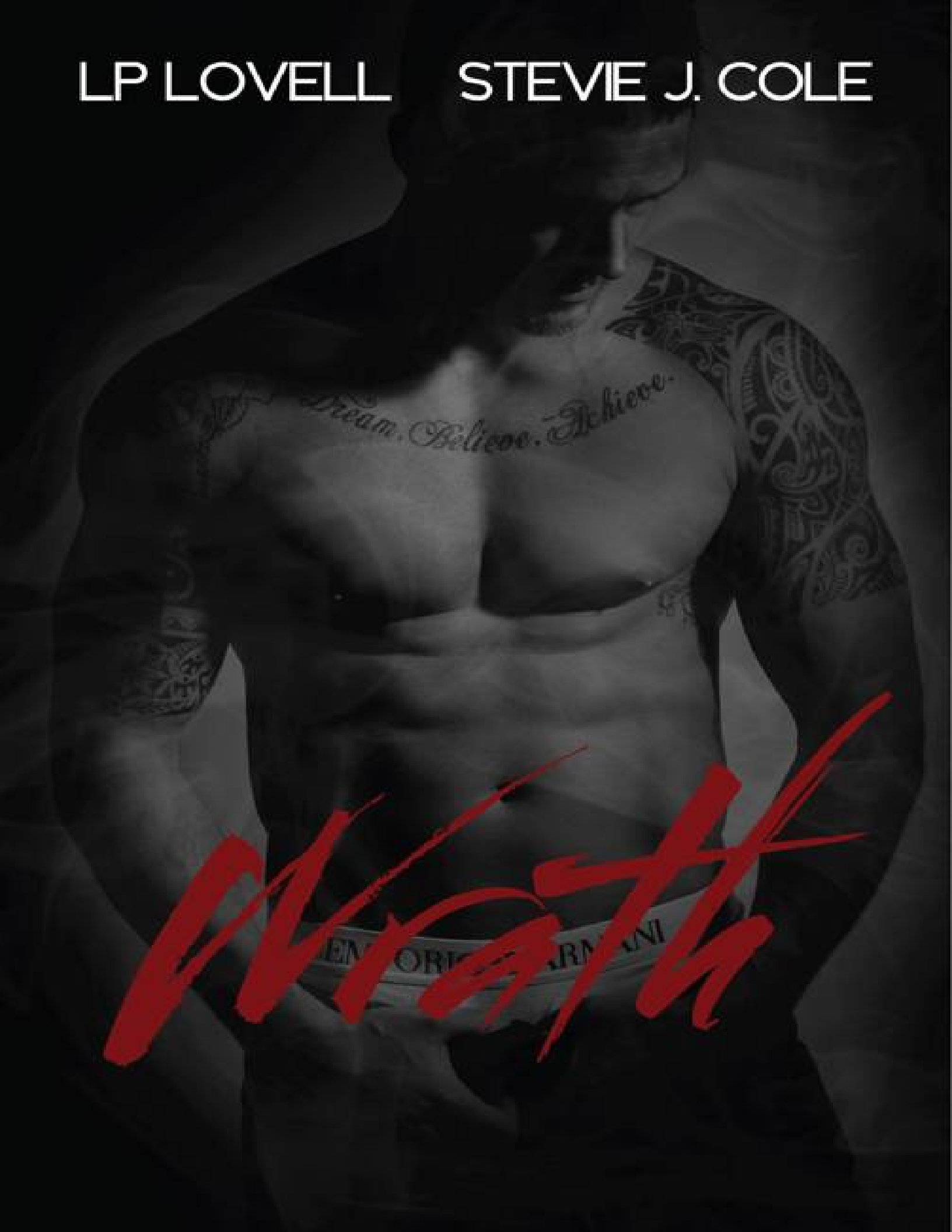


LP LOVELL

STEVIE J. COLE



*Wrath*

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### **Wrath**

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# Chapter 1

## Victoria

I glance at the large screen in front of me that reads: London Heathrow. I stare out at the runway of the South Carolina airport as I wait to board my connecting flight to London. I anxiously fiddle with the strap of my bag... Jude's bag. The contents of this bag are all I have left in the world. I have a new identity, one I don't want. I just want to go home, to see my sister, to live my life, but I can't. It's all gone. Everyone I ever cared about believes I am dead, except Jude. The only person I have left. *Had...* the only person I had left.

I won't pretend I'm not bitter. I am. I've been kidnapped, tortured, shot at, threatened more times than I care to remember, and finally rejected by the one man who I came to trust, despite all of this. The last few months of my life have been shitty; there's no other way to put it.

"Boarding pass please."

I nervously hand my passport to the woman at customs, and can only hope Jude is as good as I think he is. I didn't ask how he managed to get a passport forged so quickly. I've learned with him not to ask questions. My heart clenches at the memory of him handing me the documents. It was all so easy for him, and I hate myself for hurting over him. I hate that I love him, and when I think back, I cannot work out how the hell that even happened.



She glances over it quickly and gives it back to me. I smile politely before moving away. I barely take two steps when someone stops me.

"Excuse me, ma'am." A guy in a dark blue uniform steps in front of me. "Can you please come with me?"

"Of course." *Fuck!* They know the passport is fake. I'm going to go to jail, or worse; they'll find out who I really am. They'll find out I'm supposed to be dead, which will lead them to wonder why, when a body has already been found, am I now here trying to leave the country under a different name? Joe will be the least of my worries if I'm suspected of having something to do with that poor girl's murder. Shit.

I'm led through the airport until we reach a door that reads 'staff only.' The officers show me to a small private office, where I'm told to sit. Two guys stand on either side of the door blocking my exit whilst the guy behind the desk taps away on a keyboard. He doesn't look up at me and barely acknowledges my presence. The phone on the desk rings and he picks it up but doesn't speak. In the silence of the room, I can hear the muffled sound of someone talking on the other end. When he hangs up, he glances up at me. "There's been a problem, and we're going to need to take you to the station to clear it up." *A problem?*

"What problem?" I ask, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

His lips pull into an almost sympathetic looking smile. "We can't discuss it here." He signals towards the two guys standing behind me. "You need to go with these officers."

I nod as I take a steadying breath and stand. The two security officers lead me outside the airport. There are two men in suits standing next to a black SUV, who greet me. *This is some federal shit, it must be.* They look like agents. Maybe they know about Jude? Maybe they want to use me to get to him? My chest tightens as a wave of panic comes over me. Of course there are people after Jude. It was naive of

me to think there wouldn't be somebody watching and waiting. The thought of Jude being locked up makes me feel sick. I shouldn't care. He brought it on himself. He's a criminal, a bookie, a murderer... but I love him, and betraying him would feel like a betrayal of myself.

"Place your hands behind your back." One of the men says, holding a pair of handcuffs.

"What? Am I under arrest? I've done nothing!" I protest as he grabs one of my wrists and yanks it behind my back, pressing me up against the car. He snaps the cuff around my wrist and grabs my other arm, fastening the metal tight enough to cut into my skin. He then pushes me into the back of the car, and the door slams behind me. My pulse hammers in my ears as full-scale panic starts to set in. I'm going to jail. I'm going to be forced to choose, throw Jude under the bus or spend my life behind bars. Shit, the rational option is clear, but my damn heart is treacherously loyal to him.

The two guys get in the front of the car, and we pull away from the airport. I try to calm my breathing. It will be fine, it will be fine, I repeat to myself over and over. I'm so busy freaking the fuck out, I don't realise where we are going, until the car rolls to a stop on a private runway, next to a plane.

The guy in the driver's seat hops out and opens my door. "Step out of the car," he orders. I climb out of the car gingerly; a frown etched onto my face.

"Where are we?" I ask the guy holding the door. "What is this?" My heart is in a dead sprint, my breath faltering in my lungs as I suddenly realise the danger I'm now in. These are not agents.

He wordlessly uncuffs me, a permanent scowl on his face. He then shrugs, turns toward the plane, and leans back against the car. I stand here, my wrists and shoulders aching from the handcuffs. My eyes flick up when I catch movement in the doorway of the plane, and I watch a well-dressed older

man descend the steps. He moves so slowly, smiling when he reaches me. "I'm sorry about all the fuss, Victoria. Turns out you're a hard woman to track down."

"Who are you?" I whisper. Of course, I already know. There's only one person who would have both the inclination and the resources to track me and have me detained like this, a man with more reach than even Jude.

"Ah, now, I think you know who I am." He grins sadistically, his eyes dragging over my body. "You and I are going to have such fun, *Tor*."

Bile rises in my throat. I want to scream, I want to run, but I can't, because this is it. This is the moment that was inevitable. This was the risk I ran when I left Jude, and this is the risk I told myself was worth taking. I thought I would rather risk being caught by Joe than love Jude. I was wrong. One look at his flat, lifeless eyes tells me this is a new breed of monster, one with no limitations, no line he will not cross, and one that is so hungry for revenge, he will destroy anyone in his quest to get to Jude. I know he's going to kill me. My breath seizes in my lungs, and my gaze flashes around, quickly taking stock of the situation. There are two guys near the car, and Joe is at the top of the steps. If he gets me on that plane, I'm screwed. I whip around and run in the opposite direction. I don't think, I just react, like prey running from a predator, this is a pure survival instinct. Adrenaline courses through my veins as my heart hammers against my ribs. I head for the tree line, pushing my lungs until they burn. I'm so close when I hear the bang of the gun go off, and blinding pain rips through my thigh like a hot poker. My leg gives way underneath me, and I go crashing to the ground hard, my palms splitting open. I glance down at my leg and watch the skirt of my sun dress turning bright crimson. I grit my teeth as I grip my thigh to try and slow the bleeding. My vision blurs as tears from both pain and frustration fill my eyes.

A shadow looms over me before the butt of a cigarette is tossed next to me.

"That was stupid." Joe crouches in front of me and reaches out, gripping my jaw between his thumb and fore finger. His lips pull up in a smile, and my eyes focus on the gun in his other hand. I close my eyes, trying to take even breaths, trying not to panic. "I do love a fighter though." I feel him lean forward, his breath blowing over my face and making my stomach turn. "It makes it that much more satisfying when they break. I'm going to break you, little bird, and I'm going to make sure he sees it."

I tremble.

He pulls back, and I open my eyes in time to see him raise his gun, right before he hits me over the head with the butt.

Everything goes black.

I wake up with my face pressed into a cold, damp surface. Groaning, I push up on my hands. My head is pounding, and my vision is blurry. My leg is throbbing and feels like it's on fire.

I manage to sit up and lean back against the wall. The room is pitch-black, freezing cold and smells of mildew.

I have no idea where I am, what day or time it is, or how long I've been here.

The last thing I remember is Joe. I know for sure this is it. I'm going to die. Jude warned me, and I knew the threat was very real, yet I decided the risk was worth it. I put my pathetic heart before my life, like a lovesick idiot.

I freeze when I hear footsteps. I can't see anything, so I have no idea where they're coming from. A heavy click reverberates around the room, and a door creaks open, smashing against the wall. I hold my hand up, shielding my eyes from the sudden bright light. Spots dance across my vision as a pair of heavy boots come into view, stopping in front of me.

"Get up," a gruff male voice barks at me. My head is still spinning as I struggle to scramble to my feet. A rough hand wraps around one of my wrists, yanking me forward. I bite back a scream as pain shoots up my leg. I glance down and find it's bandaged. Why do that? Why not just let me bleed out?

"Walk." He shoves me through the open door, and I stagger, falling against the wall in the hallway. I'm half dragged, half pushed down the hall, and up a short set of stairs. There's a doorway on the left; he pushes me through it into an office. There's barely any furniture: a desk and chair, a window on one wall, and an open fire on the other side of the room.

There, sat at the desk is Joe. He appears to be a normal guy, smartly dressed in a suit, clean shaven. His slightly greying hair and a chiseled face lend him towards looking quite distinguished. He looks very respectable until he glances up at me with eyes so dark; they're almost black. There isn't an ounce of mercy or kindness to be found within the dark depths of his irises, only cold, feral depravity.

He watches me for a moment, like a wolf eyeing up a newborn lamb. "You should know that this isn't personal." He flashes me a nasty smile.

"What isn't?" I breathe, as it feels like icy water is creeping through my veins.

Joe rises, moving around the desk to stand in front of me. His eyes trail over my body, and I want to douse myself in bleach. He reaches out, taking a piece of my hair in his hands and leaning in to smell it.

"Everything," He snarls, before throwing his fist into my stomach. I double over, coughing violently as my knees slam into the ground. I hold my stomach, trying to drag air into my winded body. He drops to a crouch in front of me and grabs a fistful of my hair, yanking my head back. I cry out as my scalp burns.

He pushes his face to mine, his smoky breath blowing over my skin. "I'm going to destroy you, and he's going to listen to it." He says coldly. "He's weak, and his weakness will lead him to you, and in turn me. I'm going to kill him slowly. By the time I'm done, he will beg me to kill him," he spits in my face, before throwing me to the ground violently.

No. He can't. My heart splinters at the thought of anything happening to Jude. I made my choices, but I still love him.

"We're going to call dear old Jude." He smiles. He puts the phone on loudspeaker, and the rings echo around the room.

The phone rings and rings until the machine picks up. Joe grabs a handful of my hair again, yanking me to my knees. "Leave him a message," he growls in my ear.

As soon as the beep rings out, I shout, "Jude..."

Joe slams his hand over my mouth, silencing me. I fight against him. I have to warn Jude. He can't come after me, he'll be walking into a trap, and for what? Some misplaced loyalty for a girl he didn't even want.

The phone clicks, and then I hear his voice. "Tor?" He sounds controlled, but I know him. I can hear the edge of panic in his voice.

Joe laughs, clearly thrilled with this little moment. "You fucked up, Jude, and now I'm going to fuck her up, just like I fucked up your whore of a mother." He slams the receiver down and releases me. I fall forward onto my hands, tears streaming down my face.

"You know..." He stops right in front of me, his shiny shoes in my line of vision. "I couldn't have planned this better if I tried. When I told Euan to get you into Jude's house, I never thought it would actually happen. That his guy would be stupid enough to take you, and then when he did, I assumed JP would send you right back because he's Jude Pearson; chivalrous, lover of women." He turns and paces in front of me. "I thought he would send you back to Euan, and

I could pluck information straight from your pretty little head." He laughs and drops to a knee in front of me, grabbing my chin roughly and forcing me to look at him. His cold eyes trail over my body. "But then he was stupid enough to fall in love with you. I commend you, I really do. You must have a pussy of gold," he sneers.

"Jude doesn't love me." My voice is strangled, barely audible.

He smiles. "Oh, but he does. You see, I've been watching, Tor."

I blanch.

"Oh, yes, sweetheart, I've known where you were this whole time. Trust me, Jude Pearson is very much in love with you, and you know what they say about love... it is the greatest of weaknesses. You just became the weapon I need to destroy him."

I feel like I'm going to throw up.

"I'm going to destroy him, by destroying you, and then, finally, when I allow him to find me, I'll put him down like the dog that he is." He rises to his feet. "So, we're going to make JP a little video."

*Oh, my God. No!* I start shaking immediately.

Joe snaps his fingers. A man I hadn't noticed before moves out of the shadows, grabbing me by the throat and hauling me to my feet. I try to fight him, but it's pointless. He's enormous, and he throws my body around like a rag doll, slamming me onto the desk as Joe laughs behind me. My shoulder blades crunch against the hard wood, and I claw at his wrist as my lungs scream for oxygen.

"Don't kill her before we've even started," Joe says casually. His grip loosens slightly, and I heave in lungfuls of air. "Now, I want you to tell me everything you know about JP." He paces slowly in front of the desk. Another guy appears out of nowhere. He's holding a phone up in front of him, videoing.

"Fuck you," I choke, through my hoarse throat.

"I so hoped you would say that." He draws back his hand, and this time he punches me. Pain explodes across my cheekbone and my right eye. I lift my hand, holding my face. Joe grabs my wrist and yanks my hand away. "Oh, no, we want JP to see my handy work."

The guy takes the phone and shoves it in my face. Joe smiles and moves to the desk, pulling something out of a drawer. I can't see what it is.

"This is what happens to those who are loyal to you, JP," he snarls at the camera as he walks away from me. I can't see what he's doing, only that he's in front of the fire. My heart is pumping so hard it feels like it's going to explode through my rib cage. Fear and adrenaline course through me causing my body to shake violently.

"Turn her over," Joe orders over his shoulder.

I'm pulled up by my hair. The man twists me around, slamming me down on my front, so I'm bent over the desk. I cough as I'm winded again, and try to steady my breathing, but it's no use. I can't see him. I'm vulnerable and completely exposed, not that I could fight off three of them either way, but this feels worse somehow.

I feel the heat from Joe's body as he moves up beside me again. He grabs my head and crushes the side of my face into the desk. "I want to know everything, and one way or the other sweetheart, you will fucking tell me," he breathes in my face.

I say nothing. I will give him nothing. He sighs, as though this is such a hardship for him and brings the object in his hand into my line of sight. It's a type of steel rod, and the end is glowing a bright red. Oh, God, no! I squeeze my eyes shut, and tears trickle down my temple.

"Last chance," he prompts. My mind tries to block out my surroundings, but fear and survival instinct keep me rooted here. He rips the material of my dress away from my back, and I feel the cool air touch my skin.



"You see this Jude... I'm going to brand her, one a day, for every single day you don't save her." He laughs. "Not sure you'll want her by the time I'm done with her."

His knee digs into the centre of my back, pinning me down before he presses the brand to my skin. Burning is the worst kind of pain, the most intense. I can smell my flesh singing. I scream, my God, do I scream. I can't breathe. I can't see through the tears that blur my vision. He takes the brand away, but the pain doesn't stop, and I choke on my sobs.

"I'll start with an easy question. I want names. Tell me who some of his clients are, Victoria, and I will make this stop."

It won't though, it never will. I would rather die here than give this bastard what he wants, because no matter how many times I've told myself Jude's a monster, he's not. These men are the monsters, the monsters he tried to protect me from, and I owe him the same thing. As soon as I tell Joe what he wants, we both know he will kill me. I'm not telling him shit, and when Jude finds him because he will find him, I only hope he kills the bastard slowly. Even as I think this, my instinct to survive is screaming at me to just fucking tell him.

My silence angers him, and he growls, throwing the poker across the room and flipping me back over. He grabs me by the throat, his fingers digging into my skin as he brings his face close to mine. "This is nothing, girl. I will break you. I will ruin you, and then I will send your body back for him to see."

I hear a rip and feel the cold air touch my stomach as he tears my dress from my body. *Not that!* A small voice screams at me. *Anything but that.* They want to torment Jude, so, of course, they're going to rape me. They think he is in love with me, and with that in mind, nothing would hurt him more. I vow not to scream because I refuse to give them what they want.

Joe laughs at the camera, tracing his fingers down the long scar running between my breasts and over my stomach. "Looks like JP already had his fun with you. Let me guess, he worked out who Euan was?"

I can't respond to him. I can only moan as the pain radiates down my spine.

He glances to the camera again. "I can definitely see why you like her, JP. I fancy a taste myself. See what all the fuss is about." He grabs my underwear, yanking it down my legs aggressively. A sob threatens to break from my throat, as I hear his belt buckle being undone. I clench my teeth, forcing back my want to scream.

He grabs my thighs, pulling them apart and yanking me to the edge of the desk. His fingers press against the bullet wound in my leg, whilst the burn on my back drags across the surface of the desk. The pain makes black spots dance across my vision. My eyelids flutter closed as my head swims, but a sharp slap across the face pulls me back from that blissful brink.

"Oh, no, I want you awake for this sweetheart. Let dear old Jude see what he's missing."

My mind snaps back to reality and screams at me to fight. I can't give up. I lash out with my legs, kicking wildly at him as I try to sit up. The massive guy appears from behind me somewhere and places his hand on my chest, slamming me back down on the desk. I grab at his arm, trying to get him off, but I might as well be trying to move a brick wall for all the good it does me. I choke out a ragged cry of desperation as I realise Joe is going to rape me, and I am completely helpless.

"I do so love a fighter," Joe sneers.

With that, he wrenches my legs apart and forces himself inside me in one thrust. I flinch as pain tears through me, and he smiles manically. His fingers grip my hips, his nails breaking the skin. Tears stream down my temples as he

pounds into me violently, taking everything from me as he does.

I turn my head to the side, focusing on a spot of flaked paint on the wall. I think of another time, another place, a place when I was happy. I think of my mother, my sister, and then, I think of Jude. I remember the way he made me feel safe, the way he would smile at only me. I think of him, and I hope he doesn't come after Joe because I know in my heart that Joe will kill him.

"I think she likes it, Jude." Joe gloats at the camera. The other two men don't even blink. These aren't men; they're fucking animals.

The torture seems to go on forever. He fucks me until I feel like I'm being split in two. He eventually stiffens on top of me and grunts before pulling out, taking the last shattered pieces of me with him.

