“Me too,” I agreed. Mom was lying on the cabin floor, a pool of blood around her head. Meanwhile, Fallon was duct-taped to a chair, duct tape over her mouth, her eyes wide with terror as Sid held a knife above her.

A tripod with a camera pointed at them.

We all duck-walked below the windows until we met at the front cabin door. “We’re going in now ,” I commanded.

“Agreed,” both men said in unison.

Jace kicked in the door, and I went in first.

Sid looked up with a casual smile.

He stood behind Fallon, a knife to her throat, his expression twisted in sadistic delight.

“You just don’t give up, do you, boy?” he sneered, his grip tightening on the blade.

“Let her go, Sid.” I kept my voice low, steady, my gun trained on his head. “It’s over.”

Sid let out a laugh, cold and manic. “You know I don’t care if I get out of this alive. I just want to cause you as much pain as possible. Look over at that bitch you call Mom. She’s looking pretty dead to me.”

My gaze shifted to Mom, lying in a pool of blood, then I looked back at Sid.

He pressed the blade tighter to Fallon’s throat. A thin line of blood welled along the edge of the knife.

My pulse roared in my ears. I scanned the room for an opening, anything I could use. “You kill her fast and then me, you don’t get to see me suffer long. Isn’t that the whole point?”

His eyes flickered. Doubt. That’s all I needed.

A shot rang out. Sid’s arm jerked back—Nolan had shot his wrist. The knife clattered to the floor. Fallon launched herself sideways, knocking her chair over. I took the shot.

His head exploded.

Nolan was on his knees next to my mother. “I have a pulse. Jace, go to the truck and grab my med kit.”

I was already at Fallon’s side. I carefully pulled the duct tape off her mouth. I ripped the duct tape from her clothes as I got her free. She threw her arms around my neck, her body trembling against mine. We both stumbled over to my mom.

Mom’s eyes were open, and she was pissed. “Did you kill him?” she demanded to know.

“I did.”

“Good.”

Then she turned to Nolan. “I don’t know your name, son. I’m Lana Rankin.”

Now that I saw she was in good hands, I turned to Fallon.

“You did so good. That was so smart to ask Sid if you would need a jacket.”

“I knew you’d come,” she whispered against my chest.

I took off my jacket and wrapped it around her. She gave me a grateful smile.

“I’ll always come after you. I never want to be apart from you again.”

She looked up at me solemnly. “Michael, you do understand you’re nothing like him, don’t you?”

The noxious feeling that had floated around in my gut finally dispersed. I smiled at Fallon. “Yeah, I know. But I’ll never tire of you telling me that. I love you.”

“And I’ll never tire of you telling me that.”

I had invited myself over to dinner at the Vickers and then arrived early. I’d told Bob and Isla that I needed to talk to them about something important. I knew they thought I was going to propose to Fallon, and I was, but first I needed to set some things straight.

Fallon was sitting on the couch, flanked on either side by her parents. I was standing by the fireplace, my shoulders tense. I put my hands in my slacks pockets, then took them out. Fallon knew what this was all about, and she looked as nervous as I felt.

“Mr. and Mrs. Vickers.”

“Michael, you call us Bob and Isla, you know that,” Bob interrupted me.

I gave a brief head nod.

“I need to explain a couple of things, now that the dust has settled. You now know about my biological dad killing my mom when I was five years old, and me testifying

against him. After all, it made national news, what with Mom's and Fallon's kidnapping."

Bob nodded. "Yep. He was a nasty piece of work."

"Yeah, he was. The thing is, part of me, deep down, really thought I was like him. I didn't realize it consciously, but that belief was there."

I saw both of her parents frowning, trying to comprehend what I was saying.

"The long and short of it is, the night before the wedding, I set things up so Fallon would see me kissing Lindsay Marx and going into her house with her. I made it look like I would be spending the night with her."

"I don't understand," Isla said.

"You did what?" Bob asked loudly.

"You're catching on, Bob. I arranged it so Fallon would see something that would guarantee she would dump me and call off the wedding."

"What the fuck?" Bob stood up, and for a moment he looked like his old self as his fists clenched beside him. "You destroyed my baby's dreams?"

I nodded.

"You bastard," Isla chimed in. "How could you do that to Fallon?"

I turned to look at Fallon.