I will never come back from this. Even if he doesn't kill me, I gave up my life for love. I just hope it was enough.

# Chapter 2

## Jude

The line goes dead, and I fall back into the chair still clutching the receiver in my hand. My chest tightens, my heart beats so fucking hard I can literally feel my pulse everywhere. I have no idea where he is. No idea how many miles away from me she is. And I have no fucking idea how I can save her. This right here is fucking fear.

I chuck the phone across the room, my chest heaving. I grip the edge of the desk to steady myself as I try to calm my breathing. He fucking has her! My arms tense and I flip the desk over on its side, papers scattering everywhere. "I have to find him," I shout and look over my shoulder at Caleb.

Caleb's sitting on the couch, his head hung as he shakes it solemnly. He knows as well as I do we'll only find Joe if he wants us to. "I told her not to leave. I begged her not to leave," Caleb whispers. His gaze lifts to mine, and his face is red. "You shouldn't have let her leave, Jude!" he yells.

I stare at him and swallow. He's fucking right, but I did what I thought was best for her. I'm the one Joe wants. I thought she would be safer away from me, away from my lifestyle of fucking murder and crime. I was naive to think Joe would believe she was dead, and I fucking hate myself for it. The video Joe sent my father all those years ago creeps to mind, and I know what's going to happen to her. I feel

physically sick, and in an instant, I've gone entirely weak. *He fucking has her.*

I wipe my hand over my brow and drag in a calming breath. I need to get fucking control of myself. I grab my gun from the desk and point at the phone. "Trace that fucking number!" I growl at Caleb as I walk out of the office.

I will fight for her.

I will find her.

And I will kill that bastard for even daring to fucking look at her.

Joe Campbell better run, because the devil is fucking coming for him.



"JP, I don't know what you want me to do," David argues. "For the third damn time, I want you to fucking help me find her," I shout into the phone as I floor the accelerator.

"Look, I've got to go into the station. I'll think about it, and call you when I get off."

I hang up the phone, my fingers tightening around the leather steering wheel before I jerk it to the right. The tires squeal as the vehicle skids over several lanes to the exit ramp. There is a line of cars waiting at a red light. Laying on the horn, I drive off onto the shoulder to go around them. I swerve back into the lane, haphazardly weaving in and out of traffic. He's not going to fucking *think* about it. He's going to fucking help me right the fuck now!

My chest is so damn tight I'm unable to fucking breathe. I wipe my hand over my face, and can't help but notice I can still smell her on me. Every time I close my eyes, I see her. All I can think about is that this is my fault, and I can't handle

that. I pound my fists over the steering wheel. "Fuck," I shout.

Moments after hanging up the phone, I pull into David's drive. He's closing the front door when I put my car into park and kick the door open. I calmly make my way up his sidewalk; my fist clenched at my sides. He's frozen on his stoop and staring at me. David's seen me angry countless times, but he's never been the one on the receiving end of it. I grab him by the arms and slam him against the brick. "I didn't ask you to fucking help me, did I? I fucking *told* you to!"

He glares at me, struggling to free himself from my grip. "JP," he laughs nervously, "I just..."

"Just nothing. I need you to find me every last piece of shit with any ties to Joe." I narrow my gaze as I inch my face toward his. "You've seen me angry, David, you know there are no limits to what I'll do. And I'm *beyond* fucking angry right now," I growl.

He nods and swallows. "Okay, just... just calm down, JP. I can get you the names."

"In three hours! I want the names in three hours, or I'll think you're trying to stand in my way. You don't want me to think that!"

"I'll get them to you."

My jaw ticks. "And you make sure you cover my ass. I can't go to jail until I get her. Got it?"

"Yeah, yeah. Got it."

I loosen my grip on him and turn toward the drive. "If I go to jail, I'll kill you when I get out. And I *will* get out." I point at him and raise a brow. "I'm not fucking around, David."



By the time I get back to the house, David has already given me the first name I need. I don't have time to make a plan. Every second I waste will cost Tor something, and I'm fully aware of that.

I storm into the house. "Marney!" I shout. "Where the fuck are you?"

The door to the bathroom swings open and Marney stumbles out with a newspaper tucked beneath one arm and a cigarette smoked down to the filter between his lips. He pulls at his fly. "Can't a man take a shit in peace?"

"We gotta go."

"Where the hell are we going?" he asks, following me down the steps to the basement.

"To get Tor."

Footsteps come running down the stairs behind us. "Jude!" Caleb calls out, but I keep walking toward the weapons room. "Jude?"

"You gonna answer your brother?" Marney mumbles.

Gritting my teeth, I turn around to face Caleb. "What?" I bark.

He stares at me, his eyes possessing a hardness I've never seen from him before. "I'm going with you."

"No!"

"Shit, Jude." He grabs the sides of his head and groans. "I care about her too, you know."

"You are *not* coming, Caleb. This has nothing to do with you. I need you here to make sure shit runs smoothly." I glare at him in warning as I step into the room. I don't want him going. I don't want him in that kind of danger.

Caleb marches through the doorway, and Marney steps between us, gently placing his hand on Caleb's shoulder. "Listen to your brother, boy." Marney pulls several rifles from the rack, then eyes me, shaking his head. "Somebody's got to stay here," he says.

I take several guns from the metal shelves before turning to carry them outside to the car. Caleb fumes as he follows us out into the driveway and opens the trunk for us. I throw the guns inside, step back, and stare at him. I need him to fucking understand he cannot go. Joe Campbell is not a man he can deal with. This is my fucking war, and my little brother will not fight it for me.

He slams the trunk, his eyes honing in on me. "I want to help her. Please, just let me help her." I can see tears building in his eyes, and I feel sorry for him, but I won't risk his life like this.

"No, Caleb! You can help her by staying the fuck right here. Don't argue with me about this." I yank the driver's side door open, climb in and turn the engine. I glare back up at Caleb. "You. Stay. Here," I order before closing the door. He shakes his head and hesitantly turns back toward the house.

"I mean it, Caleb." I shout as I pull out of the drive. "You keep your ass right here!"



Marney and I have been on the road for hours. We've barely said three words to each other. For the past forty minutes there's been nothing but dirt roads, farms, and run-down buildings. I cut the headlights because we're getting close, which means it's pitch-fucking-black outside. I can barely see anything. If it weren't for the full moon, I'd be driving blind. The car bumps along the uneven road causing the guns and ammunition in the back seat to rattle.

"You've arrived at your destination," the GPS announces as we come up on a dented metal mailbox.

I pull off into the gravel driveway and cut the engine. As soon as I open the door, the humid night air swallows me. I



grab the gun from the door, and head toward the house with Marney following closely behind me.

A dim haze from the television lights the front window to the house. Aside from that, the place is entirely dark. We creep through the overgrown grass, the buzz from the crickets silencing as we make our way to the side porch. I stop in front of the door, completely calm and focused. I will not fuck around with this. I don't have the time.

I raise my gun, cock it, and kick the flimsy door down. The man is sprawled out on the couch watching television; his hand shoved inside his underwear. The commotion startles him, and he jumps up, reaching to the side table for his gun, but mine is aimed at his head already.

"Don't even fucking bother," I growl. "You touch that gun, you die."

He backs away as I come at him, which is stupid because now he's right up against a wall. I shove the tip of my pistol into his mouth, and he flinches, his eyes pulsing open in fear.

"Tell me where the fuck Joe Campbell is," I say, calmly.

He doesn't say anything. Just carefully shakes his head, and squeezes his eyes closed.

"You have three fucking seconds to tell me where he is."

I silently count to three, shrug, then, BAM. Warm blood splatters over my chest and face and the man's body drops to the floor. I'm not in a mood to fuck around. I head to the back door, stopping to swipe a can of beer from the counter on my way out. I pop the top and guzzle the warm lager before I step over the broken door.

"Boy!" Marney strolls leisurely down the steps behind me, lighting a cigarette. "You're losing your shit."

I shrug and toss the can onto the ground. "I have a list of people to get through. One of the fuckers will say something the first time I ask."

Marney bends over to pick up the can of beer. "What the hell is this?" he shakes the can at me. "Your pops didn't

teach you to be stupid. You want to go to jail? Shit. Leaving fucking DNA everywhere. Use your head, boy!"

My short fuse snaps, unleashing a wave of anger into my system. I stop dead in my tracks, and close my eyes as I clench my fist. "I'll tell you this once, old man. I'm fucking pissed, and all I'm concerned with is finding her." I slap the can from his hand and point my finger in his face. "Don't fuck with me."

He stares at me, his gaze narrowing as he pulls a cigarette from his pocket. I yank the door open. "Let's go, Marney!" I shout as I get into the car.

He hurries and climbs in, then I peel out of the drive, the tires kicking up a cloud of dust as we turn onto the road.

An hour later, I'm pulling over to the side of the road to take a piss. My phone vibrates in my back pocket as I'm zipping my fly. There's a text from an unknown number, and all that is there is an attachment. I stare at the screen, knowing damn well I shouldn't open it, but I do.

A blurry image comes into focus. A fucking beast of a man holds Tor down by her throat over a desk. Heat floods every last inch of my skin.

"Don't kill her before we've even started," Joe snickers.

My heart pounds violently. My jaw tightens. The man releases his hold on her, and she gasps for air.

"Now, I want you to tell me everything you know about JP."

I have to swallow. Acid eats its way up my throat, but I can't make myself look away. They beat her, and my heart feels like it's going to pound its way out of my fucking body. My eyes blur with tears as I watch the fucking bastard burn something into her back, the sound of her screams splintering their way through my body. They are so guttural, so ragged. Those screams will haunt me until the day I fucking die. I can't watch this. I go to close the screen and

the phone slips from my slick palms, her cries still ringing out from the speaker. I fumble around in the damp grass for the phone, desperate to cut the sound off. Then, suddenly there's silence. I hear things banging around, Joe talking, and I'm terrified she's been killed.

When I finally find the phone, I hear Joe say, "I can definitely see why you like her, JP. I fancy a taste myself. See what all the fuss is about." My hands shake as I turn the phone over and see Joe laid on top of her, her legs held open. I close my eyes as I fumble to shut the phone off. All I hear are Joe's sick grunts. Tor doesn't make a fucking sound, and that might just be the worst part.

I lean over the front of the car, trying to control my breathing. "Fuck!" I launch my fist into the hood. "Fuck," I shout again, my voice breaking as I drop to the ground, and rest my back against the bumper. I rake my fingers through my hair and place my elbows on my knees. I stare at the black screen of my phone, her cries still echoing in my ears, and I feel tears building in my eyes.

This is pain, weakness, vulnerability. I know damn well she's my weakness, and so does he. If I thought for a fucking second he would give her up for me, I would hand myself over, I would give him whatever the fuck he wants, but what he wants is to break me. He wants me crawling on my fucking knees before he puts a bullet in my head.

I wipe my hand over my face, angrily swiping away the tears threatening to break free. I will not let him fucking break me. I can't help her if he does. I stare out at the empty road and think about what all he has taken from me. I think of how he used an innocent fucking girl as a pawn in this sick, fucked up game he's playing with me. And no matter how hard I try, I can't get the image of him on top of her out of my fucking mind. Every reason I have hunted Joe over the past few years fades into the background. Although revenge is one hell of a driving force, being the sole person who can

save her means I *have* to find him. My pulse kicks up. My vision goes red. And the adrenaline burns through my veins like a hit of fucking heroin. Fuck anger. This is unadulterated rage, and Joe has no fucking idea what he's just unleashed. The fucking devil himself would run and hide from me because I know no fucking limits, and I'm fucking pissed.

# Chapter 3

## Victoria

Hours and days seem to blend together. The only way of measuring the passing days is when I'm dragged out of here, so Joe can brand me, rape me and beat me. He wants me to scream. He wants Jude to hurt, to act out of anger and make a mistake. This will hurt Jude, of course it will, even if it's nothing more than a case of wounded pride, but the less I scream, the less Joe gets what he wants. I won't give him the satisfaction of hearing me scream or beg because it will do me no good.

I hear the familiar lumbering footsteps coming down the hall again. It's always the same guy. I once tried to talk to him, hoping maybe, just maybe there was a grain of decency in him somewhere that I could persuade him to help me. I got a slap in the face and a split lip for my trouble.

The door swings open, smashing into the wall. He grabs my hair and drags me out of the corner. I wince, as everything hurts. The bullet wound in my leg is badly infected, and I know it won't be long before septicemia sets in, but I'm banking on being dead long before then.

He tows me along the corridor before pushing me back into the office. Fear consumes me as my entire body starts to shake. I think I'm going to throw up.

Joe has his back to me, and he seems to be talking to himself. "This is just like a fairytale, huh? And you want to be the hero. Don't worry Jude, I'll let you find her when I'm ready, just remember, I'm not one for happy endings." He laughs and turns to face me. "Ah, Victoria, you're just in time. I have dear Jude on the phone. Say hello."

All the blood drains from my face as bile rises in my throat. "Tor?" Jude's voice comes over the loudspeaker, and a small whimper leaves my lips upon hearing him.

"Tor?" his voice is calm and controlled and I can almost picture the cold rage on his face. It's when he's calm that he's at his most deadly. By now, he's seen the video. Shame and self-hatred wash over me. I can't talk. I can't even speak his name as tears track down my face.

"Oh, now don't be shy, little bird. Speak up." Joe moves toward me, and a strangled cry escapes my throat. He grabs me by the back of the neck, slamming my chest and cheek against the wooden desk. He presses his pelvis against me, and I wretch.

"Jude," I manage to whisper through panicked breaths. "Don't come for me," I sob.

Joe laughs. "You hear that JP? I told you she liked it. She wants to stay here. Maybe she just wants to get fucked by a *real* man. I told you I'm going to fuck her up, and I haven't even started having my fun with her yet."

"Do what you like with her," Jude's cold voice comes over the line. "She's nothing to me." The line cuts off.

*He hung up. He hung up!* It feels like someone just shoved their hand inside my chest and ripped my heart out. I'm nothing to him. I knew he didn't love me, but I thought... I thought I meant *something* to him. He doesn't care. And it's at this moment I realise I've been fighting for nothing. He was never coming for me. Joe torturing me has all been pointless because he was banking on Jude coming for me. It's such a brutal irony that I laugh, I actually laugh.

Joe's guys look at each other as though I've totally lost it.

"What's so funny, sweetheart?" Joe says, with barely concealed anger.

"I told you he doesn't love me; he doesn't even fucking like me!" My voice cracks. "So just kill me already."

Joe presses his body against me, his lips at my ear. "I wouldn't be so sure. He likes to think he's clever," His breath touches my ear, and I push down the vomit that threatens to rise. "Why would a man who doesn't care for you drive two hundred miles just to put a bullet in the head of one of my associates?" he muses. "He's getting desperate, and that means he's going to get sloppy. He's already dropped his guard, and I'm going to go for his jugular." He picks the receiver back up and dials a number, then puts the call on the loudspeaker. His fingers drum on the desk as he waits.

"Hello?" My entire body tenses when Caleb's voice comes over the line. I open my mouth to scream at him to hang up, but one of Joe's men is ready for me and rams the barrel of the gun against my temple. My pulse hammers in my ears. Please don't let him get dragged into this, he's too innocent, too young.

"Well, Caleb, my boy, allow me to introduce myself. I am the man who killed your mother, and if you don't do exactly as I say, I'll kill Victoria along with your pathetic brother."

He says nothing. All I can hear is him breathing into the phone.

"I will take you, and I will let her go. You tell your brother, you tell anyone where you are going, and I will make sure all three of you die, and as you know, I don't make threats."

There's a beat of silence, and I fucking pray he hangs up, that he thinks this through, that he goes to Jude!

"Where?" Caleb responds.

I don't care that this guy might shoot me. They're going to kill me anyway. There's no way I'm getting out of this, and I will not let Caleb die. "No, Caleb!" I scream. "Do not..." Something collides with the side of my head, and everything goes black.



I don't know how long I've been here. It seems like weeks. This room is pitch-black, the only chink of light coming from under the door.

My body is done. I can take no more. Every time Joe touches me I want to die. I know he's going to kill me, and he's only dragging this out in some sick bid to antagonize Jude. That's the worst part. I'm suffering through this, and yet, it's pointless. He thinks Jude cares about me, but he doesn't. I heard the cold indifference in his voice as he told Joe I meant nothing to him. *Nothing*. I feel so stupid.

I just want it all to end. He keeps me handcuffed to this pipe. The only thing I can reach is the bucket that functions as a toilet. They sometimes offer me food, but I don't eat. I'm constantly nauseous. I may not die of starvation, but starvation and the pain mean that I'm barely conscious when he forces himself on me. It's a small mercy.

The sliver of light under the door is interrupted, and I hear the clink of keys before the door swings open. I don't even open my eyes. He steps into the room and releases the cuff from around my wrist.

"Get up."

I don't move. I'm too weak to stand. Septicemia has set in, and I'm burning up with fever. My body is shutting down, and I'm thankful for it.

The man grabs my arm and drags me to my feet. I slump against the wall, struggling to keep my eyes open. He growls



and pulls me from the room, my feet numbly find the ground as he holds me upright. Eventually, he gets bored of trying to hold me up and throws me over his shoulder. My head lolls to the side as he moves down the corridor. A door creaks open and I hear voices before he dumps me onto the floor. My limp body sprawls across the ground, and I don't have the strength to try and move or fight. Honestly, I'm almost happy about it. I can sense the end fast approaching, and it feels like a mercy at this point.

"Oh, God. Ria!"

It's Caleb. I want to cry, and scream in frustration. *Why would he do this? Why the hell did Jude let him come here? It has to be a plan, surely? Jude always has a plan.* I frown and try to open my eyes. My fingers dig into the worn carpet. Warm hands skim my face, fingers barely skimming over my skin.

"Ria." My name's spoken on broken breath, so quiet I can barely hear it.

There's a loud clap followed by Joe's laughter. "Well isn't this touching?"

Fear has me dragging my eyes open. I see Joe standing over me, that twisted smile of his on his face as he glares down at me. My eyes dip in and out of focus as I try to find Caleb's face. I squeeze my eyes shut as a shudder wracks my body. I pray to anything and everything he isn't acting on his own, because if he is, then he's going to die. My eyes flutter open again, and he's on his knees beside me. Tears streak down his young face as his eyes lock with mine.

"You shouldn't be here," I whisper, shaking my head.

"Please," he croaks. "Please, just let her go. You have me. I'm the last family my brother has. Take me, kill me, do what you want with me, it will hurt him more."

No, no, no! I want to scream at him, but it's too late.

"I did tell you I would let her go if you came here, didn't I?" Joe smiles slowly. "I lied, surely you knew I was lying?"

Joe signals his guys and they pull Caleb to his feet.

"Please, let her go! She'll die." Caleb's voice breaks and tears slip down my temples. I was so close to death, and now Caleb's here. How can I wish for death when I know I'm leaving him to this?

Joe glances at me as though I'm nothing more than a dog he's bored of taunting. "That's the idea." He smirks before turning his back on me. "Put him in with her. They have some catching up to do."



The door closes, but instead of the usual darkness, a small dim light bulb swings back and forth above our heads. I lay on my back and watch as it moves into my vision, then away again. My body trembles and convulses as the fever rages through me.

"Ria." Caleb scoops my head off the floor and cradles it in his lap. He presses his palm to my forehead and his eyebrows pinch together. His eyes flick to my leg covered in dirty bandages that haven't been changed since I got here. I don't even know what it looks like, but it smells bad, like decaying flesh. I stopped trying to salvage it a long time ago. I have no medicine, no disinfectant, nothing. Why delay the inevitable?

"You shouldn't have come, Caleb." My voice sounds scratchy even to my own ears.

"I couldn't just leave you here." His face hovers over mine, his eyes soft as they study my face. "I hoped I could convince him to let you go."

"Please tell me Jude knows you're here, that he has a plan?" I beg.

His eyes slowly move to mine. "He never would have let me come, Ria."

"Oh, God." A strangled sob breaks through my lips. "You'll die," I rasp. My breaths come in uneven pants as even the smallest of actions seem like an uphill struggle.

Caleb shakes his head, determination painting his features. "No, Jude's looking for you now."

I wish I could believe him, but hope is not something I can afford anymore. I pray Caleb survives this. I know I'm delusional, I've seen the extent of Joe's hate, but I ask for this one small thing.

Caleb takes one of the bottles of water, the only thing Joe's guys supply me with, and he pours it over my leg, attempting to wash my wound.

"Leave it."

"Ria, it needs cleaning."

I shake my head. "Leave it."

"What, you're just going to give up?" He tries to sound stern, but his voice cracks.

I don't say anything. I don't have to.

"You don't get to give up. You fight this." His face crumples and tears trickle down his cheeks. He suddenly looks so young, like the boy he should be, not the man his brother's lifestyle has forced him to become.

I reach up and hold onto his wrist gently. "There are some things that we just aren't meant to survive," I breathe. My head spins violently, and I try to focus on his face.

"Ria!" He shakes me. "Ria."

I try to stay awake, but the blackness pulls me under. I welcome it like an old friend, wrapping me in its warm embrace.



I wake when someone grabs me by my shoulder and hauls me to my feet. "Don't hurt her!" I can hear Caleb screaming, and it confuses me. I thought he was a dream.

I want to cry when I feel the familiar wooden surface of Joe's desk hit my back. Every time I think I'm immune, that he can't hurt me anymore, that his abuse will not affect me, and every time I'm wrong, left pining for death as though it is my very salvation.

A ragged moan slips from my lips as I try to roll away. A deep laugh echoes around the room as a hand grabs my hair and jerks me up to face Caleb. "Pretty little thing isn't she?" Joe sneers as his face presses to my cheek. "Or at least she was. Still, her body's good, and her pussy's even better."

I squeeze my eyes shut. I can't look at Caleb. I can't see the disgust in his eyes.

Joe spins me and forces me face down on the desk. I don't fight. I can't fight. He lifts the oversized t-shirt I've been dressed in, exposing my body to the room. I don't care anymore. I hear his belt buckle, and then I feel him slamming into my prone body. He's just pushing me that little bit closer to death. Caleb's screaming hysterically, drowning out Joe's maniacal laughter. I block it all out, my mind drifting. I smell the smoldering iron of the poker before I see or feel it. This is something he likes to do, fuck me whilst he brands me. Most days, he then lets his men fuck me. The only thing that gets me through is knowing there will be an end. Eventually.

His fingers brush against my skin, moving the torn shreds of my shirt to the side. The hot iron burns into my

back, but I don't flinch or react. I barely register the pain anymore.

Joe stiffens behind me, and then he's gone. I close my eyes. I'm so tired.

"I can't wait until Jude kills you!" Caleb shouts.

There's a grunt followed by a thud. I open my eyes to see Caleb on his knees, hunched over as he tries to catch his breath.

Joe chuckles, and once again, drags me up by my hair, forcing me to face Caleb. I can't look at him. Instead, I stare vacantly at the wall. "Here is what is going to happen. Now, *you* are going to fuck her," he sneers, pointing at Caleb, whose face goes completely white.

"You're sick," he spits at Joe.

Joe laughs and releases me, throwing me back down on the desk. I lay on my side, curling in on myself. "You have no idea, boy." He slowly walks toward Caleb. "My hatred for your family goes back decades, from the moment my first wife decided to fuck one of my clients, your fucking father, and get knocked up. My hatred for that bastard brother of yours is something that has consumed me since the day he was born." Joe drops to a crouch in front of him, his face only inches from Caleb's. "Did he tell you what I did to your mother and sister?" He grins, and Caleb remains still. "Well, I'll tell you. First, I fucked them. I fucked your whore of a mother, and then I fucked your pretty little virginal sister." He smiles as Caleb swallows hard, his face twisting in pain.

"Oh, how she screamed," he whispers. "And when I was done, I let my men fuck them. Over. And over. Until they begged for mercy. I broke every bone in your sister's body, and I made that whore watch. I broke her piece by piece until your mother begged me to kill her own daughter."

Caleb is shaking, his teeth gritted. I can see the muscles in his arms tense and release. Joe stands up and turns his back on Caleb, moving toward me slowly.

"I filmed the whole thing." He smiles, clearly pleased with himself. "I sent it to that piece of shit father of yours!" Joe shouts, his face turning puce. He quickly reins his temper back in, smoothing the front of his suit jacket.

My stomach churns violently. Jude told me he saw that video, and I never asked the details, but hearing them now... my heart breaks for him and Caleb, for the two women who suffered at his hands. I've seen and felt the extent of Joe's hatred. I wouldn't wish this on anyone.

Joe pulls in a long breath before continuing. "And then your brother took my second wife from me as well." He breathes heavily, his shoulders tense. "My fucking pregnant wife!" he shouts, his voice showing an edge of hysteria.

I would say I feel bad for him. There was a time when I would have, but now... now, I want to smile because the sick fuck deserves everything he gets. There's a beat of silence, and the tension in the room could be cut with a knife.

He points at Caleb. "You will fuck her, and I'm going to film it. I'm going to send it to Jude." He turns to me, reaching out and stroking my face. Bile rises in my throat at his touch. "Oh, how it will break his cold little heart." He laughs to himself. "Camera!" he snaps.

I already know one of his guys is filming this. This is a drill I'm familiar with. I swallow hard as the room begins to spin. I grip the edge of the desk, trying desperately to keep myself routed. Caleb's leg bumps against mine. I drag my eyes open to find him standing over me, his expression full of turmoil.

Joe cocks his gun, pressing it against Caleb's temple. "You fuck her, or you die," he mocks.

My palms are slick with sweat, even as shivers rack my body. I press my head against the unforgiving wood and fix my eyes on the ceiling, accepting my fate, however horrible it might be. There is no point in fighting. Joe always wins.

"No," Caleb growls.

"Caleb," I rasp. "Just do it. It's okay." What I don't say is he can't possibly do anything to me that hasn't already been done ten times worse. I can see the horror in his eyes. This is my eternal nightmare, I've accepted it, and I will endure it to save his life. In Joe's twisted game of love and war, the rules are simple. Play and survive, or die.

There's a long pause before I hear Caleb's whispered voice again. "I'm not a fucking monster. I'd rather you kill me."

Joe laughs again. "Commendable. Fine. Fuck her, or I'll kill her."

I slowly glance up at Joe and find myself staring down the barrel of his gun. I smile and find the energy to slowly drag myself into a sitting position. I wrap my fingers around the barrel of his gun and press it against my forehead. "Do it," I say.

"Ria, no!" Caleb shouts at me.

I don't pay him any attention. I stare straight into the eyes of the devil, daring him to end it right here, right now. I can't remember ever wanting anything so badly... and I know Joe sees it.

He leans forward, holding the gun in place as he brings his lips to my ear. "I'm not done with you yet, princess. You're worth more to me alive." My heart plummets in my chest as all hope evaporates. He grabs my jaw, angling my face up and licking my cheek. "You should know by now not to test me, sweet Victoria."

He spins away from me so quickly I barely manage to stay upright. He raises the gun in front of him and pulls the trigger. The loud bang echoes around the room and Caleb's body falls to the ground. I scream as a pain like no other rips through my chest. Caleb's lifeless eyes stare at the ceiling, a trail of blood streaming from the small bullet hole between his eyes. All I can hear is the sound of my own screams. *He killed Caleb. He killed Caleb.*



# Chapter 4

## Jude

It's been five days, and I've already killed nine of Joe's guys. Not one of them has given me what I want. Each time I put a bullet in one of their heads, I feel my control slipping. I haven't slept in days, and as I stare at the road, my vision begins to blur. I drift off for a second, coming back to when the tires bump over the ridges of the shoulder.

"Shit, let me drive would you," Marney groans. "I don't want to die in a car crash."

I pull over to the side of the road, and we trade seats. Moments after he pulls back onto the highway, I fall asleep.

*"You can't save her," he laughs. "You're too late."*

*I can't see anything. I'm forced into a room where Tor is lying in a pool of blood. She's completely naked, bruises and cuts all over her. My heart drops into the pit of my stomach, and I fall to my knees in front of her.*

*"Don't worry, she was thoroughly used before I killed her," Joe says just before he places the cool metal of the gun against my temple. I close my eyes, waiting for the gun to go off. I want it to. I deserve this because I failed her. I feel the pressure lift away from my temple, and Joe makes his way around, squatting in front of me.*

*His lips curl up into a sadistic grin. "I wouldn't kill you if my life depended on it because knowing I did this right here to you," he points at her body, "is far more satisfying."*

I startle awake, my skin damp with sweat. The sun is starting to go down, and Marney's still driving. He glances over at me and points down to the floorboard. "You missed a call."

I pick the phone up, and there's a voicemail. My hand trembles as I press the phone to my ear and listen.

The first thing I hear is Joe snickering. "Your little brother wanted so badly to be the hero, but he's more stupid than I thought." My stomach flips and turns, adrenaline scorching through my jugular. I sling the phone onto the floor. *How the hell did he get Caleb?* I slam my fists over the glove box, my heart pounding. "Joe has fucking Caleb!" I growl through clenched teeth.

There's a tense moment of silence. Marney wipes his hand over his mouth and nods, as he floors the accelerator. "We gotta make the next one talk, Jude. You're gonna have to hold your shit together long enough to make him talk."



An hour later, we're walking up to the front of a two-story, brick house with rifles held by our sides. The irrigation system unexpectedly cuts on, and Marney jumps. "Shit," he mumbles and inhales.

The flood light flickers on as we climb the stairs. When we reach the top, Marney presses his back to the side wall and cocks the gun. I can hear the muffled noise of a television. I ring the doorbell and wait. A shadow appears behind the frosted glass door, attempting to peer out, and, well, they are just taking too damn long. I quickly raise the gun, aim at the person's shoulder and shoot through the glass. The glass shatters and falls in sheets to the ground as the person on the other side collapses.

"Well, hell, Jude," Marney groans, shaking his head as he reaches through the broken glass and unlocks the door. "Just

got ants in your pants, don't ya, boy?"

Kicking the door the rest of the way in, I shout, "I'm in a fucking hurry, Marney. I don't have time to wait around for shit." Glass crunches beneath my boots as I make my way inside.

The guy leans against the railing to the stairwell; his hand clutched at his shoulder. There's a bright red patch soaking through his shirt. A pistol lays in his lap, and he's attempting to load it with one hand. I lean over and snatch it from him. His gaze trails over my body, and when it lands on my eyes, his face quickly washes white.

I smirk at him. "Yeah, I'd be afraid if I were you too," I say, tucking his pistol into the waist of my jeans. "You gonna make this easy, or am I going to have to torture you?" He swallows and opens his mouth, but no words come out. "Fucking torture it is..." I say as I jerk him to his feet. My mind floods with images of what Joe is doing to Tor and Caleb. Those thoughts force my jaw to clench, and I bring his face inches from mine, staring coldly at him. "Where the fuck is Joe Campbell?"

"I don't know."

"I don't like being lied to," I say as I shove him away from me. He falls back against the stairs. I nod and exhale as my gaze drifts over to the hand he's holding over the bullet hole. I snatch his wrist and throw his hand from his shoulder. Without hesitation, I jam my finger into the ripped flesh, digging around in the warm wound. The man screams and jerks in pain. I know this shit hurts like a motherfucker. I glare at him as I shove my finger deeper into the hole, watching him squirm. I push him to the floor. "Where?" I shout.

He doesn't say a damn word; he's just sitting in the floor panting through the pain.

I motion at Marney. "Tie him up."

Marney mumbles to himself as he unwinds the rope that's looped around his shoulder. He crosses the man's arms

behind his back, quickly binding his wrists together. I glance around the house and spot a dying fire in the fireplace, and I motion toward the hearth. "Just set him over there."

I walk past them and grab the iron poker from the tool rack. Marney's just sat him in a chair, and I take a running start, bringing the poker back behind my head like a baseball bat and swinging. The heavy metal meets his knees with a loud crack. The man screeches in pain and buckles over. He sounds like a wild animal caught in a bear trap.

"Now," I wipe the sweat from my forehead, cocking a brow as I point the end of the poker at him, "You fucking tell me where he is."

I don't even know if he heard me over his continued howling. I place my hand on the handle of my gun, my finger twitching over the trigger. I'd just as soon put a bullet in his skull than deal with this shit, but I can't. I close my eyes, reminding myself of why I need to keep it together. *Caleb, he has Caleb and Tor...* My blood boils, my pulse accelerates, and the last piece of sanity I have been clinging to is consumed by the hate festering inside me.

"I will kill every last piece of shit that tries to stand between he and I. I'll go after your fucking family if I have to."

His bloodshot eyes rise to meet mine.

"Tell me!" I yell as every muscle in my body tightens, but he remains silent. He's trained not to give out information, but damn it, I *will* get what I want from him. Every-fucking-one has a breaking point, and I will find his.

I place the end of the poker into the dimming flames, watching as the pointed tip brightens to a glowing red. I pull it from the fire and twist it, sadistically staring at the burning tip as I slowly push it in his face. His gaze trains on the end of the poker, his brow beading with sweat as he tries to scoot away from me.

"Hold him still!" I order Marney, and he grabs him by the shoulders.

Marney leans in by his ear. "He's a sick fuck. I promise the devil is kinder than this one. Wanna answer him?"

Each moment he stalls is a moment he takes from me, from Tor and Caleb. I ram the sharp, hot end into his eye. The sound of singing flesh sizzles through the air. The thick aroma of burning skin creeps into my nostrils; I can practically taste the charred flesh in the back of my throat. I never have in my life heard cries and howls like this man is letting out. I yank the poker back and toss it to the floor. His mutilated eye dangles from the optic nerve, swinging across his face, and, I won't lie, that shit makes my stomach turn.

"Tell me..." I trail off because the fucker is screaming so loud I can barely hear my own fucking voice. I grab him by the throat and squeeze. "Shut the fuck up!" His screams become garbled as I choke him. He's thrashing around, and now I'm just tired of it. "I am your own fucking personal apocalypse right now." My fist lands against his face, the force of the blow causing the chair to fall over. I smack him again. His face is covered in blood and so is my fist.

"You're gonna kill me," he groans. I can see him straining, trying to resist the urge to cry from the pain. "Even if I tell you where he is, you won't find Joe unless he wants you to," he says through gritted teeth.

"Oh, I will find him. I can assure you of that." I grab his bound wrists and drag him toward the fireplace. I slam him face down onto the hearth and kick the screen away from the opening. Holding him by his wrists, I press my weight into his back and lean over him. I bring my face next to his and arch a brow, grinning as I say, "You have *no* idea what I'm capable of."

I grab the knife from my back pocket and flip out the blade, cutting the rope. I use my knee to pin down one of his arms as I take the other and shove it into the fireplace. There he goes with his high-pitch wailing again. He bucks beneath me trying to free himself.

"Where?" I ask.

He drags in several deep breaths. "Fuck..." he pants. "It hurts!"

I glare at the back of his head. He is standing in my way of finding them. I yank his blackened hand out from the fire, watching the smoke rising from it. My fist clenches around the knife still in my hand. I press the blade to his cheek and slice down the side of his face, down to his shoulder. With one swift movement, I flip him over and slice over his stomach. His back arches from the pain.

"Fuck you!" I shout so loud my voice goes hoarse. I'm swatting at him like a maniac, the blade ripping open his skin with each movement. "You fucking tell me where he is!"

"Jude," Marney attempts to get my attention.

"Where is she?" I straddle him. "Tell me!" I ram his head against the brick hearth. "Tell me where she is!"

Blood is everywhere and the man's no longer fighting me. I crush his windpipe with my hands, then release him. "Tell me, and I won't make you suffer any longer. If you don't tell me, I will fucking beat you all night if I need to." I raise my fist and punch him in the jaw. One of his teeth flies out of his mouth, bouncing across the floor.

"One...." he pauses to whimper from the pain, and I halt in my assault. "One fifty-five, highway seventy-five," he chokes through his blood.

Marney types the address into his phone. His eyes narrow on the screen before lifting to mine. "It's an old furniture factory?"

The man groans and nods. I take the knife and place it on his throat. "Thank you," I whisper in his ear as I slowly slice his throat open. Blood pours from the wound, splashing onto the brick.

Marney stares at me briefly before glancing around the room. He rubs over his stubble. "What a fucking mess," he exhales. His gaze drifts down to my blood-soaked jeans as he shakes his head. "You gotta get control of yourself."

I'm drenched in blood, but I don't fucking care. "Come on," I mumble in a slight daze, as I stand. My head spins violently, and I feel like collapsing onto the floor, but instead, I lean my forearm against the wall, resting my head against it. I focus my eyes on the white carpet, watching the red droplets fall from my elbow and splash onto the floor. *There is no controlling this wrath.*

# Chapter 5

## Victoria

I'm shaken awake roughly. The cold stone floor is biting against my bare back, and I've lost feeling in my hand from it being attached to the pipe above me. I hear the clink of metal, and the handcuff is released. My arm falls to the floor limply.

I barely have the strength to drag my eyelids open. A blow collides with my cheek, and my head snaps to the side. I don't react. I can't.

"Ah, fuck," a man grumbles as heavy footsteps move away from me. I don't hear the door shut, and I manage to crack my eyelids enough to see bright light pouring through the open door. It's right there, wide open, and I'm so weak I can't escape no how much I want to. A small tear of frustration slips from the corner of my eye.

The room smells of death, and I feel like fate is mocking me because I know I'll be dead soon.

A few minutes later and I hear more footsteps, two sets this time. They approach and stop next to me. A hand fists my hair and pulls my head from the ground. I whimper as the stench of heavy cigar smoke blows across my face.

"Well, little bird, I said I would break you. I have to say, I'm disappointed. I thought you would last longer than this." He strokes my face gently, and my stomach clenches



violently. My body trembles, fear overriding everything else I may feel.

I manage to pry my eyes apart enough to look at him. I hate him. My only regret is that I will die without getting to see Jude kill him, because Jude will kill him for what he did to Caleb, innocent, beautiful Caleb.

Joe has done things to me that have made me pray for death, and yet I would take it all a hundred times over if it would bring Caleb back. Joe thinks he broke me, and he did, but he didn't do it by raping me or beating me. He broke me when he shot my only friend in front of me. He broke me when he destroyed one of the best people I have ever known, and I will never recover from that. I want him to kill me, and I will die safe in the knowledge that Jude will make him suffer for this.

"Kill me," I whisper.

He laughs. "Oh, I know you want to die, princess. Which is why I'm not going to let you die," he tells me. "You see, when I brought you here, I intended to use you as bait, to lure Jude to me. I just wanted to kill him, to watch him suffer, but then I saw young Caleb's face when he saw you. I saw how much it hurt him, and it made me think, I'm not going to kill you." A sadistic laugh rumbles from his chest, and all I can think is how much he sounds like the devil. "Oh, no, no, no. I'm going to send you back to JP, just like this. Broken, unrecognisable, *unsalvageable*. This will hurt him more than anything I could physically do to him. I'm going to let him find you. I'm going to leave his dirty whore and his dead brother right here for him." He yanks me up further and twists my face to the side.

There, a few feet away from me is Caleb, his dead, milky eyes staring at me. A desperate cry rips from my throat, and I slam my eyes shut.

"He's coming for me, you see. I could kill you and then kill him, but this is just too good of an opportunity to let slip.

I'll kill him eventually, but it's so much better this way, so much more torturous," he whispers.

I cough a raspy laugh. "I'm dying anyway, asshole."

He grabs my chin, jerking it to his face. "No, sweet thing, you're not."

He releases me, and my head hits the ground with a thud. I feel his fingers wrap around my arm, and then a sharp prick. I open my eyes enough to see him injecting something into my arm. "Antibiotics," he says with a smug smile. "You're going to survive long enough for him to find you, and if you die after that, well then, poor JP should have gotten here sooner shouldn't he?" he snickers.

I want to scream. This is all I have wanted for so long, and now he's ripping it from me, and it feels like the cruelest form of torture. A sob chokes from my throat, and he laughs in response. He presses his lips to mine, making me feel sick. "I knew I would make you cry eventually, sweetheart." He strokes my cheek. "You tell JP, I'm going to kill him. I'll be seeing you soon, princess." He winks, turns away from me, and then he's gone.

The door slams shut, leaving me in darkness. Even with antibiotics, I'm probably still going to die, he's just bought me another day perhaps.

I lay there on the cold ground, my body broken, my mind shattered. I reach out until my hand brushes against Caleb's cold fingers. I hold onto him, as though if I will him to, he will come back to me. I cry until I lose consciousness again.

# Chapter 6

## Jude

The car bumps over the worn pavement before rolling to a stop. Marney shuts the engine off, pushes the door open, and pops the trunk.

I climb out, then reach back inside to grab two guns that I shove into the waist of my jeans. Marney's loaded down with guns. We look like we're going into a goddamn zombie apocalypse.

I have no idea what to expect, but I try to prepare myself for how fucked up Tor will most likely be. The images from the video Joe sent me jar to memory, and I squeeze my eyes shut. Leaning my head back, I wipe my palm down my drenched face.

Each step seems to be in slow motion, each breath seems forced, like if I don't remind myself I'll forget to fucking breathe. I'm on high-alert. This is Joe. He should have guards all around this motherfucker. He knows we're coming, and yet... nothing. Just the sound of crickets chirping and leaves crunching underneath our boots.

The only reason no one has shot at us yet is because Joe wants us to get inside. For the first time in my life, I'm afraid I'm actually about to die. It's not the thought of death that bothers me; it's the idea of being killed before I ever get to them.