"You know why I did it. You say you understand, and I thank God for your

understanding.” I went to the couch and knelt in front of her. “But what I haven’t said to you, is just how fucking sorry I am for having done something so utterly harmful and mean. If I could, I would rip my heart out of my bloody chest and hand it to you to show you how sorry I truly am.”

She stared at me, silent, her gaze unreadable. I swallowed and pressed on.

"I figured out what I was doing, deep down inside. I thought I was doing you a favor by making you hate me, so you could have somebody better in your life. Deep down I was convinced I was a monster just like my real father.

"I know you said we could move forward at one point, but until this chapter is well and truly closed, I just don’t think we can. I’m begging for your forgiveness. Do you think you have it in you to give it to me? I’ll make it up to you every single day if you let me. I’ll spend the rest of my life proving I’ll never push you away again."

Her eyes softened, and she let out a breath. “Michael, do you understand that not only are you not a monster, you’re actually a hero?”

I leaned back, studying her eyes.

She cupped my cheeks. “You’re my hero.” She placed a chaste kiss on my lips.

I stood up and held out my hand to her so she could stand up as well. I turned to look at Bob. “Mr. Vickers, I would like your blessing to marry your daughter. Will you give it to me?”

Bob looked over at Fallon. “Fallon, do you want me to give my blessing?”

I was shocked. What had happened to Bob Vickers? I was going to have to ask Fallon in private later. As long as she said yes to my proposal.

“Yes, Dad, I would love it if both you... and Mom, gave us your blessing.”

Bob stepped forward and kissed Fallon’s cheek. Then he turned to me and shook my hand. “You have my blessing, Michael.”

Isla got up from the couch and kissed Fallon’s cheek, then rested her hand on my chest. “You have my blessing as well, Michael.”

With that, I knelt down on one knee and opened up a black box. I presented Fallon with a ring that was completely different from the diamond solitaire I had proposed to her with before.

It was a sizeable emerald flanked by a diamond on either side. “The emerald is to represent you, Fallon, and the diamonds represent me always at your side, supporting you, no matter what.”

“It’s gorgeous,” she breathed.

“Will you marry me and give me the chance to spend forever making things right?”

She sniffed, blinking rapidly. Then, with a watery smile, she nodded. “Yes, you idiot. Yes.”

Relief crashed over me and I surged to my feet. I swept her into my arms and kissed her deep and sure.

My Fallon had said yes. There was just one last thing that needed to be done.

Six Weeks Later

They say confession is good for the soul. I'm thinking it is just plain hard work. It started with me talking to one pink-haired lady named Florence, then Roger over at Roger's Supermarket. By the time I talked to Pearl about renting out her restaurant for one evening, she knew what I was up to, and she was all-in.

It took me a while to track down Lindsay Marx, since she had moved away seven years ago, and moved three towns since then. But I eventually found her doing hair in Cincinnati. I flew her in for the event.

Now it was just a matter of herding Fallon and her parents to Pearl's at the right time.

I knew Michael was up to something. But I had no idea what. He'd already proposed. Maddie and Zoe and little Bella were having a blast looking at dozens of bridal sites, while I was downsizing my business even more, and starting a new chapter in my career—an exciting chapter, something I'd never been this excited about.

Simon had approached me two weeks after my kidnapping with a job offer. Apparently, they needed a computer expert in cyber-security. He thought I might be right for the job. Then he looked uncomfortable.

The conversation was really entertaining as far as I was concerned.

“The thing is, Fallon. I can't just hire you. I'm going to need to test you out first.”

“Uhm, Simon. I think that is prudent on your part.”

“The thing is, testing you to hack, could be considered illegal.”

“You heard how I regarded hacking.” I smiled. “What’s more, I think it depends on the reason you’re doing the hacking. Are you trying to get in somewhere and stop human trafficking? If you are, then I say you aren’t hacking, you’re doing good. You know?”

Simon had nodded. “But still. The types of tests I’m going to run you through will be rigorous and require lateral thinking and out-of-the-box thinking.”

I nodded. He was right.

“Okay, who will be testing me?”

“You’re not going to interact with them face-to-face. I have six different people who will give you six different scenarios, some will include hacking into a system. There will be other tasks like doing digital forensics, identifying and plugging leaks. Things like that.”