A metal building comes into view. My nerves tense. My throat tightens. This is fear. My brother and my fucking heart are inside this building, and I know damn well if they aren't dead, they're in a state worse than death could ever fucking be.

We stop in front of a cracked, rusted door. Marney glances back at me, his eyes uncertain. Using the barrel of the gun, I push on the door. The worn hinges groan as it slowly swings open into a large, empty room. To the right, hanging above a doorway is a single bulb barely flickering. It casts a yellow haze over a rickety door. I know Joe has done this to build the suspense. I kick the door open, and it bangs against the wall, the loud crash reverberating into the open ceilings. I wait. Nothing. Dim light bulbs dot the room, and the only sound I hear is water dripping from some old pipe.

"I'll go down this way, you go down the other side," Marney whispers, jerking the rifle to the left side of the room.

I nod at him, and we separate. I tread through the corridors, waiting on someone to come after me, but the place is deserted, eerily quiet. My heart slams violently against the wall of my chest, each loud beat echoing in my ears. Every door I pass is wide open, each room empty. I'm so wound up right now; I can hardly breathe. I round the corner and stop, staring down a long, dark corridor. The thick odor of mildew and stale air washes over my face. I cautiously place one foot in front of the other, my eyes wide as my vision attempts to adjust to the darkness. The further down the hallway I go, the smell begins to change. My pulse is uneven, my stomach churning. This is a distinct scent. This is the stench of a decaying body. I stop dead in my tracks and hang my head. I notice my hand shaking when I go to wipe the sweat from my brow. I trail one hand along the wall to guide me and use the other hand to aim the gun in front of me. Eventually, my fingers brush the cool metal of a

doorframe. Unlike all the other doors, this one is closed, and my heart stops.

The creak of the unoiled hinges pierces my ears as I push the door open. The stench from inside wafts out. I instinctively gag on the unmistakable odor of death, and I have to swallow back my urge to vomit. *This is why no one is here. They're already dead.* My chest rises in deep, uneven swells as my fingers clench into fists. I push the door open wider, and it hits something. The door refuses to budge any further. I drop my gaze to the ground, barely able to make out a pair of worn boots in the dim light. My eyes frantically trail up the body, and my stomach bottoms out. I lean over, resting my hand on my knees as I spit out the saliva pooling in my mouth. I grab both sides of my head and my legs buckle. I slump to the ground in front of my little brother's body. The sound of my pulse echoes in my ears, and I try to force my eyes away from him, but I can't. I slam my fist against the floor. "No! Fucking no!" I shout, my voice shaking.

I don't know why I do it, but I reach for him, jerking my hand back at the shock of his chilled, damp skin. I hang my chin to my chest. "No, Caleb. God, please fucking no..." I mumble. I drag his lifeless body into my lap and the last part of me with a soul fucking dies. He was the only family I had. Protecting him was my job, and I failed. My brother is fucking gone, slaughtered for no damn reason. This was my wrong doing, this was my fight. Not his.

I sit with his head in my lap, choking on the pain shredding its way through my chest. I clutch his stiff body to mine because I just need to feel like he can forgive me, I want to believe that he knew I loved him, but I never even fucking told him that because I am too damn hard. I give up, and everything inside me crumbles.

I have no idea how long I sit and mourn. I know I should let him go, but I just fucking can't. I'm can't even move.

I jump when I feel a hand on my shoulder.

"Jude," Marney's voice is low, vacant. "Ain't nothing you can do that'll fix this."

I gulp back air, fighting the urge to completely break down as I shake my head.

"Come on, son. You tried." He pats my shoulder and walks across the room. "Awe, shit," he sighs, then falls silent. "Jude, you're gonna have to let that go right now, or else we're gonna be toting two bodies outta here."

I slide Caleb's body from my lap, pushing myself up. I'm trembling as I stumble toward the dark corner. Marney raises his pistol and aims, the bullet creating a spark when it ricochetes from the metal pipe. He leans down. "Come on little darlin', let's get you outta here."

He turns around, and in the darkness, I can barely make out Tor's limp body in his arms. I drag in a breath and rush to him, taking her from his arms. "Tor?" I brush a finger over her cheek and she slowly turns her head to my chest. Her dark hair is matted to her cheeks. The side of her face that's visible is covered in blood and bruises. She's naked aside from a ripped and tattered shirt. Dried blood is smeared all over her legs. She never deserved this, no one does. My Tor never deserved any of this!

I can't stop staring at her as I carry her through the room. As much as I expect to have violent anger coursing through me, I don't. I'm too heartbroken to feel anything. I swallow as I pass Caleb's body. I can't manage to glance at him again. Stopping next to Marney, I whisper, "Get him."

He stares at me with his face drowned in pity.

"Get my brother, Marney," I say sternly. "I'm not gonna leave him here like this."

Marney draws in a large breath and kneels to pick up Caleb's body. The entire way back to the exit, we walk in silence. I clutch Tor tighter with each step I take. Once outside, I climb into the backseat and hold her in my lap. I

hear the trunk slam shut. I know what Marney just did, but I block that out and focus solely on her.



Tor's limp body is sprawled across the back seat, her head in my lap. I stroke her hair and try not to think of Caleb. I can't, because if I do, I feel like I might break, and that is not a fucking option right now.

"How much further?" I ask hoarsely, staring at Tor. She's not once come to. Every few seconds her breathing stops, and everything inside of me tenses. I need her to live. I need her.

I hear Marney's phone ring, and his hushed words, but I don't listen. I stare at her bruised and battered face, the ragged and torn t-shirt that barely covers her broken body. I failed them both.

Five minutes later we're pulling into the roundabout in front of some backwoods emergency room. I climb out, cradling Tor in my arms, and shut the door. Marney speeds off and I walk toward the sliding glass doors of the emergency room.

As soon as I set foot inside the entrance it seems as though everyone in the waiting room falls silent and stares at us. "Help me, please," I beg.

The nurse in the triage station slowly rises to her feet while another rushes from the room toward me. Everything hits me at once. I'm strong, but I am not strong enough for this shit. My breath catches and my muscles go weak.

"I need a gurney!" the nurse shouts.

I shake my head. "I'll carry her. Just help me. Please!"

My pulse throbs through my temples. The nurse's eyes rise to meet mine, and she swallows, pointing toward the metal doors. I follow her into a room where I lay Tor down. I watch staff swarm around her, pushing me to the back of the room. They don't miss a second, they don't ask any

questions. They immediately hook her up to equipment and check her over. I slump against the wall and slide to the floor because I can't stand any longer. Everything fucking hits me at once.

"What happened to her?" someone asks me.

I don't glance up. I keep my eyes trained on the floor as I say, "She was taken. And attacked..."

One nurse scurries out into the hallway shouting for another doctor. I wonder if I should have just killed her when she walked into my office instead of forcing her to endure this fucking nightmare I call life. There's no way she will ever forget what she's been through. And part of me feels it would be best for her not to struggle with the memory of it all for the rest of her life. Sometimes death seems like a gracious option, but selfishly, all I care about is that I have her.

The next morning I startle awake in the hospital chair. Tor's asleep. She's still not conscious enough to know I'm here. All night all I could think about was my brother. If I let it, it could easily consume me, and part of me wishes it would. I glance up at Tor, checking the monitor. *She survived.* The longer I stare at her, sadness turns to anger. My breaths grow harder and deeper. I can either let Caleb's death kill me, or I can kill the fucker who took his life. I failed Caleb. I cannot fail her.



# Chapter 7

## Victoria

All I can hear is the repetitive beeping from somewhere beside me. Everything hurts as I struggle to drag my eyes open. I blink against the blinding fluorescent lights as I try to assess my surroundings. I'm on a bed. Turning my head towards the beeping, I find a heart monitor, the green line spiking across the screen. A hospital. I'm in a hospital. My head is foggy, and I struggle to remember how I got here. The last thing I remember... I swallow as bile rises in my throat. The last thing I remember is Joe. Shame and disgust crawl over my skin like a swarm of insects. I close my eyes and press my head back against the pillow as images flash through my mind. All I can see is Caleb's small smile right before Joe put a bullet in his head. A pain I didn't know existed consumes me from the inside out, a grief so intense, that even my mother's death seems like a walk in the park. Several tears slip down my cheek as I think of him. I rub my palm over my heart as I gasp for breath. I feel as though I won't ever be whole again. Caleb was a bright light in this dark and ugly world, and now he's gone, and I'm free-falling into this pit of despair. I wish Joe had just let me die.

The door clicks open and I look up as Jude walks into the room. My heart leaps into a sprint, and my skin breaks out in

a cold sweat as the door slams shut behind him with a heavy finality. Our eyes lock, and a barrage of emotions hit me. I never thought I would see him again, and the sight of him has a sob tearing from my throat. I press my hand over my mouth, and the lines attached to my arm pull tight.

He's by my side in an instant, gently brushing a finger over my cheek. "I'm sorry, Tor."

I've never heard his voice so soft before. I squeeze my eyes shut, unable to look at him as the emotional war wages inside me. His eyes trace over my face. His hair is a mess, and dark circles have formed under his eyes. I've never seen him appear anything other than completely controlled, the master of his own empire. Now, though, he just looks destroyed. His brother died. Caleb died. I want to feel for him, but I'm too consumed by own grief. I wish I could say something, but there's nothing to say. His brother died trying to save me.

"Tor," he whispers.

I twist my face away from him. I can't look at him. I feel everything all at once, and it's too much, so I switch it all off. I don't want to feel.

"Tor." He sweeps a finger over my cheek, and I flinch instinctually. Jude backs away from the edge of the bed and sighs. "I need you to know when I said what I did. I..." He shakes his head before continuing. "He needed to believe you were nothing. Anyone who means something to me ends up dead," his voice breaks.

I remember the exact moment I heard those words because it was the moment I gave up. It was the moment I realised I was nothing, and no help was coming. It was the moment that shattered me, and no words can put those splintered pieces back together.

"You're everything," he breathes.

I don't want to be everything. I accepted my fate; I accepted that I meant nothing to him. I was willing to die. I welcomed it. The second I heard Caleb's voice on the other end of that phone, my only wish was that Jude would keep him safe.

He failed.

I wish I had been the one who died because living with Caleb's loss is an agony I can't bear. I close my eyes, and I can still see his smiling face, that trace of innocence I knew he would never truly lose because he was good in every way that mattered. He died trying to save me, and his loss is a pain I can't even begin to describe. So I switch it off. Call it self-preservation. There's only so much one mind can take before it snaps.

"Please go," I whisper without looking at him.

His eyebrows pull together in a dark frown, and he stalks towards me like the predator he is. His fingers wrap around my chin, forcing my eyes to his. "You have been through hell. I get that, but you listen to me, you are not nothing, you are everything." My chest tightens, and tears prickle my eyes. "He took Caleb from me, don't let him take you too." His voice is barely above a whisper as he stares at me, begging me with his eyes. I know I should feel something at his words, but I don't. I can't.

There's a knock on the door, and a doctor walks into the room carrying a clipboard. He flashes me a broad smile that I don't return.

"Miss Pearson, I'm Doctor Perry. How are you feeling?" I remain silent, and he clears his throat. "We need to discuss what happened to you—"

"I want him to leave," I quickly say, pointing at Jude.

"Why do I need to leave?" Jude's jaw clenches and I can tell he's fighting back the urge to throw a few curse words in

there.

I direct my gaze toward the doctor, pleading.

"At her request, I need to speak with her alone. Please excuse us, Mr. Pearson."

Jude rises, glaring at the doctor the entire way to the door. He opens it and glances back at me. "I'm gonna go smoke. I'll be right back."

The door clicks shut, and the doctor glances at me. "How are you feeling?" he repeats.

"Fine."

Physically I'm as well as can be expected, mentally, I will never be fine.

He nods. "You've been through a lot. The infection you had has cleared up; all the labs have come back negative for organisms. I think you'll be able to leave in a few days."

He's looking at me, and I know that look. There is something he's not said yet because he's not exactly sure how to broach it.

"Do you know how long you were you gone?"

I frown and try to think, to remember, but everything is a blur. "I don't know, days, weeks." I shrug. "Why does it matter?"

"It's routine to give every female patient a pregnancy screen, Miss Pearson—" Oh, God!

"No." I shake my head. I'm going to be sick. "No, no, no," I repeat to myself. I drag my hand through my hair. This isn't happening.

The doctor walks to the bedside. "Miss Pearson..."

"I want it out!" I shout at him.

"Please, I understand this is difficult, but please calm down for just a moment."

I jump off the bed, yanking the IV lines out of my arms. Blood trickles down both wrists.

"Miss Pearson!" he shouts as he steps back to open the door. "I need help in here," he yells to the nurse's station.

I turn my back to him and rip the hospital gown down my shoulders, exposing my back. "How many brands are on my back?" I scream hysterically. There's silence. "How many?!"

"Six," he whispers, his voice breaking. Only six? I felt like I was there for months, and yet, I remember every brand being burned into my skin. One a day.

I brace my hands on the bedside table, my breathing ragged. It's not Joe's, which means... I turn back around to face the doctor, and Jude is standing in the doorway, his expression a mixture of pain and anger.

Six brands, one for every day Jude didn't get to me, isn't that what Joe said? Two nurses step into the room, and the four of them stare at me as though I'm a wild animal about to bolt.

The doctor tries to calm me. "Miss Pearson, you need to..."

"Leave." My voice is a broken rasp, but he stops and nods before leaving the room. One of the nurses moves to my side and tries to treat my bleeding wrists. "Leave!" I shout at her.

She flashes a nervous glance at Jude, then back to me. Eventually, she nods and leaves. Silence fills the room, and I can feel the tension humming off Jude from here.

"Sorry," he says quietly.

I lay down on the bed and curl onto my side. Blood stains the sheets but I don't care. I can't process this, so I choose not to. I shut it down and push it from my mind. I close my eyes. I'm so tired. I wish I could fall asleep and never wake up.

"Sleep, Tor." I'm vaguely aware of Jude's hand stroking my hair as I fall asleep.

# Chapter 8

## Jude

She's out. And the longer I stare at her, the more helpless I feel. I'm about to lose my shit in here; I can't be fucking still. I keep getting up and down and pacing the room. Some nurses quietly come, eyeing me as they change out her IV, and I excuse myself, pulling my cigarettes from my pocket as I make my way down the white hallway.

The glass doors slide open. The sudden breeze causes my skin to prickle. I flick the lighter, pull the first drag deep into my lungs and wait for a small piece of this tension to undo itself. I lean against the brick exterior, and I draw in puff after puff. I close my eyes to shut the world out, and as soon as I do, all I can see is her. All I can see is how fucked up she has become because of me. I never asked for her. I never wanted her thrown into my life but... one day she just was, and once she was there I had no control over what happened. I never in a million-fucking-years intended to love her, but fate is a motherfucking sadistic bitch. I watched her fucking break against my will... I watched her morph into something she didn't deserve to become. She tore into those empty, dark crevices of mine no one should venture into. Tor made me fucking feel. She reminded me there was more to life than murder and money and revenge.

My phone dings, and I open my eyes, taking a long drag from the cigarette. I glance at the screen, and find a missed

text from an unknown number. It's obviously Joe. I know I shouldn't read it, but I tap the screen, blowing out a steady stream of smoke as I read over the words: *I let you find her. I left her like that just for you. I'll be coming for you soon, but until then...* I see an attachment and open it.

The blurry video slowly comes into focus. I see Tor laid on a desk, covered in blood with her clothes ripped. Someone shoves Caleb in front of her, and my entire body sinks.

"You will fuck her, and I'm going to film it. I'm going to send it to Jude," Joe's voice rattles over the speaker, and my blood heats.

I should look away, but I can't. For some fucking reason, I can't. I watch in horror as Caleb refuses to rape her. I watch Tor press the gun to her forehead daring Joe to shoot her.

"Do it," she says, her voice weak. She looks like she barely has the strength to sit up, but there's determination in her words that damn near fucking breaks me.

Joe smiles at her, and then, without warning he turns and puts a bullet between Caleb's eyes. I shut my eyes, blowing out quick breaths to numb the pain threatening to overtake me. The sound of that gunshot echoes in my ears, and Tor screams. I can't breathe. I sit down on the pavement. My eyes lock on the screen, staring at the frozen image of Joe's twisted smile.

Waves of anger and grief pound over me. My entire body shakes as I dial David's number and place the phone to my ear. After three rings, David picks up. "Hello?"

"You find him!" I growl. "You find that sick son-of-a-bitch!"

"Jude, you gotta back down a little or you're gonna get arrested before you find him!"

"He killed Caleb."

"I know. I'm sorry, JP."



"You find him, David. You fucking find him!" I hang up the phone, clenching my fist around it.

I will find Joe, and I will kill him in a way that the devil himself would find ruthless and unjust.

I finish my cigarette and slip back into Tor's room. It's dark except for the dim lamp at the side of the bed. As I approach her, the shadows play over her bruised cheeks. Her dark hair is fanned out on the pillow. I brush a stray lock of hair away from her face, and the soft strands slip through my fingers. I drag my hands through my hair, pacing beside the bed before taking a seat in the bedside chair. I sit here and just stare at her. I'm not exactly sure what we do now. This is all a game to Joe, and right now, I'm losing. He's not going to stop. He's going to keep coming for me, and once again, she's in the line of fire because I love her. And he damn well knows it. I take Tor's small hand in mine and press my lips to her knuckles.

I never want to leave her side again. All I want is for her to be happy and safe, but now she's as far from those two things as she can be. And nothing can change that.



Earlier today, Tor said she wanted out of the hospital. She said it was too much for her to handle. When I told her no, she pitched a fit and ripped the IV out before storming out of the room yelling for a doctor. They were hesitant to let her leave, but well, she's fucking persistent. She was given a prescription for antibiotics, and we left.

I glance over to the passenger seat, and Tor's already out. She fades in and out of sleep for the duration of the three-hour drive. There's so much I want to say to her, but I don't, because honestly, as fragile as she is right now, I'm afraid to. Hell, I fear I'm on the brink of a mental breakdown,

I can only imagine the shit she is feeling. She startles awake when the tires bump over a dip in the pavement.

"It's okay, doll," I say, reaching over to gently pat her leg as I put the car in park.

I quickly make my way to the passenger side door, opening it to help her out. She pauses and stares up at the house. This is the house where everything in her life went to hell, and now it's the only home she has. I just wonder if that's what she's thinking right now.

I step forward, but she remains frozen to the spot. "Tor?"

She wraps her arms around her shoulders and shakes her head. "He knows," she says quietly, her eyes vacant. "He's coming for me. He knows."

"What are you talking about, Tor?"

She's rambling. She sounds crazy, and I worry maybe she's finally lost the last bit of sanity she had.

"He knows where to find me," she whispers.

I gently turn her to face me as I lean down eye level with her. She's staring straight through me.

"Joe knows where my house is?" I ask. All she does is nod. Inhaling, I glance around the woods surrounding the house as I bring her body into mine, wrapping my arms around her reassuringly. "I swear to God, I won't let anything happen to you. I have guards. Joe's not stupid enough to set foot on my property."

"He's going to kill you," she breathes, her expression blank.

I rub my hand down her spine and rest my chin on top of her head. "No, he won't. Come on. Just a few days, and I promise we'll leave. I just have to get a few things in place, doll."

She hesitates before she slowly moves her feet. We make our way up the stairs in silence. I open the door and Marney's sitting in the recliner watching the television. He

glances over at us, frowning when he glances at Tor. He gets up and comes to stand next to us, putting an arm around her. She throws her arms around his broad waist, shocking the shit out of me.

He hugs her, his eyes welling up. "We'll take care of you little darlin'." His eyes fix on mine. "We'll take care of her."

I guide Tor through the house, and when we walk past Caleb's room, I feel her body tense. I purposefully keep my eyes trained ahead of me. I refuse to let my mind go there. I cannot drown in this shitty feeling trying to swallow me because I can't take care of her if I do. I inhale, telling myself I have to live in denial that Caleb is actually gone. Denial is the only way I can manage this.

The door to my bedroom creaks open, and she slowly walks in, stopping beside the bed. I know I should say something to her, but what the fuck do I say? Every-fucking-thing has been taken from her. And the thing that terrifies me the most is that I know what happens when everything has been ripped from you. I know what the violence bleeding through this world does to even the strongest of people. It makes you numb; it breeds hate, and it makes you a fucking monster.

She walks over to the picture of my mother and sister and stares at it.

For the first time since I lost them fifteen years ago, I'm thankful Joe killed them. It was actually an act of mercy because had he not, they would be in the same place Tor is right now. One look at her eyes tells me she's in a place worse than hell. She's hurting, and I want to take the pain away from her. I want to blot out every horrible thing that has happened to her. I would be a fucking martyr for this woman if I could.

"I'm sorry," I say, tucking a stray piece of hair behind her ear.

She flinches, her breath catching as her eyes dart up to me. I feel my throat tighten. Sorry doesn't touch on how I feel, and that word can do nothing. It's just a word, but it's the only word I can think to say to her. My mind is so fucking jumbled.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to find you," I whisper. "I tried. The second Joe called me I started looking." I inhale. "I feel like I failed you."

I want to scream. I want to punch something, but I can't.

She remains silent. Her finger slowly traces over the picture; then she turns to face me. "I understand now," she whispers.

"Understand what?"

Her empty eyes meet mine. "You," she says.

*Fuck.* Her comment stabs me. I don't want her to be able to understand any of this. Her heart is beating, but inside, she's dead and gone. I can't recall how many times I've washed blood from my hands without the slightest twinge of guilt, without the tiniest thought that I did something wrong. What has happened to Tor forces a wave of guilt over me that nearly knocks me to the ground. I wish she would cry, or blame me, anything because I can't deal with this emotionless state of nothingness.

"I don't know how to help you..." I murmur as I cautiously step toward her.

"You can't help me. No one can," she says beneath her breath.

I tenderly take her hand, pulling her against me. She stiffens briefly, and I freeze. "Tor," I say quietly, "I would *never* hurt you." I swallow because I'm not sure she can believe me.

I'm so mixed with emotions, always swinging between rage, guilt, and grief; so I just focus on her. I focus on how she feels in my arms, on the fact that I have to keep everything together to protect her because she is all I have left now that Caleb is gone.

I run my hand along her side. She's grown so thin I can feel every fucking rib. She pulls away from me, and without a word, climbs onto the bed. She lays on her side and draws her knees to her chest.

She looks so fucking small and weak, and it breaks my fucking heart. This is all that's left, a shell of the person she once was. Joe has murdered my family. He killed my brother and left him in that room to rot with Tor. He kept Tor alive for the mere fact that he knew watching her like this would be the cruelest form of punishment he could ever inflict on me. Watching someone you love suffer is worse than burying them, especially when you know there's no way to mend them.



*All I can hear are my heavy breaths. It's so dark. No lights anywhere. How did he take her from my own damn bed? "Tor?" I scream so loudly my voice breaks. I run down the empty hallway, the soles of my bare feet slapping over the cold concrete. "Tor?"*

*My heart is beating up into my throat, and then, a light flips on. Joe has her and Caleb. He's only about ten feet in front of me. I go to run, but I can barely move. I'm moving so slow it's like there's a weight pressing against me. Joe's sinister laugh echoes through my ears and my skin crawls.*

*"Not good enough to save them, huh, boy?"*

*I watch as Joe pulls a gun and aims it at Caleb's head.*

*"No!" I shout, trying to reach him. A loud pop rings out, and Caleb crumples to the floor. Tor screams. Joe laughs. I*

*feel so weak, my entire body is as heavy as lead. Joe approaches me, and I draw my fist back to swing at him, but the blow barely taps against his cheek.*

*"Weak. You. Are. Weak!" he snarls.*

My eyes pulse open, and I sit up in the bed before jumping to my feet. Adrenaline is flooding my body, setting my skin on fire, and sending my racing heart into overdrive. I pant, attempting to catch my breath as I gain my bearings. A small sliver of light is coming through the window, and I make out Tor lying asleep in the center of the bed. I walk to the bathroom and brace my arms against the edge of the sink. I turn the faucet and splash some cold water on my face, and then stare at my reflection. I can see my pulse thumping through my jugular and temples. It's not enough that he plagues my every waking thought, he's taken over my subconscious as well. Joe Campbell is the only man I've ever feared, and in order to make this stop, I have to kill him.



I've been awake since two A.M. Every time I closed my eyes to sleep, I saw Caleb's face. I can't do that. I can't go there.

I've walked around in a fog, not even sure what I've done today aside from sitting and watching Tor sleep, trying to force her to eat whenever she wakes up. Marney has been getting things ready for Caleb's burial because, well, I just can't. I lay down next to Tor, skimming my hands over her arm.

"He killed Caleb because he wouldn't rape me," she whispers.

I swallow and nod my head. "It's okay Tor."

I sit there for well over an hour holding her as I silently think about what I could have done to have things end

differently. There's a soft knock on the door as Marney pushes it open. "We're ready, Jude."

The sun is slowly setting, the orange hues barely visible through the thick trees. I grab the handle of the coffin and stare straight ahead. Marney's hand comes to rest on my shoulder before he takes the handle behind me. "He was a good kid," Marney says solemnly. "A real good kid." I can hear him fighting back the tears.

Rich and Paul take the other side of the casket and lift it from the ground. It's so fucking light. *He was only a kid.* The fact that my little brother's body is inside this box now resting on my shoulder causes my chest to tighten and burn. This fucking hurts. This right here makes it all too real. Caleb is gone, and I can't deny it any longer. For a moment, my knees threaten to buckle from the reality that is all too quickly setting in.

I train my eyes ahead of me and find Tor standing by a pile of red dirt, staring vacantly into the hole. A light breeze picks up, blowing her hair in front of her face. She doesn't bother to brush it away.

We set the coffin on the grave. Marney steps to the side, shaking his head. We all stand around the grave in silence. I should say something, but what? Caleb is dead, not one fucking thing I say will change that. Silence is all I can manage. I keep telling myself this is not real; this is not my life. I don't want this life anymore. I'm so goddamn tired of each day being a fight, of always being on guard, I never felt like this before her. If I could take all this away and just have her...

"He's with his pops now." Marney chokes a little and reaches for his cigarettes. "We'll make this right, Caleb. I promise you and your pops we will." He lights the cigarette, his eyes watering as he turns his back to us, and stares off into the woods.

I close my eyes, and that video plays out in my head, the expression on Caleb's face when Joe shot him, the way his body jerked when the bullet went through his skull. My fists clench, and I bite down on my bottom lip. I don't look over, I grab Tor's hand and pull her to my side. I'm numb as I watch the first shovel full of dirt rain down on top of the metal casket, followed by the next. It seems so wrong to place him in the ground like this, but we have no other choice.

A pitiful sob breaks from Tor and her fingers dig into my arms, her body trembling. I want to block out the sound of the dirt hitting the casket, but I can't. I hang my head and I fucking cry. No man can manage this feeling, even the hardest of men have their breaking points, and this is mine. I rest my chin on the top of Tor's head, silent tears rolling down my cheeks.

I'm done. There is no point in fighting. My father chased Joe until he died. My goal in life has been to murder that son-of-a-bitch, and all it's done is cost me every last thing I care for. Joe Campbell is death and destruction, and I am no longer willing to take that gamble. I give up. I will let him win. This is fucking over. Haunt my dreams all he wants, I won't let him take another fucking thing from me.



# Chapter 9

## Victoria

I'm hollow, like everything inside of me has been ripped out. Caleb is gone. His body buried beneath six feet of soil. They say a funeral gives you closure, I don't feel closure. All I feel is this earth shattering pain, and it seems like it will never go away. My very soul grieves Caleb's loss. I rub at the spot over my chest where my annihilated heart sits.

Jude is nowhere to be found, and for that I'm grateful. He watches me as though I may lose it at any minute. He tries to talk to me, but I can't speak to him. Caleb was the person I talked to. He would listen to me, empathise with me. Caleb was good and right. He upheld morals in a world where they no longer exist.

I get up from my place on the sofa and move through the room full of men. The usually loud, smoke-filled house is disturbingly quiet as a cloud of grief settles over it. Everyone loved Caleb. I can't take it anymore. I just need to be alone. No one pays any attention to me as I leave the room. I open the front door and quietly close it behind me, walking down the porch steps and onto the grass. The dewy blades brush against my bare feet as I walk around the back of the house towards the woods. The headstones seem so somber, shadowed in the darkness of the oak tree.

I trace my fingers over the smooth marble of Caleb's headstone, and my throat tightens.

"Hey, Caleb," I whisper. It's stupid, but I feel close to him here, as though his presence somehow still lingers. I don't believe in God really. I don't believe in heaven and hell. I've never thought about it much. For Caleb's sake though, I hope heaven is real. I hope he is eternally happy and loved. I want that for him, more than anything in this world.

I lay down on the grass beside his grave and stare up at the stars scattered throughout the clear night sky. "I miss you." I release a shuddering breath. "So much."

I swipe at the stray tear tracking down my temple, but it's pointless as more follow. "I can't do this without you," I whisper. A soft breeze rustles the leaves above us. I roll over and press my palm into the freshly laid grass. "I don't want to." I squeeze my eyes shut, my chest heaving. It should have been me who died. I wanted it to be. I still do. Joe stripped me and left me with nothing, he broke me in ways no human being should ever have to be broken, and then he took Caleb from me. I would endure it all again, every single depraved act if it would bring Caleb back.

"I'm not strong enough for this, Caleb!" I cry. I turn my face into the grass as my tears stain the ground. "I just want it to end." I can't see past this, I can't envision a time when I will ever be okay again. I can't see a future. There was a time when I wanted to be a doctor, to get married and have kids. Now though... My hand subconsciously moves to my flat stomach. "I can't be a mother. I can't be anything," I whisper. I can't have this baby. "Jude will understand," I tell myself, or Caleb. I don't know who I'm telling anymore.

How can Jude understand though? How can he possibly know what it is to live like this? No one can unless they've

experienced it. No one can know the depths of my despair, the bottomless pit of self-hatred I reside in. Caleb was the only one who may have been able to help me.

Jude won't understand, but honestly, I'm past caring. I'm selfish.

I lay there for a long time. It might be minutes or hours. I don't know. Movement from my left catches my eyes, and I turn my gaze toward a shadowed figure stepping out from behind the tree. I sit up and move my hand behind my back, and my fingers curl around the gun I have tucked into the waist of my shorts.

"Hell, I was just checking on you. You ain't gotta shoot me, darlin'."

I release the breath I've been holding as Marney's stout figure comes into view. His cigarette glows in the darkness, a slow cloud of smoke floating around him. I release my grip on the gun and climb to my feet wordlessly.

Before I can walk away from him, he speaks. "So, I take it Jude doesn't know you're knocked up, huh?"

I drop my gaze to the ground, remaining silent. Shit.

He takes a drag from his cigarette and exhales slowly. "Hmmm." He takes another long puff. "Is it Jude's?"

I hear what he doesn't say. Is it Joe's? If it were, I would have cut it out myself. I nod as I swallow around the lump in my throat. I know he has to ask, but just the thought makes me want to throw up.

"I don't want him to know," I say through gritted teeth.

Marney kicks at the ground, his eyes set in front of him. "He'll figure it out when you start to look like you swallowed a damn watermelon, you know that, right?"

He'll find Joe before then. This will be over before then. One way or the other. "I know," I rasp.

He walks over to me and places his arm around me. "You've been through a lot. Why don't we just get you back inside? You need to rest..." he leans down, bringing his face level to mine and his eyes soften, "... and eat."

"Please don't tell him," I beg. *It will only make it worse.*

He narrows his eyes and inhales sharply. "I ain't gonna tell him. You need to be the one to do that."

I nod, glancing at Caleb's grave one more time. The constant ache in my chest intensifies, and I wonder whether it will ever go away. I turn and head back to the house. Marney's heavy footfalls sound behind me.

I open the front door and go straight upstairs, keen to escape his scrutiny. I can practically feel his eyes burning a hole in my back.

When I open the door to Jude's room, I find him sat on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands. He looks up, his eyes darting over my body. I glance down and spot the grass stains on my shorts. His eyes land on them, and he takes a breath.

"He didn't even fucking tell me he was going. I left him here, and all I was worried about was finding you..." His eyes meet mine and his face crumples.

Caleb came after me, because I left, despite him begging me not to go. He came after me, and then I watched as Joe put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger because he wouldn't rape me. He died because Joe was punishing me, because I wanted him to kill *me*. He died because he always did what was right. I bite my lip as I try to beat back the wave of pain and guilt washing over me.

Jude hangs his head and inhales deeply. "I brought him into this shit."

There is nothing I can say because ultimately, nothing can bring Caleb back. He's gone, and no words will make

that any better.



I lay awake, unable to sleep, too afraid of what awaits me to close my eyes. Early morning light drifts around the edges of the heavy curtains, and I listen to the bird call, allowing my mind to drift in their happiness. The gentle sounds mix with Jude's heavy breaths behind me. His arms are wrapped around me so tightly; I can barely breathe. I don't fight him though. I allow him to hold me because he needs it, and honestly, there are times when I feel like his arms might be all that is holding me together.

Since he saved me, Jude and I have barely spoken. I don't think he knows what to say to me, or is even capable of saying anything. Caleb's death has hit him hard, and it scares me to see him so down and out. This is Jude, unbreakable, 'destroy anyone in his path', Jude.

I see the way he watches me, every time he touches me, as though I might burst into tears at any moment. Our relationship is... I don't know what it is, and it seems so trivial right now. I left him for a reason, but everything has changed now. I don't even know if I still love him. I don't think I'm capable of feeling anymore. As for Jude... if he didn't love me before, then he definitely doesn't now. Who would? I'm damaged goods, sullied, fucked by the very man he hates. I'm no longer the innocent girl he craved so badly. I'm darker than he is. Tainted beyond measure. Everything that happened to me has changed me. I can feel it, like a snake coiled around my neck, this numbness beckoning me into its dark depths, and I embrace it. I welcome it because it means I don't have to feel, and that allows me to survive.

Jude stirs. His lips brush my shoulder in a whisper of a kiss before he rolls away, releasing me. I hear him get up

and go to the bathroom, and I take the chance to leave the room. I make my way through the house, passing Caleb's bedroom door. I don't look at it, I never do. Caleb is the only thing that breaks through this fog I've surrounded myself with, the pain of his loss so acute; it could break through steel walls.

The entire house seems to be under this somber cloud. It's quiet, too quiet. The usual sports games blaring from the TV's, followed by the raucous shouting is notably absent.

I go into the kitchen and see Marney sitting at the breakfast bar. I like being around Marney; he has this way about him. He's the only one who doesn't look at me like I'm a victim. He looks at me like I'm a survivor, a fighter. He treats me like he has always treated me, well, perhaps he's a little nicer. He was an asshole to me before.

"Mornin'." He lowers the paper from in front of his face and blows out a slow stream of smoke from his cigarette.

"Hey." I grab a mug from one of the cupboards and pour a cup of coffee from the pot.

I turn around and hop up on the counter. Jude's oversized t-shirt falls to my knees like a dress.

I pick up the mug of coffee and clasp it in both hands.

"You told him yet?" Marney asks without taking his eyes from the paper.

He asked me the same thing yesterday and the day before. I really wish he didn't know. "Not yet," I sigh.

Usually, he just nods, but today he lifts his eyes to mine. "Gonna have to tell him some time, little darlin'."

"I know," I whisper. "But he's not ready to hear it."

He glances back down at his paper, propping his elbows on the breakfast bar. "He's not ready to hear it, or you're not

ready to say it?" he mumbles.

I don't answer him because it's both, and honestly, I don't even know what I'm going to do at this stage. It's something I can't deal with right now; my mind can barely muster the ability to care at all.

"How are you feeling?" He asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Fine."

"I know you don't wanna talk 'bout it, but if you ever need to..." he trails off.

"I need to forget, Marney," I whisper.

He peeks over the paper at me; his lips pressed together. "Ain't no forgetting, darlin', just surviving."

He's right, and this is what I like about him. He doesn't tell me it will be okay. He doesn't pretend there will be a day where this will all be a distant memory because there won't. Survival is all any of us have in this fucked up world.

"Evolve to survive," I whisper to myself.

He narrows his eyes at me and gives me a stiff nod. "Do what you gotta do." A small smile pulls at my lips, and we sit in silence for a moment.

"You gonna eat today?" Marney asks as he narrows his eyes at me. Ever since I came back, I have no appetite. Every time I eat, I feel like I'm going to throw up. Jude watches me like a child, but Marney knowing what he knows, may actually be worse.

I roll my eyes. "I have coffee." I try and avoid his scrutinous eyes.

"I'll make you something." He says getting up. "No arguing little darlin'."

I smile and hold up my hands in surrender.

"Oh," he stops me as he pulls something from his pocket.  
"Here."

I stare at the small silver hummingbird on the delicate chain, and he drops it into my palm. "Where did you find it?" I ask, my voice shaking.

"Dangling on the rearview mirror. Why you women hang shit up on that thing, I'll never understand." He shuffles into the kitchen and opens the fridge.

I can't breathe. My hands tremble, and I clench my fingers into a fist around the little metal bird. The last time I saw this necklace was when one of Joe's men ripped it from my neck. He's sending me a message. He's sending Jude a message.



I stare out of the window at the green woods stretching beyond the house. I used to find them pretty, peaceful, but now they only seem ominous, as though anyone could be hiding in them. I wrap the thin silver chain of the necklace around my fingers. We need to leave. Being in this house is making me nervous. It's only been a few days since we buried Caleb, and I've been trying to be patient, trying to stay calm, but I need Jude to snap out of this. I know he needs to grieve, but here is not the place. It's not safe. Joe knows where we are, and he knows Jude is vulnerable. As always, we're just pawns in Joe's game, part of a bigger plan where we're always two steps behind. He told me he was coming for me, and the thought has me wanting to run as far and as fast away from here as I can.

I turn from the window. Jude is lying on the bed, tossing Caleb's football up and catching it. He's been doing that for half an hour without saying a word. Just staring at the ceiling



and throwing the ball. I need to make him understand the danger we are in.

"Jude, we need to leave," I whisper.

His eyes lock with mine, his fingers gripping the ball. He looks back up to the ceiling and throws it again.

I watch him, waiting for a response that doesn't come. He just keeps throwing that ball. Jude always makes me feel safe, but right now, he's scaring me. This is not the formidable Jude Pearson that I need.

"Jude!" I shout, my voice trembling.

"What, Tor!"

I can't take this. I need him to be, well, him, right now. I need him to take control and make me feel safe. Without that, I might as well take my chances without him. Caleb's loss hurts me, just as it hurts him. I know what I need to do to cope with it though.

"Please." My voice hitches with desperation.

He sighs, throwing the ball to the corner of the room. "I told you I have some things to work out. When I get those ready, we'll leave."

"You haven't done anything!" I shout. Fuck this. I move across the room and go into the walk in wardrobe, pulling a bag from the top shelf. I grab clothes from the rails and start ramming them inside the bag.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he shoves his way into the closet and snatches the bag from me.

I hold my hand out, letting the necklace drop from my hand until it's dangling from one finger. He eyes it, a frown on his face. "Tor, why—"

I quickly cut him off. "The last time I had this necklace was at Joe's, right before it was ripped from my neck. I haven't seen it since, until yesterday," I say quietly.

"Where did you find it?"

"Marney found it, hanging from the rear view mirror of the truck," I say without emotion.

I watch his jaw tick, and he drags his hand down his face. "Shit."

"It's a message. He's coming for me. He told me he would," I choke. "I can't go back, I won't go back." My hands are shaking with just the thought, and my stomach churns violently.

He studies me, his jaw tensing. He brushes his finger over my cheek and turns, walking out of the closet without a single word. I hear the door to the bedroom closed, followed by his footsteps on the stairs.

The Jude I know would be threatening to make it rain fire, and he just walked away without a word. I slide down the wall and pull my knees up to my chest, resting my forehead on them. Joe has broken us, and I hate him for it. Never have I wanted to kill anyone before, but I want Joe Campbell dead more than I have ever wanted anything. I want to watch him bleed, and beg. I want to see his eyes glaze over, just like I had to watch Caleb's. For the first time in days, I feel something besides numbness and pain. I grab hold of this new found rage with both hands, and it becomes intoxicating to me. It gives me purpose in a life that has been stripped of it. I will kill Joe Campbell, with or without Jude's help.

It's like all the little pieces of my fucked up existence click into place. Evolve to survive, this is what I need to survive. *Blood. Revenge. Wrath.*

# Chapter 10

## Jude

I swat the thick cloud of smoke from in front of my face as I walk into the den. Joe, or one of his men, came onto my property, without anyone fucking noticing. He's mocking me. Anger sears its way through me. He could have killed us all, but he chose not to because he wants to watch me crumble, he wants to force me down on my fucking knees. He wants me to fear him, and I refuse to fear any-fucking-body.

"Marney, we need to leave." My tone is overly calm, which causes Marney to cock his eyebrow at me.

"Yeah." He takes a sip of whiskey and swishes it around in his mouth.

I glance over to Paul and Rich sitting on the couch. "You two leave. Don't tell me where the fuck you are going, just be ready to come when I call for you." They both stare at me. "Get up and get the fuck outta here, do you hear me."

I eye them as they stand and make their way out of the room.

"I bought a house a month ago," I say to Marney. "Down in the Caribbean. It's in Tor's name... well, her alias."