I grinned. “Simon. I hope I pass, because this sounds like a hell of a good time.”

He laughed. “I hope you pass, too.”

“What are you grinning about?” Michael asked me as he drove my Audi SUV across town to Pearl’s.

“Still thinking of Simon and his potential job offer,” I admitted. “I still have two more tasks to complete. If they’re anything like the first four, they’ll make my ears bleed.”

“You sure looked like you were having fun, though.”

“I was. Most fun I’d had in years... work-wise,” I modified. “I can’t believe yours and my parents wanted a big night out at Pearl’s.”

When we pulled up, every parking spot was full. We had to park in the grass out back. We walked into the diner hand-in-hand, and I might have held on a little tighter than usual, seeing how rude Pearl had been the last time I’d been here.

When we got through the door, everything seemed wrong. Instead of all the tables just being full, people were standing up all around the restaurant. It was wall-to-wall people. I looked and saw what looked like all of Jasper Creek.

“What’s going on?”

Michael just smiled as he dragged me up to the counter where there was one seat available. He lifted me up onto the seat, then he leaped onto the counter so that everyone could see him.

What the hell?

He cleared his throat. I saw red creeping up his neck all the way to his cheekbones. He looked around the crowd, and when he saw somebody in particular, he winced.

Seriously, what the hell?

“I need to make an announcement. I did a crap thing damn near ten years ago, and I made it look like my beautiful fiancée was to blame, when in actuality I was the dick.”

I looked around the restaurant. A couple of people were laughing, like they were in on the joke, but most people were looking at Michael...and me...with avid curiosity.

“The night before our wedding was to take place, you all know that Fallon left town.

So, it's town lore that I was left heartbroken at the altar. Well, that's not true. Fallon had every right to dump my ass. As a matter of fact, that's what I wanted her to do. I set it up, so she would see me kiss Lindsay Marx and then go into Lindsay's house with her."

A gasp went through the restaurant.

"Before you paint Lindsay with a bad brush, don't. Lindsay didn't know I was going to use her that way. She called me every bad name in the book, but mostly she called me a coward for not manning up and telling Fallon I was too scared to get married, forcing her to break it off instead." He looked at the woman again who'd made him wince. "I'm sorry for doing that to you, Lindsay."

That's when I recognized her. Lindsay gave me an awkward little wave. I smiled and waved back. She looked relieved.

Michael went on. "So, I staged everything. I did it because I was convinced I was going to turn out to be like my birth father, you know. The psycho who kidnapped Fallon and my mom, Lana Rankin. I was convinced I was doing Fallon a favor by having her walk out on me."

I'd seen so many people looking at me with smiles, which was nice, but now they were frowning at Michael, and some were out-and-out glaring at him.

This I did not like.

Michael's face was so red, he looked like a tomato.

"Michael," I said. "I think that's enough."

"No, it's not." His voice was raw.

“Everybody, I want you to know that I have my head screwed on straight, and there isn’t a chance in hell that I’m ever going to let the best thing in the world slip through my fingers again. Fallon has agreed to marry me.

“The amazing part is that she never said a word against me,” Michael continued, his voice thick with emotion. “Fallon let you all believe she was the one who walked away. She took the blame, the judgment, the whispers behind her back. And she did it with grace.”

He looked down at me, and the love in his eyes made me dizzy.

“I am so sorry for what I put you through, Sunshine. I will do everything in my power to only bring love and happiness into your world from here on out.”

I blinked rapidly, my lips pressed together, holding back tears. The crowd remained silent for just a moment, then burst into applause.

I turned on the stool, grabbed a handful of napkins from the dispenser, and pressed them against my nose.

“Thank all of you for coming here and listening to my confession and apology.”

Michael hopped down from the counter. “I love you, Fallon. I always have, and I always will. Thank you for agreeing to marry me. Thank you for believing in me.”

“You were an idiot a long time ago,” I said softly. “But you’re my idiot.”

A breath of laughter escaped him, and then he was kissing me, right there in front of the entire town. Cheers erupted around us, chairs scraping against the floor as people stood and clapped. Someone whistled, and Pearl muttered something about them making up for lost time.

But all of that was just background noise to me. Michael held me close. My world was finally, completely right. And this time, I knew he wasn't ever going to let me go.