A smirk creeps across his face as he raises the glass back to his lips. "Huh, why'd you go and do that?"

"Because I fucking wanted her to have somewhere to go." I snatch the glass from his hand and slam it down on the side table. "The second I find that fucker, you are going to

take her there and make sure she's fucking safe." I flip the cushion off the couch and stare down at the loose piece of material. I tug it back and pull out a large metal box, and then hand it to Marney. "Go get the rest of the money we've got hidden in this house and pack it up. I want you to take all of it, and the money in the stocks. If anything happens to me you make sure she's taken care of, you understand me?"

"Yeah," Marney chuckles and slowly rises from the chair. "Ain't nothing gonna happen to you boy. Stop being so damn dramatic." He tucks the box underneath his arm and makes his way down the hall.

I comb my fingers through my hair and glance around the house. There is too much evidence in this house to just leave. I have so many pieces of collateral I've taken possession of... I'm going to have to burn this place to the fucking ground. And maybe, just maybe Joe will be stupid enough to think I'm dead. Doubtful, but I'll take anything at the moment.

I hurry back down the hallway and up the stairs to my room. The hinges creak when I push the door open. Tor is cramming clothes into a bag, and she glares up at me. "I'm leaving, with or without you," she yells. "I'm going to find him, and I'm going to kill him!"

She's lost it. She looks fucking insane right now. I arch a brow at her and cock my head. "You need to calm the fuck down. Stop shouting!"

"I can't live like this, Jude!" Her voice wavers slightly, and I take a deep breath, pinching the bridge of my nose.

I grip her firmly by her shoulders. "Killing him won't take any of this fucking shit away. It won't bring Caleb back. It will change nothing."

Tears fall down her cheeks as she shakes her head. "This is what he wants. He wants me to fear him." She steels herself. "He killed Caleb, and I'm going to kill him. I won't live

looking over my shoulder. I would rather die trying to get to him." Her eyes narrow and something sparks to life within them. "I want him to suffer, Jude."

This is the first time I've seen some fight in her, and I almost want to breathe a sigh of relief, but this is not where I wanted her to go. There is no helping this. There is not a fucking thing I can do or say that will take that thirst for blood away from her.

"You cannot kill him, Tor." I walk to the closet and grab several suitcases, tossing them out into the bedroom.

"No," she whispers. "But I can if you help me."

I stop on my way out of the closet and stare at her. She's gone batshit fucking crazy if she thinks I'll let her anywhere near him. "Are you in-fucking-sane? Do you think I will let you close enough to him to kill him? Fuck no!" I'm breathing heavily just thinking about it. "I'll fucking kill him, but you won't even be in the same goddamn state!"

She studies me for a few minutes. "I'm not a pet you can keep in a cage, Jude. That's not the way this works. You weren't there. You can't understand this. I need this."

Her comment pisses me off. I do understand this. That fucker single handedly killed my entire family and destroyed the one person left that I care anything for.

"Don't say that to me." My eyes land on the picture of my mother and sister before drifting back to Tor. "I understand plenty," I growl.

She drags her hands through her hair and picks up the bag again. "Fine. I'm telling you, you can't stop me," she dismisses, shoving past me and walking into the bedroom. "You don't own me."

A flash of anger jolts through me, and before I realize what I'm doing, I grab her and shove her against the wall,

pinning her to it with one hand. I brace myself with my other hand as I place my face inches from hers, my jaw clenched. "You will do what the fuck I tell you to do. I don't own you but damn it, I know what's best for you. You will not do this to me. Do you hear me?" I remove my hand from the wall, and she flinches away from me, squeezing her eyes shut and bringing her hands up to protect her face.

*Shit.* She thought I was going to hit her. She's conditioned to this now. I am going to fucking slaughter, Joe. "Fuck, I'm... sorry, Tor. I'm sorry." I reach for her cautiously, gently brushing my fingers down her cheek, and she slowly lowers her arms. Her face is pale, her eyes unfocused. I cup her face in both hands and stare into her eyes. "I would never hurt you, doll. I—I just can't let anything happen to you." Her eyes drop to the floor.

I press a kiss against her forehead, inhaling her delicate scent. This right here is terrifying—when someone becomes this vital to you, it's the realest fear in the world.

"I would never hurt you," I whisper. "I promise." I hold her tightly for a few seconds before she finally relaxes against me.

"You okay?" I ask her.

She nods.

"We'll leave, okay?" I say as I push away from her and walk into the bathroom.

I stare at my reflection for a moment before I grab the mirror with both hands and throw it to the ground. The glass shatters and sprays all over the floor.

She appears in the bathroom doorway; her small figure swamped by my t-shirt. "What are you doing?" she asks, fiddling with a strand of hair.

I stare at the now exposed hole in the plaster. Stacks of cash are piled up like you'd find in a bank vault. "Getting my

shit together," I mumble. "Bring me one of those suitcases, would you, doll?"

She drags the suitcase in, her eyes trained on the wall. She watches as I fill the suitcase up with money, never asking me anything. By now she knows how shit runs. I'm a fucking bookie. Bookies can't go to the bank. My house *is* a fucking bank.

Marney helps me continue ransacking the house. We bust up walls, rip up floorboards until we've stuffed every last dime into those suitcases. I have no idea how much money is there. It's well up into the millions, ten years' worth of work. And it's definitely enough to take care of us for the rest of our lives, and that's all I'm concerned about, taking care of us. Taking care of her.

I toss the bags onto the stairs and go to get her from the room. "Come on," I say as open the door, but she's not in here. I turn and stare down the hallway, noticing that Caleb's bedroom door is cracked.

I inhale and slowly push the door open. She's sat on the bed, clutching a photograph of Caleb to her chest. "Come on, let's go," I say softly. She pulls the picture away and stares at it before she stands up and silently walks past me. Taking one last look around my little brothers room, I gently close the door, grabbing the bags and following Tor outside.

Marney is waiting for us beside the car. I hand the suitcase to him as I say, "Put it in the car."

I place my hand on the small of Tor's back and guide her to the rear door, holding it open. "Get her in the car."

She climbs in, looking lost, and my phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it out and glance at the screen. There's a text from an unknown number: *I love watching you break*. A video is attached. I stare at the phone, my throat tightening. I pull in a long breath as I delete the text. I will not fucking let him do this to me. I will take the upper hand.

"I'll be back soon, okay?" I say. Her eyes meet mine, and she nods.

I head toward the overgrown shed, forcing the rusted door open. The smell of mildew and gasoline overpowers me. I spot two tanks of gasoline and grab them. On my way to the house, I pause to glance at the headstones buried behind the tree line. *Do not let this sadness overtake you. Fucking anger. Wrath.* That is what I need.

I keep walking in the direction of the house and flip the lids to the tanks the moment I set foot inside the door. I pour the liquid along the floors, trailing it down the stairs to the basement, and through the narrow corridors. I can't stop the memories forcing their way into my mind. Fuck! I take a breath and keep going, focusing my attention on the sound of the gas as it splatters onto the floor. I come to the weapons room. All that Marney left in here is the box of explosives in the corner. I trail a line of gas over to it and dump the rest of one can inside the wooden crate.

I leave, dripping the remaining fuel onto the driveway before I throw the can down on the yard. I hear Marney start the engine.

"Go ahead and put it in reverse," I shout as I flick the flint to the lighter. I hold the flame in front of my face and stare at the house. I hesitate because I'm about to burn down everything I own, I am about to obliterate any tangible memories I have to the person I am. I swallow as I bend over and hold the flame to the fluid. I back away, watching the blaze snake up the stairs and engulf the front door before I rush to the car and climb in.

The tires squeal as Marney backs out. He pulls off before I manage to shut the door. We speed down the long driveway and fishtail out onto the dirt road. Moments later a loud boom rattles the windows of the car, and an orange glow reflects from the windshield. Tor slides her small hand into mine and squeezes. Leaning my head back against the seat,



I close my eyes, rhythmically stroking my thumb over her wrist. That subtle touch somehow calms me, reminding me why I'm doing this. For her, for us.

"Where are we going now?" she quietly asks.

"To Marney's place in the mountains until we find Joe, then we're leaving for good." I turn to look at her, but she keeps her eyes trained out the window. All she does is nod.

By the time we reach the chalet, Tor is passed out, asleep on my lap.

I carefully lift her as I climb out of the car and carry her straight up to the bedroom. I tug the covers back and gently lay her down. When I turn to leave, her fingers cling to my shirt, and her eyes flutter open. "Stay," she whispers.

I stroke a stray piece of hair from her face. "I will, doll. I just need to wash this gas off of me real quick." I press my lips to her forehead before I pull away to leave the room.

I rush through a shower, not wanting to leave her alone too long. I dry off, pull on a pair of boxers and climb into bed. I wrap my arms around her and drag her body close to mine. I cling to her like she's fucking life itself as I breathe in her familiar scent. Having her against me like this causes my muscles to relax automatically. She is the only thing in my life that has ever felt right. It's fucked up, and it's wrong, but I love her. She's fucking everything.

# Chapter 11

## Victoria

*Hands pin me down, restraining me as he leans over me. "Victoria, you know fighting is useless." He presses his disgusting cock against me. "I'll only hurt you more." His face contorts into a grimace as he rips into me. I clench my teeth against the pain, the invasion, the degradation.*

*I feel his fingers wrap around my chin.*

"Wake up, Tor."

I jump awake, a hand is still on my face, deep breaths blowing against my cheek. I thrust my hand under my pillow and am grateful when my fingers brush the cool metal of the gun. I grab it and twist away from him, pulling the gun up in front of me. I can only make out a shadowy figure in the darkness.

"Stay the fuck away from me!" I shout, clicking the safety off. My hands shake, my palms are slick with sweat as adrenaline and fear course through my veins. All I can hear is the pounding of my frantic pulse in my ears.

"Whoa, Tor! I'm not gonna fucking hurt you. Put the gun down."

I count each of my laboured breaths, in and out, in and out. I frown as reality and dream blur and then pull apart. *Jude. It's Jude. Oh, my God, I almost shot him!* I scramble

backwards until my trembling legs touch the ground, and then I run. Why? I don't know. I just can't face him. I find a bathroom down the hall and lock myself inside it.

I just want Joe out. I want him out of my head. I slide down the wall until the cold tile of the floor bites against the backs of my thighs and tears roll down my cheeks. I said I would get revenge. I said I would hunt him down for Caleb, but how long must I survive this? Jude might have rescued me, but I will never be free. Joe is always there, waiting to torment me. He's won because even after he is dead and buried, he will still be right here in my mind.

"Tor?" I hear Jude calling me. "What are you doing?" The handle rattles, and there's a thud on the other side. "Please put the gun down." He inhales deeply. "Please!"

I glance down at my fingers still firmly wrapped around the pistol, my index finger pressed against the trigger. I raise it and stare at it. It would be so easy, so quick. Painless. Caleb didn't feel any pain; he was just... gone. I want to be gone. I want it to end. I clench the handle with both hands and rest the smooth length of the barrel against my forehead. The metal feels cool and against my skin, alluring.

"Don't do it, Tor. I know what you're thinking, and it's not..." his voice trails off. He stops, and I hear him take a ragged breath. "I need you. Please, don't do it. I can't lose you too." He pauses, "Think of Caleb, Tor. At least if I have you, it seems there was a reason for him dying."

Caleb. There was no reason for him to die. I promised myself that I would kill Joe though, for Caleb, and I will. I stare at the gun in my hand, the potential of salvation so close, so tempting, and I drop it onto the floor, the metal clicking heavily against the tile.

Jude jiggles the handle once more. "Please let me in." His voice is quiet, barely contained. The Jude I once knew would batter down that door, but now he's standing on the other

side begging me not to kill myself. If that isn't tragic, I don't know what is. He has lost everything, but I can't be his everything. I can't be anything to anyone.

The two people we once were are broken.

I leave the gun on the bathroom floor and stammer to my feet, swiping at the tears on my face. I pull open the door and come face to face with Jude's massive frame. His forearms brace either side of the door; his head hung forward in defeat. He slowly lifts his face, and his green eyes meet mine. It pains me to see such a powerful man look so destroyed. I know I'm selfish. Caleb is dead, and I'm all Jude has. He has told me this many times, and yet, I can't seem to muster the will to care.

He wordlessly pulls me into his arms, pressing me against his warm chest. He makes me feel safe, and for the brief moments when he holds me, I feel untouchable. I wish this were enough. I wish he were enough, but even Jude can't keep my demons at bay.

I nuzzle against his bare chest and close my eyes. His hand cups the back of my head, and I feel his strong heartbeat under my cheek. If Jude can make me feel safe for even the briefest moments, then perhaps he can make me forget too. Maybe he can erase Joe's touch. I can still feel Joe's hands on my body, and I hate that he was the last person to have me that way.

I pull my face away from the warmth of his skin and look up at him. He cups my face in both hands and strokes his thumbs over my jaw. I take a deep breath. My eyes flick down to his lips and back up to his eyes as I muster the courage to kiss him. He doesn't need any more than that. He leans in and gently presses his lips to mine in a whisper of a kiss. I push up on my tiptoes and wrap my arms around his neck, clinging to him with shaking fingers.

The air rushes from his lungs, a deep groan leaving him as his hands move around to the back of my head, tangling in my hair. His muscles tremble under my fingertips from his restraint, his cock pressing against my stomach. I want him; I need him. He can take this away. He can make it better. I tentatively push my tongue against his, and he moans, thrusting his tongue into my mouth. His fingers tense, pulling my hair, and then suddenly, I'm against the wall, my legs around his hips, my body pinned by his much larger one. And it's then that my mind goes into overload. I can't do this. Images flash through my mind on fast forward, memories of being restrained, held down, forced. Joe is dragging me by my hair, pinning me by my throat. My lungs seize, and my body goes into lockdown. I can't move. I just need it to stop. I press my hands to his chest and shove him away, screaming, "Stop!" My breathing is ragged, my pulse hammering through my veins out of fear.

Jude steps back, his lips pressed together, his brow furrowed. I close my eyes and try to still my shaking limbs.

"Tor..." his fingers brush my face, and I jump, my eyes flashing open. He approaches me cautiously like he's worried the slightest movement may send me over the edge. His eyes are full of pity, and I hate it. "I just miss you," he whispers, his eyes locked with mine. "I'm sorry." He stands staring at me, uncertain of what to do.

Tears fill my eyes. I hate that Joe has done this to me, to us. I'm angry at myself for being this weak. This is Jude. I know he would never hurt me, but my mind is so damaged, so conditioned, that it doesn't seem to matter. "I'm sorry," I choke.

He shakes his head and reaches for me, pulling me close to him. I press my cheek to his broad chest, listening to his steady heartbeat and timing my frantic breaths to it.

"Don't be." He rubs his hand up and down my back, comforting me in a way only he can. "Let's just go to bed,

okay?"

I nod, and he takes my hand and leads me back to the bedroom. I curl on my side, and he lays behind me, pulling me into the crook of his body. I wish I could stay like this with him forever, with him protecting me from the world.

"Give it time, doll," he breathes. "I'm not going anywhere."

I nod and cling to the strong arm wrapped around me. They say time heals all wounds. I can only hope that's true.

# Chapter 12

## Jude

I'm alone in the makeshift office. I blank out as I stare at the papers on the desk. The window is cracked so I can listen to the pine needles rustling in the light breeze. For some reason, that sound soothes me. We've been at this cabin for almost three weeks, and once a week Joe sends me a video clip that I delete. I have Rich and Paul and David trying to track Joe down. Nothing. David thinks he's out of the country. I don't give a shit where he is. I will find him, if it takes me the rest of my fucking life, I will get him.

Tor is slowly beginning to resemble her old self. She no longer flinches if I touch her, and she doesn't break down when I kiss her, but she still has those fucking nightmares every night. She wakes up screaming or crying, whimpering. I hate that. Joe has worked his way so deep into her; he's so far under her skin that he's like a fucking disease just eating away at her from the inside out. She told me the other day that when she was with Joe, she prayed for death. She said she'd never prayed before because she didn't believe in a god, but, at the time, she thought if one did exist he would pity her enough to end it. What do you say to that? I can't take that fear away from her no matter how badly I fucking want to. He branded her physically and mentally, and I don't know that those wounds will ever completely heal.

I stare at the names David sent me. All these men are tied to Joe, and as I glance down I find two that, at one time, were clients of mine. Leaning back in the chair, I see Tor step into the doorway, and rest against the frame. She dyed her hair blonde again, and despite all she's been through, she somehow just radiates this glow. Her steel-blue eyes drift over to me, and a small smile plays on her full lips. God, that woman is fucking beautiful. Even with the hatred and coldness that tries to overtake her at times, nothing can make her seem less than perfect. She's mine. My gaze slowly skims down her body, halting when it reaches the low cut dip in her dress. I feel my dick swell. I can't fucking help it. My eyes trail further down to the hem of the short, pale blue dress she's wearing. It hits midway up her thigh. She shifts her legs, and the hem rises a little. I adjust myself in my seat to make my tightening jeans less constricting. I want to fuck her so badly, but I'm not even *attempting* that.

"Do you know where he is yet?" she asks, drumming her fingers over the wooden doorframe.

I grab my cigarettes and tap one loose from the pack, placing it between my lips. I hold the flame to the tip and drag in a lungful of smoke. "No," I say, exhaling.

"We need to find him, Jude," she sighs, staring at the wall. "Every day that he's breathing... I just need him dead."

I take another hit from the cigarette, blowing a steady stream of smoke from my lips as I think about how I want to kill fucking Joe. About how I want to drag it out over the course of a goddamn month, but I'm not going to say that to Tor right now, so instead I just say, "I know."

"No." Her bottomless eyes turn to meet mine. "You don't."

I take another puff and stare at her as I blow more smoke through my parted lips, my jaw instinctively clenching as the usual guilt gnaws at me. I hate being reminded how messed up she is. "I fucking *know*, Tor," I say through gritted teeth.



Her eyes spark violently, her nostrils flaring. I can tell she's thinking about him. Over the past few days, she's reached a volatile level of anger at the situation, and I'm honestly relieved with that. Guilt, denial... that does nothing, but anger, well, that's a whole different story. That is one emotion that at times can be more cleansing than a fucking baptism. When you finally let all that pent up tension go, it's freeing because when you've lost everything, sometimes anger is all you have. As shitty as it is, at times in life, revenge is all that's left. And that's where we are now.

She pushes away from the doorway. Her steps light as she makes her way toward me and leans over the desk. She takes the cigarette from my hand and places it between her full lips, pulling in a long drag and blowing a stream of smoke in my direction. "You really, really can't understand this," she says as she steps around the desk and sits on the edge in front of me.

She crosses her legs. That innocent movement causes her sundress to ride up her thighs far enough that I can see the white lace of her underwear peeking out. Swallowing hard, I force my eyes away from her long, lean legs. The phone rings, which is a welcomed distraction, and I quickly reach to answer it.

"Hello?" I barely get the word out of my mouth before I hear the line click. I frown, looking up to see the disconnected cord. Tor twists it around her fingers while she smirks. She places her bare foot on the chair next to my thigh and spreads her legs open, giving me a much clearer view of her.

I lean my head back against the chair and squeeze my eyes shut. I don't want to fucking deal with this right now. Honestly, I don't have the control to.

"Tor..."

"Jude," she answers flatly, that sexy smirk deepening on her face.

I push her foot from the seat. "What are you doing?"

Her gaze is locked to mine as she slowly pushes herself off the desk. She slides onto my lap and straddles me. Arching her brow, she wraps her arms around my shoulders and laces her fingers behind my neck. Her warm pussy presses against my cock through my jeans. It's been too damn long since I fucked her. I grab her hips, situating her further down my lap so she can't feel my hard-on. "Tor, what are you doing?"

Her eyes flash. "Do you need me to spell it out for you?" Her fingers drift over my shoulders to the top button of my shirt and unfasten it. She teasingly scrapes her nails over my exposed skin, causing me to draw in a slow breath. She moves her fingers to the next button, popping it loose, then to the next.

I grab her wrist. "You don't want this," I say, raising both brows.

Frowning, she tilts her head to the side. I can see the hurt mounting in her eyes, the crying vulnerability.

"I don't want this, or *you* don't want this?" she asks softly.

I'm not sure how to handle this because I don't think she can't handle it. She may think she can. Sighing, I cup her cheek and brush my thumb over her soft skin. "Believe me, I want you."

Her chest rises in uneven breaths, her eyes glued to mine.

"I just don't think you're ready," I say.

Her entire face crumples. Just when I'm afraid she's going to break down into tears, she whispers, "Please." That one word is spoken so softly I can barely make it out. "I can't, I don't want him..."

She diverts her gaze to the wall behind me. She's so ashamed of that, and it kills me. It's not her fault, but I think somehow, she's made herself feel like it is. I gently grip her chin, forcing her to look at me. There's a long pause of silence as I fail to find the right words.

Her brow furrows and her eyes plead with me. "I need you take it away."

I tenderly squeeze her thigh, and her eyes fall to my chest. There are no words that can make this right. I'm better off not saying a damn thing. She is so fragile, and I never know what I'll say or do that may break her. She needs to know she's worth something, she needs to feel loved, but this is where I struggle. I am not that man that can put a feeling into words. I'm not fucking romantic. I lack sympathy on damn near every level.

I press my lips to hers in an attempt to help her feel what I cannot say. The heat of her soft lips floods my skin. My fingers dig into her leg, and I fight every urge I have to throw her down and take her.

Her tongue skims my bottom lip, and her fingers tighten on my shoulders as she presses her body harder over mine. I allow my hands to travel up her sides to her neck, scratching my fingers up into her hair as I kiss her deeper. Her hands drop to my belt buckle. I notice them tremble as she yanks at it. She's desperate, her movements jolty, and I realize I just can't do this with her. I release her hair and break away from her.

"Tor," I say quietly, stilling her hands. Her chin drops to her chest. "I just need you to be—"

"It's fine. You don't want me. I get it." She pushes off of me and staggers to her feet.

I rub my hand over my forehead. I'm annoyed because I don't know what the fuck to do with her. I go too far, and she

loses her shit, I don't go far enough and she thinks I don't want her.

She goes to walk away, but I grab her by the wrist. I stand and push her against the desk. I'm not going to do this with her. She makes an attempt to shove me away, but I don't budge. She's breaking, and I can see it. I'm done letting her fucking go off and break by herself. I pull her back to me, and she pushes me away again. This time, I give a little but refuse to let go of her waist. She fights me, pounding her fists over my chests, her fragile body shaking underneath my grasp.

"Fuck you, Jude!"

The next thing I know, a loud slap rings out, and I feel the sting across my cheek.

I blow out a calming breath and take it, gritting my teeth. My fingers instinctively flinch into her waist. "Tor..." I growl. "I am not the person you're fucking mad at." Her fingers fist my shirt, and then she breaks. Her eyes slam shut, and her body trembles as a ragged sob tears from her throat. I will do anything for her, be anything to her, but I'll admit, I don't know how to help her with this. I grab her, cupping the back of her head as I bring her to my chest and hold her.

"Whatever you need, doll," I mumble into her hair. "I'll give you whatever you want, whatever you need, as long as it is what you need." She buries her face in my chest; her fingers balled in my shirt. "Look at me," I whisper.

She tilts her face up. Her cheeks are slick with tears, and I swipe my thumbs underneath her eyes to wipe away the remaining tears. How could she possibly think that I don't want her? I've never wanted any damn woman the way I want her. She fucking owns me, and she's completely unaware of it. I shake my head gently as I scoop her up into my arms. "I'm gonna take you to bed."

I carry her through the cabin, slowly climbing the stairs to the bedrooms. I pull in the scent of her hair just before I lay her on the bed. That smell is so familiar, so fucking undeniable. "What do you want me to do, Tor?" I ask as I sit on the bed next to her.

She bites her bottom lip, refusing to look at me. "I just don't want him to be the last person to..." her voice breaks. She draws her knees up to her chest, resting her elbows on them and burying her face in her hands.

*Fuck.* I drag my hands down my jaw trying to decide if this is really what the hell she needs. I rub my hand along her spine. "You are absolutely sure you want me to do this?"

She silently nods. "This is something only you can fix, Jude," she whispers.

I swallow hard, and gently pull her into my lap, wrapping her legs around me. Our eyes lock, and I'm fucking terrified I'm going to hurt her. I press my forehead against hers and close my eyes as I trail my fingers up and down her neck. "You tell me if you want me to stop."

She nods, and I rise from the bed, holding her as I gently lay her back on the bed and hover over her. I inhale as I skim my lips up the side of her throat, over the thick scar beneath her jaw. Her quickening pulse thumps against my lips. Her fingers comb through my hair as her breaths become uneven. I nervously trace my hand up the inside of her thigh, pushing the hem of her skirt up as I go. My finger brushes between her legs and she freezes, her breath catching. Her grip on my hair tightens nearly to the point of pain. I pull back to look at her. Her head is thrown back against the pillow, her eyes squeezed shut, every muscle in her body tense as hell.

"Tor..."

Her eyes slowly open, hardened and cold once again. I can't do this to her. She's too fucked up in the head from Joe, and I don't want to hurt her, but I fucking miss this, I miss her. Suddenly, her palms press against my chest like she's going to shove me away, but instead she forces me onto my back. She straddles my hips and glares down at me. Her chest rises in ragged swells. "I want you to take it away," she says as she takes the bottom of my shirt and rips it over my head. "Make me forget," she pleads.

Grabbing her by the hips, I yank her toward me, and she falls forward onto her elbows. I grip the back of her neck and bring her into a brutal kiss. *She wants to forget? I'll make her fucking forget anything that isn't me.* She nips at my bottom lip and a low moan transfers from her mouth to mine. That noise causes my cock to twitch. My innate urge is to pin her down by her throat, and I inhale, attempting to control myself. I slowly snake my palms up her thighs until I feel lace against my skin. I slip one finger beneath the material, and the second I touch her, her lips still.

I stop, pushing her up enough to see her face. "Tor, look at me."

Her eyes focus on mine, and I can see the fear in them, the uncertainty.

She takes an unsteady breath, resting her forehead against mine as she grabs the waist of my jeans and undoes my fly, then stops. She's breathing so damn hard and just staring off. It's like she's convincing herself she can do this, and that's not what I want.

# Chapter 13

## Victoria

"You don't have to do this," Jude whispers, his eyes full of concern.

I do though. I need to do this; I need *him* to do this. "I need it," I whisper against his mouth. "I can still feel him."

Jude shakes his head. His teeth grate against each other. "No one will ever fucking touch you again," he promises, his voice barely restrained.

I believe him. I feel like I'm falling, but he will catch me, no matter what, because that's what Jude does. Sometimes I want to hate him, I want to blame him for everything, but I can't.

His fingers move to the hem of my dress, inching it up over my hips. I stiffen and grab his wrists, halting him. His eyes meet mine. I don't want him to see the marks; the shame stamped all over my skin in ugly scars. "Leave it on."

He shakes his head. He abruptly sits up, bringing us face to face. "*Don't* hide from me." His low voice soothes my frantic pulse.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders, and his warm, solid chest presses against my body. He holds me tight, and not for the first time; it's as though he's physically holding me together. His fingers move to the back of my neck, and

trail down my spine. I tense as I feel them run over the raised scars, the brands marring my skin. I want to shy away from him. He can't possibly feel anything but disgust as his fingers skim over the thick scar tissue. He stops when he reaches the material of my dress, just above my bra strap. I close my eyes as my throat threatens to close. I feel exposed in the most vulnerable way, and I fucking hate it. His free hand grips the back of my neck, bringing me close.

"Don't be ashamed in front of me," he rasps. "Never be ashamed in front of me."

How can I not feel ashamed? He pulls me close and presses his lips to mine. This kiss is slower, more careful. He treats me as though I'm something breakable, and I am, but I don't want to be. He tears his lips from mine and kisses down my throat and across my chest. His fingers dig into my hips, pulling me closer. His erection presses against me through his jeans. Bile rises in my throat as every fibre of my being recoils in horror. I can do this. I can do this. It's not Jude. I know it's not Jude.

He moves against me again, and images flash through my mind, like a video on fast forward. All I can see is Joe moving over me, forcing himself inside my body. Suddenly, it feels like insects are crawling over my skin. I bite my lip as tears sting my eyes. I tilt my head back and stare at the ceiling, trying to keep myself rooted in the moment. Here, with Jude. I need Joe out of my body, out of my mind! I need Jude to replace what he took from me.

I feel his hand skim over the inside of my thigh, and I flinch. I take a shaky breath and the familiar smell of cigarettes and whisky washes over me, but it's not enough to pull me from the fear gripping me. His hand freezes on my thigh. Sighing, he pulls his hand away from me abruptly.

He shakes his head, a broken expression covering his features. "Tor... I can't."



Of course he can't. Who would want this? No one, especially not Jude. I can't move quickly enough. I jump off the bed and head for the door, but he catches my hand, stopping me. Tears track freely down my cheeks, and I wish I could just become invisible.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, his voice straining.

"It's fine, Jude. You don't have to apologise," I choke out. It's not his fault. I shouldn't have pushed him. The rejection I'm experiencing right now is my own doing. I should have known he wouldn't want this. I wrap my arms around my waist, wishing I could just shield myself from his vision.

He just sits there, staring at the wall, and then he rakes his hand through his hair. He glances over at me. "This isn't going to help you. I don't know what to do here, Tor."

"You can't help me. No one can," I whisper.

*Is this it? Has Joe really broken me beyond repair? Am I destined to feel like this for the rest of my life?* This isn't a life. This truly is hell. This is why Joe wouldn't let me die. He wanted me to suffer like this. I clench my fist until my nails bite into my skin. I want to feel the pain, though; I like it. Jude takes a hold of my hand, unfolding my fingers. I look up into his eyes. "I can't do this," I tell him honestly.

"It's fine."

I shake my head. "No. I can't do any of this. He's in my head, Jude. I think about it all the time." My voice hitches. "Every time I close my eyes, he's waiting, and the worst part about it... this is exactly what he wanted." Tears run down my face. "I begged him to kill me! Begged him! And he wouldn't."

"I'm not gonna let him do this to you. He will not ruin you!"

My poor, hopeful Jude.

"He already has," I whisper sadly. "You see it, even if you won't admit it. This..." I gesture the length of my body. "... is damaged, and this..." I tap my temple. "... is irreparable."

Jude takes each side of my face in his large hands and stares into my eyes with an intensity that threatens to bring me to my knees. He slowly shakes his head. "I won't let you be damaged. To me, you are every-fucking-thing in this goddamn world." He kisses me hard. "I fucking love you, Tor," he mumbles against my lips, his fingers working their way into my hair. "Fuck, I love you." He kisses me harder, deeper. "Do you fucking hear me? I need you. I want you. I love you."

I cry deep, desperate sobs. I cry until my knees buckle, and Jude catches me, scooping me up and carrying me back to the bed. He just sits, cradling me in his lap whilst I cry all over him. I cry for everything that we have lost, and for everything that I now cannot give him. I feel as though I owe it to him to try, because if I don't, Joe wins, and this was all for nothing.

"Tell me again," I breathe, tracing my fingers over his stubbled jaw.

His lips are beside my ear, and he sweeps my hair from my neck. He tenderly kisses below my earlobe, then whispers. "I love you." His lips move lower to my collarbone. "I fucking love you."

I lift my gaze to meet his, and his green eyes seem to penetrate my very soul.

"Only you. I only love you." His hands trail down my back.

My heart clenches hard. There's a moment of silence as we stare at each other, that familiar pull simmering between us. I allow myself just to feel it, to feel what I thought Joe had taken from me, but I now realise he can't take my love for Jude. He is all I have, and I am all he has. What we are hasn't

changed, he's still my beautiful tragedy, my knight in bloodied armour.

I stroke my fingers over the rough stubble of his jaw before I slam my lips over his. He winds his fingers into my hair, pulling me closer, until all I can feel, all I can see is him. He grabs my waist and lifts me, laying me back on the bed. He slides easily between my thighs, hovering over me.

His cock rubs against me through his jeans. "I fucking *want* you, Tor," he growls.

I grit my teeth as my mind tries to drag up the memories. I squeeze my eyes shut, and dig my nails into his shoulders. "Again," I whisper.

I feel his lips trace up the side of my neck, and his teeth gently skim my earlobe. "I love you," he rumbles. My eyes snap open, and then I'm pulling him to me. I want him on me, in me, possessing me, consuming me in every way. I want him to erase every bad memory I have and forge new ones.

"I love you," I gasp against his lips before he slams them over mine. His bare torso presses against me, his warm skin like silk beneath my touch. He lifts away from me, but his lips never leave mine. I hear the clink of his belt buckle before I hear a heavy thud as it hits the floor. His hands work over me, touching, caressing, teasing. My skin breaks out in goosebumps and trembles beneath his soft touch.

For the first time since it happened, I don't crave something besides the rage and the numbness. I don't want to shut him out. I want him connected to me in every possible way. I want to feel again.

His hands stroke over me as he places small kisses over my face. "You're so fucking beautiful, Tor," he growls. "Every fucking bit of you." His weight settles back between my thighs briefly before he pulls away and watches me. His eyes never leave mine as his hands run confidently up my thighs.

My breath hitches when his fingers brush across my underwear. He slips one underneath the material, caressing me. A small smile pulls at his lips; it's part pride, and part male satisfaction.

I squeeze my eyes shut as a thousand feelings bombard me at once, waging a war inside my head. Jude's lips are at my ear, his hand cupping my cheek. "Breathe," he whispers to me.

"I want you."

It's true. I want him; I want this. This isn't going to be easy, it was never going to be, but I need this, I want this. Only he can do this for me. He can heal a part of me that I can't heal myself. He nods and moves away from me, slowly sliding my underwear down my legs.

He settled between my thighs again, but I sit up and stop him with a hand on his chest. "You need... you need to use something," I mumble, drawing my knees to my chest as I keep my eyes fixed on the bed. "I don't know... they didn't..." I sigh and squeeze my eyes shut, unable to say the words: I might have HIV. "I'm not clean." Tears prickle my eyes, but I bite the inside of my cheek to keep them at bay.

I feel a finger under my chin. "Open your eyes," he orders. I slowly open them, meeting his hard gaze. "You *are* fucking clean." He presses his lips to mine, and slowly parts my thighs again, pushing me back on the bed.

"Jude," I object, mumbling against his lips.

He kisses me harder, silencing me. He kisses me until I'm breathless, my skin heated. The hot skin of his hips presses against the insides of my thighs, and I feel his cock push against me. I tense, but he's right there, his soft voice soothing me. And then, he's inside me.

I wait for the fear to come, but it never does, because this is nothing like what happened to me with Joe. This isn't

violent or degrading. This is Jude. He touches his forehead to mine, his hand cupping my face. He makes me feel his love, and in doing so, he takes away the pain. He takes away everything by giving me him.

I cling to his biceps as he rolls his hips against me slowly. His lips are everywhere, but his hand never leaves my face, and his eyes never leave mine. He makes me feel protected, safe, cherished in ways that I never thought possible.

His muscles tense as he restrains himself, and a low groan leaves his lips. "Fuck, I've missed you." He breathes against my mouth.

I've missed him too. I've missed us.

His lips trail down my throat as he moves over me. My body slowly softens to him, and tension gives way to pleasure.

My hands move to his back, my nails digging into his skin as a small moan slips from my lips. His breath is hot on my neck, his touch soft, but demanding enough to let me know just how much he wants this.

"You're mine, Tor. No one can take you from me," he growls.

"Fuck me," I beg. "Come inside me." I need him to mark me, claim me, remove all traces of Joe from my body. His muscles tense as he tries to hold back. "Please," I whisper against his lips.

"Fuck!" Jude groans, his thrusts becoming faster, less controlled. His body tenses, his face falling slack as he comes inside me. His body shudders and trembles as he rests his forehead against my chest. All I can hear is his ragged breaths mixed with my pounding heartbeat. I did it. We did it.

I don't know that I will ever be free of Joe's grip, but with Jude by my side, I will fight him every step of the way.



I sit on the porch staring out at the mountains. My life feels like a tornado, changing from one direction to the other in the blink of an eye, but whichever way it goes, there's always destruction. There's always an issue lurking in the shadows, waiting for me to think I'm okay, and then pounce.

I'm better, things are better. After Joe, I wasn't sure I would ever be able to say that, but in his own way, Jude is slowly fixing me. He makes me feel whole, as though perhaps I'm not the shattered mess that Joe sought to destroy. And this brings a whole new set of issues.

I glance down at my stomach, which is now just starting to form a small bump. For the last few weeks, it's been a null and void point, something I could barely think about or comprehend myself. I still haven't come to terms with it, but I feel guilty because Jude has been nothing but supportive. He's helped me, protected me. I owe him the truth. I should tell him, but I can't. I just... my gut tells me that now is not the right time. I'm worried that if I tell him now, he'll walk away from Joe, and I can't live with that. I need Joe dead, for both our sakes. He's like a shadow looming over us, threatening to ruin everything at any given time. I need to pull the trigger myself. I can't explain why, but when someone takes so much from you, the only thing I believe can truly cleanse me, is to take something from him. His life.

If I tell Jude I'm pregnant, he won't let me go after Joe.

*No. I need to wait until we find Joe, and then I'll tell him.*

I'm done waiting. I need action. I need to do something. I get up from my seat on the porch and make my way back

inside the house. Once in the bedroom, I open the bedside table and pull out the nine millimetre that I found in Caleb's bedside table.

I can point a gun and shoot it, but I want to know how to shoot to kill. I want to be as good as Jude. I want to be able to defend myself without being a liability. I refuse to be weak when I come face to face with Joe.

I move back through the cabin until I come to Jude's office. I push the door open without knocking. He glances up at me briefly.

"Teach me to shoot," I say, placing the weapon down on the desk. Jude's eyes move over the gun before rising to my face and narrowing. He smirks, holding back a laugh, but I hold his gaze, refusing to back down.

He raises an eyebrow. "Where did you find that?" He picks it up and sets it on his lap.

"This house is full of guns," I answer flatly. I don't want him to know where I got it, although I'm sure he already does. This is Jude after all. "Now, teach me to shoot."

He pulls back the top of the gun, and a bullet clicks into the chamber. He watches me carefully, his elbows resting casually on the desk. Finally, he leans back in his chair, taking a pack of cigarettes from a drawer. He places one to his lips and holds a lighter to it as he inhales. The lighter snaps shut, and he exhales a thick cloud of smoke, his eyes meeting mine once again.

"Okay." He stands up, his enormous frame unfolding from the leather chair. He tucks the gun into the back of his jeans and moves around the desk. There's a cabinet on the far wall, and he walks over to it, opening it, and pulling out several boxes. He puts them on the desk in front of me. The top one is open, the shiny bullets inside glinting in the dim afternoon light. There must be hundreds of bullets there.

"You do know I want to shoot, not start a war?" I mumble.

He cocks an eyebrow, a small smile pulling at one side of his lips. "Yeah, I know. I figure it'll take this many for you to learn to hit the fucking target."

I narrow my eyes at him. "You're an asshole," I grumble. He walks out of the office, his deep laughter rumbling down the hall.

"You do know which end to point away from you, right?"

I scowl at him. "I might forget to point it away from you in a minute," I say whilst trying not to smile.

He chuckles as he pushes open the screen door to the porch. We walk to the tree line, and he stops behind me, pointing at a target on a tree, the messy paint faded and old. "Raise the gun up."

I hold the gun out in front of me, one foot spaced behind the other.

"Good." Jude's hand glides down my arm, his fingers gently holding my elbows to keep my arms up. He mimics my stance, his body lining up with mine. The heat from his chest presses against my back, his even breaths blowing in my hair as his massive frame towers over mine. He lowers his lips to my ear. "Now, don't tense your arms too much. Let the gun kick back. Don't fight it." He waits for me to relax my grip on the gun. "Okay, close one eye and stare down the barrel. You need to line up the sight here with the target." I do as he says, focusing in on the tiny raised notch on the top of the gun.

"Now." He reaches forward and flips the safety off. "Breathe in and out, and on the pause between breaths gently squeeze the trigger and let your elbows absorb the impact."



He moves away from me, and I take even breaths. I focus on the target in front of me. I squeeze, and the gun explodes in my hand, raw power contained in my grasp. My heart races and my ears ring from the deafening bang. The last and only time I shot a gun, I did it because I had to. I did it to protect Caleb, and it terrified me. Now though, now I feel powerful, I feel a surge of energy pulse through me as adrenaline courses through my veins. This is power right here, life and death.

Jude brushes my arm, and I glance over my shoulder at him. "Good. You're a natural." I've always been good at pretty much anything I set my mind to but being good at this suddenly feels so crucially important.

We work for what seems like hours, shooting round after round. We shoot until I feel like I can't hold my arms up anymore, and my hand shakes from all the adrenaline. Jude cups my cheek, staring into my eyes with a small smile on his lips. "Well, hell, we still have another box left. Who knew my girl could fucking shoot?" His eyes move to my mouth, and I can see the desire flash through them. It doesn't scare me now. Jude is and always has been, my exception. His touch should make me nervous, but instead it makes me feel safe. His lust should make me want to run, but it makes me feel loved, wanted.

I reach up on tiptoes and place my lips to his. He bends down and grasps my thighs, lifting me as I wrap my legs around his waist. One hand cups the back of my head as his lips move against mine, soft, but unforgiving. I cling to his broad shoulders and his arms wrap tightly around my waist, crushing me to his body.

"I'm proud of you," he whispers against my lips. "And not just for being a good shot." He releases me, and I slide down his body until my feet touch the ground. His fingers remain

tangled in my hair, keeping me close. "You are fucking strong, Tor. You're a survivor."

I don't know what to say to him, so I say the first thing that comes to mind. "I love you," I whisper.

His lips slam over mine, uncontrolled, unhindered. One second I'm standing, the next, my back hits the ground, his hand protecting the back of my head. Empty casings litter the floor beneath us, clinking against each other. His hand strokes over my jaw and down my throat, his lips softening slightly. His fingers move to the hem of my shirt and trace up my sides, taking the material with them. His lips skim down my throat to my chest. I can feel his restraint in his gentle touches, which are almost reverent. His mouth moves lower, his fingers pushing my top up. I freeze, and he feels it. I don't want him to know about the baby, and it's at the point now where he just might notice. I need revenge more than anything else. Revenge is all that matters right now. Everything else can come later. He needs to remain focused, and I still need time to work out what I'm going to do. At this stage, I can't think past finding Joe.

Jude's eyes flick up to meet mine. "You want me to stop?" he asks.

My chest squeezes, and I feel horrible. I pull my top down and sit up. He rears back, giving me room. I press a hand flush to his chest and feel his heart beating quickly beneath the solid muscle. I stare up into his eyes. They're such a deep shade of green; they sometimes look black.

"Just..." I pause. "Just, not here." I offer him a small smile. He's done nothing wrong, and I feel bad keeping this from him, but I act out of love. I keep it from him because with Joe out there, I honestly don't know what the future holds for us right now. I don't even know what the future holds for me. I have moments of clarity, moments of strength, but every day seems like a battle to keep the demons at bay. I feel like there are two versions of me, and

they are being torn apart. One part of me wants to fight, wants to live and love Jude, and scrape whatever happiness we can from the shattered remains of our lives. But the other part, the part that wakes up screaming every night, the part that is irreparably damaged struggles to comprehend a 'normal' life. It's a tough battle to fight. Both sides have something in common though, they both want blood and death, both want revenge in a way that is all consuming. I know Jude will find out about the baby eventually. I have maybe another two weeks before I won't be able to hide it from him anymore, and if he touches my stomach... sooner, *much* sooner.

He studies me, his eyes narrowed. I look away because he's too perceptive, and I'm terrified that he'll see my deception. I feel his fingers brush my neck.

"It's okay, doll." His voice is soft yet deep, like a soothing baseline to my anxious state.

He helps me to stand, taking my hand in his as he leads me back toward the cabin.

I just need him to find Joe; nothing matters beyond that.

# Chapter 14

## Jude

"I can't find him..." David sighs into the phone. I know he's waiting for me to blow up over this. The fact that no one can figure out where that bastard is pisses me the fuck off, but Tor's asleep and I don't want to wake her. I grit my teeth, reining myself in. I lean my forearm against the window pane, clenching my fist as I stare out at the thick storm clouds rolling in. It's been fucking weeks. I'm just ready to get this over with and move on with my life. I want to feel like she's safe.

"But," he continues. "I found a guy. Joe calls him once a day to 'check in on things'."

I inhale. "I'm tired of fucking dealing with people other than him. I want fucking Joe!" I growl.

At the mention of his name, Tor whimpers in her sleep. I walk to the side of the bed and stroke her arm in an attempt to soothe her.

"I know, but I think this guy—if you play him right, can get you to Joe," David assures me.

My mind jumps back to all the shit I did trying to get to Tor, and for a moment, I grow paranoid. "What about the cops? They aren't onto me, huh?"

"Nah. As far as they're concerned you're fucking dead. Blew up in the house."

"Good." I nod to myself. "Keep it that fucking way."

"Joe's gotten messy, he'll get locked up soon enough." David falls silent, and I can tell he's hesitating. "Look, you wanna get to him, you're gonna have to set this up. You can't just go in there and kill this guy, that place is full of Joe's guys. You've gotta be smart, JP."

"Well, no shit. I'm not a fucking idiot..."

"You haven't exactly been the most logical person lately. I mean hell, you lost your shit on me, I'm just saying. You're gonna have to get him alone. Really fucking alone. Okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. I got it."

I hear the rustle of papers. "This guy's name's Mussa, big Italian guy. Found out Joe owns this little hole in the wall bar, it's basically just a front for the prostitutes he runs out of it." I can hear him tapping his fingers over something as he inhales deeply. "You're gonna need to use a woman."

"Fuck no." I shake my head. "I'm not using a damn woman!"

"You want Joe? Look, I've been watching this guy and trust me, the only way you can get to him is with a whore. I can just tell one of the prostitutes I arrest that the charges will be dropped if she does us a favor."

I can't think straight at the moment. I don't want to fuck around with anyone else, much less a fucking prostitute. I just want to get this guy and get to Joe so Tor and I can get the hell out of here.

"I'm not trusting a damn stranger to do shit for me."

"You don't have much of a choice. That place is crawling with guys, you breathe the wrong way, you're gonna get shot."

Shaking my head, I groan. "I'll call you tomorrow." I toss the phone onto the bed, dragging my hands down my face. This is fucking hell I'm living in right now. Fucking hell!

# Chapter 15

## Victoria

I roll over when I hear Jude finish his conversation. I overheard David on the other end. They're getting closer.

"Who was that?" I ask, even though I already know.

Jude glances at me and presses his lips together.

"David," he replies gruffly.

"And he knows where Joe is?" His eyes meet mine, a warning in those endless green depths. I ignore it. "Well?"

He takes a deep breath. "No, he doesn't know where Joe is, but he knows where one of his guys is. I just gotta go and get him."

I frown. "You're supposed to be dead," I whisper.

If he goes after Joe's guys, then they'll know he's not dead, and all this running and hiding will have been for nothing. I know this is a strategic game, and so would Jude normally, but since Caleb... since Caleb his judgement has been off. I can't trust him to be fully rational any more.

"No one's gonna know who the hell I am in this state."

"Joe knows who you are!" I grit my teeth.

Jude presses his lips together and raises an eyebrow at me. "And he'll be fucking dead before he can tell anybody."

I shake my head and get off the bed, moving toward the door. I throw it open and walk along the hallway. "Marney!"

Jude stalks after me. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Marney!" I call again as I descend the stairs.

Marney appears in the doorway of the kitchen, cigarette in hand. "What you yelling for, sweetheart?"

"He has a lead for one of Joe's guys, and he's determined to go in there all guns fucking blazing, like the Neanderthal he's apparently become." Pointing at Jude, I say, "Tell him it's stupid!"

Jude swats his hand through the air. "Fuck. I never said that. She gets half the fucking story, and just goes off pitching a fucking fit." He redirects his attention to me, his eyes flashing dangerously.

"You're going to get yourself killed!" I shout.

Marney puffs his cigarette, his eyes narrowing on the two of us. "You lovebirds sure do quarrel like a pack of mangy dogs," he chuckles, gripping the cigarette between his lips as he hoists his trousers back around his waist. "Jude's a sick bastard, fighting with him like this is probably about as good as popping in a porno. Angry women are the best kind of foreplay known to man." He's smiling so big right now his eyes are gleaming.

"You," I scowl at Marney. "... are gross. And you..." I look at Jude. "... need to come up with another plan."

"Who the hell are you to tell me I need a new fucking plan? A fucking doctor turned mafia? Fuck me, Tor. I know what the hell I'm doing!"

His muscles bunch and release. Everything about Jude screams dangerous, and I'm not so in love with him that I can't see that. He doesn't scare me, he would never hurt me, but I certainly have a healthy dose of respect for that side of

his nature. However, he's not thinking straight right now. He's not being smart.

"Now, now, now," Marney steps toward us. He reaches into his pocket, pulls out a cigarette, and hands it to Jude. "Here fucking smoke a cigarette and calm your ass down, boy."

Jude slaps the cigarette out of his hand and turns to head back to the room. "I don't need any-fucking-body telling me how to do shit," he shouts before closing the door.

"Such a fucking child!" I scream after him, and yes, I'm aware of the irony.

Marney just keeps puffing on his cigarette, a small smile on his lips. "Well, that went well... for it being Jude and all."

Sighing, I walk in the direction Jude stormed off in. The thing driving me right now is fear. Jude is all I have left, and my need to kill Joe is warring against my need for him.

I push the door to the front room open and find Jude sitting on the sofa, leaned over a laptop on the coffee table. "What?" he growls without even looking up at me.

I linger near the door, unsure of what to say to him. I fiddle with the sleeve of his hoodie I'm wearing. After a moment of silence Jude slowly glances at me. His eyes skirt over me, watching me closely. "Tor... come here," he sighs, his voice a low rumble.

I move until I'm standing in front of him. His fingers wrap around my thighs, pulling me onto his lap so I'm straddling him. His big hands cup my face, his touch gentle and completely at odds with everything that is Jude.

"You *don't* fucking tell me what to do." He arches one eyebrow. "I *know* what I'm doing." His touch is soft, but his voice is guttural, his words meant to dominate.

I lift my hands and wrap my fingers around his wrists. "I know, but it's just us now. If you get killed... I can't..." My



voice trails off.

Except it's not just us. I feel like I should tell him. *I mean, now would be a good time right? Fuck.* I want to. My mind is screaming at me to do it, but I just... I can't. I'm not ready.

His eyes bore into me. "I'm not gonna get killed."

"Jude!" I want to slap him. "You are not bloody indestructible, and Joe—he hates you." I shake my head.

"There are no lengths he will not go to."

He smiles sympathetically at me. "I'm not gonna leave you. I know what I'm doing. Trust me." He stares at me briefly before his hands drop from my face. "Joe isn't gonna be there. It's his version of Marney I'm going after, and I'm not even really going after him, more like waiting in a room until he's brought to me."

"By who, Marney? You think they don't know what—"

"No. David's getting a girl to lure him up to a room." Jude grins, seemingly pleased with this plot. "See, I won't get killed."

His phone beeps in his pocket, and he pulls it out, glancing at the screen. A scowl mars his features, his lips pressing together as he clenches his jaw. He swipes the screen, before throwing the phone down on the coffee table hard enough to leave a small dent in the wood. I frown at him, and he shakes his head, dragging his hand down his face.

"Let me help," I say, pulling his attention back to the conversation. "You can't go in there, but I can."

His eyes dart to the floor. "Hell no!" His jaw clenches. "You're worried about me, and you expect me to let you go in there. Fuck no!"

"You need a girl, and not some random one whose loyalties you can't trust. My hair's blonde now. He won't know what I look like." This suddenly feels vital, something I need to do. I've waited in this house, protected and wrapped

in cotton wool for weeks. I'm itching to do something, to feel like I'm getting closer to Joe.

"No." He shakes his head.

I glare at him. "So what? You're going to use a hooker?"

"Yes, I'm going to use a fucking hooker, because if she gets killed I don't give a shit."

"So, let me get this right, you're going to use a hooker to lure a man who runs an entire fucking brothel of hookers?"

I smirk.

His jaw clenches as his eyes harden. "Yeah."

I sigh. "You're a man, Jude." He cocks an eyebrow, and I want to roll my eyes. "Tell me what draws you to me?" I put just a touch of sex into my voice, tracing a finger across his jaw.

He swats my hand away from his face. "For fucks sake, Tor. Really?"

I nod my head, biting my lip. "Yes. I'm proving a point, so tell me, what is it about me that made you want to fuck me?" I press my body against his and I feel his crotch hardening against me. He's too fucking easy.

He bites down on his bottom lip and groans as he strokes my hair. "This isn't fair. You know that, right?" A small smirk tears at his lips.

"Say it." I brush my lips across his, teasing him.

"Because every fucking thing about you is wrong, that's why."

I cock an eyebrow at him. "Lies. You wanted me because I was innocent. Something pure that you wanted to corrupt."

He smiles as his fingers tighten in my hair. "And there was that... and fuck did I enjoy corrupting you." His lips press against mine, his free hand grips my hip and pulls me tighter against him.

"Mmm-hmm," I hum against his mouth. "And hookers are already corrupt. Where's the fun in that?"

He fists my hair, jerking it to the side to glare at me as he raises both his brows. "No!"

I hiss as his hold becomes almost painful. "Stop thinking with your heart, Jude. You know I'm right."

He immediately rises from the couch, dropping me onto it. He drags his hands through his hair. "I'm *not* letting you do it." He shakes his head. "Fuck no!"

I sigh with exasperation. "A man like that, I can lure out easily, and then you can do your crazy torture, maim, kill thing."

His eyes dart up to me. "It's not worth it to me, Tor."

"It's worth it to me," I say quietly. "He won't know who I am. I'll be nothing more than a fuck to him. He's not going to kill me."

He sighs, sitting next to me on the couch. I can tell he's contemplating it at least.

I lean forward and grab his face, pressing my lips to his. His strong fingers wind into my hair, holding me to him.

"I can do this." I breathe against his lips. "Please, let me do this."

"Tor..."

"He doesn't know who I am, just a girl who looks a little too classy to be in a brothel. He can have whores whenever he wants. This is our best chance, and you know it." I press on. Honestly, if he lets me do this, it will be a miracle.

He rests his elbows on his knees, folding his hands and cupping his face in his palms as he stares down at the floor. "If I let you do this, you will follow my instructions to a fucking T. Do you hear me?"

I nod, a small smile pulling at my lips.



The car idles at the curb. I glance at the front of the bar that looks exactly that, a bar, not the seedy brothel that it really is.

"Marney will be parked on the corner. He's gonna watch you when you come out, and I'll be waiting in the hotel room. You take too long, and I'm doing this my way." Jude drags his hands down his face. His movements are anxious and agitated as he opens the centre console and grabs a gun, handing it to me. "Put this in your fucking purse. If he looks at you the wrong damn way just fucking shoot him." He cocks an eyebrow at me. "I'm not kidding, Tor."

I roll my eyes. "Jude, we have been backwards and forwards over this. If I think I'm in danger, I'll get out."

He sighs heavily, the muscles in his shoulders rigid tense. He grabs my face roughly and slams his lips over mine. "I have a right mind not to let you do this. I swear to fucking God if anything happens to you..."

"You worry too much," I smirk and press a quick kiss to his lips, before shoving the car door open and hopping out. I can practically feel Jude's eyes burning a hole in my back as I make my way to the front of the bar.

I approach the door cautiously. The bouncer holds his hand out for my ID whilst his eyes slowly drag over my body; it's a move meant to make me feel uncomfortable. It doesn't. I cock an eyebrow at him, as I place the fake driver's license in his palm, being careful not to touch him. He glances down at it briefly and hands it back, a smirk on his face. As soon as he steps aside, I move past him.

I become who I need to be to get the job done. My hips sway just a little more as I move into the busy bar. Jude said the guy I'm looking for will have eyes on the bar, that he will

see me, even if I don't see him. All I need to do is get noticed. To get noticed, I need to own him without even laying eyes on him. Easier said than done.

I move toward the bar and place my bag on it. I order a glass of wine and take a seat on one of the stools, watching. The place is an average upmarket bar. The walls are a gunmetal grey, with chandeliers hanging from the ceilings and big silver mirrors on the walls. Behind the bar is a wall of bottles, all uplit from underneath. It's modern, but caters to the average Joe. Dance music pulses through the speakers, making the place too loud for civil conversation.

This may look like a normal club. But I know it's just a front for the brothel in the back. A lot of the men who come here, come for a reason, a clear purpose in mind. In my periphery, I notice a guy watching me, eyeing the length of my exposed legs. I wait, ignoring him. Eventually he approaches me, a cocky smile on his face.

"Hey, beautiful."

I swing my gaze to him and cock an eyebrow wordlessly. His smile slips slightly, but he isn't deterred. He leans into me so that he can be heard over the music. "How much?" He asks.

Bingo. Just like Jude said.

I smirk. "Sorry, sweetheart. I'm waiting for someone." I add a slight twang to my accent, probably sounding more Australian than anything, but as long as I don't sound blatantly British... There aren't too many British girls wandering around here, and I don't want to draw unwanted attention.

"Oh, um... I... sorry," he stumbles. He trails off and slips away from me, merging back into the crowd.

I wait. Another half hour passes. I drink my wine slowly and order another, simply to avoid looking strange. I barely touch it.

I'm starting to think he's not here when I spot him across the room talking to a woman in a skirt so short it barely covers her arse. Julio Mussa is an attractive man, probably in his forties. He's massive, easily as tall as Jude, but where Jude is lean, honed muscle, this guy is just bulk. He appears the image of civilised charm, but I know better. I watch him for a few minutes, and then direct my attention elsewhere. When I look up again, his eyes are fixed on me, curiosity evident on his face. I hold his gaze for three seconds, a small smirk pulling at my lips, and then I glance away, sipping from my wine glass absentmindedly. A few seconds later and a large figure leans against the bar next to me.

"You're not a whore," the slightly accented voice comments.

I glance sideways at him. "Not yet, no."

Up close, he's handsome, his features distinguished, but it's there in his eyes, the depravity that lies within him. His eyes are like a warning to anyone who cares to look close enough.

His gaze narrows as he steps closer to me, so close I can smell his strong aftershave. "Yet?" He purrs, his lips twisting into a smile. His eyes trail over my body, making me feel dirty.

I shrug, smiling back at him. "A girl's got to work, right?"

"You know who I am?" he raises his eyebrow.

"What is it they say? Do your research before applying for a job. I did my research, Mr. Mussa." My voice projects confidence, but the expression on his face is suspicious, as though he shouldn't be researchable, as though he's untouchable. "A friend of mine heard one of your girls talking."

He purses his lips. "I see."

I take a deep breath. "I need a job, now are you going to give me one, or are we going to chit-chat all night? I have places I could be."

His lips twitch into a smile as his eyes skate over my body. "You're not the usual type." He touches his index finger to his bottom lip.

I shrug. "No. I'm not."

"Bold," he laughs. "I like it. Well, I think we could both make money out of this. Fifty-fifty split, you only work for me. I find out you've been working for someone else, and we're going to have a problem." His voice lowers, the threat thinly veiled.

A wide grin spreads across his lips, and he leans into me, trailing his fingers across the top of my breast. I grit my teeth and try to stop the shiver that threatens to overtake my body. "Now, I need to interview you."

My stomach twists at his words, but I fix a smile on my face. "Well, lead the way." I hope to God Jude is right about this, and Mussa does actually go to that hotel room instead of taking me off to some lair, or trying to fuck me in one of the brothel rooms. The thought makes me sick for more than one reason.

He places his hand low on my back, and it takes everything in me not to flinch away from his touch. My natural instinct is to shove my knee between his legs and run like hell. My body fights against me as it threatens to bolt. I grip my bag tighter trying to stop my shaking hands. Joe has conditioned me to fear any type of male contact. The only touch I can handle is Jude's.

Mussa walks behind me, guiding me down the road, through the crowds of people gathered on the pavement, drunkenly commuting between clubs and bars.

"Mmm, I have to say, you're a very nice surprise this evening," he purrs. I don't look at him.

"Well, I'm glad I could brighten up your evening." I see the hotel as we turn the corner but pretend I don't know where I'm going, waiting for him to lead.

He moves his hand from my back and walks in front of me across the road. I release the breath I've been holding ever since he placed his hand on me.

My eyes skate across the parked cars outside the hotel entrance, until they land on a black SUV with smoke streaming from a gap in the window. Marney nods once at me, his expression as serious as I've ever seen it. I smile at him and continue to follow Mussa.

The girl at the reception desk waves at him, but says nothing else; she doesn't even spare me a glance. The ride in the lift is tense. I feel like I'm on a timer, about to blow at any minute. This guy creeps me out. The way his eyes practically fuck me is nothing short of disgusting. I'm anxious to get to the room because I know Jude will be waiting. I've come to crave his presence, and it's something I'm not entirely comfortable with.

Mussa stops outside one of the doors, his eyes flicking to my lips. For a second I think he's going to kiss me, and I freeze. He smiles slowly. "You're a pretty little thing," he says. "I bet you got a pretty little pussy, don't you?"

I think I'm going to throw up.



# Chapter 16

## Jude

My back presses hard against the wall, and I feel sweat trickle between my shoulder blades. It's hot as fuck in here, and my heart is slamming around like a fucking beast inside my chest. This is taking too damn long. I can't believe I let her talk me into this. I don't like that my eyes aren't on her. The handle of the gun slips in my damp palm. *Fuck this shit!* I push away from the wall, and then, I hear footsteps down the hall, followed by Tor's laugh.

"You're a pretty little thing," the man says, a hint of Italian accent in his tone. "I bet you have a pretty little pussy, don't you?"

I force the growl down my throat, my fingers tightening around the gun. Shadows block the light streaming underneath the door and the lock clicks. I hold my breath as the door slowly pushes open, and stops an inch in front of my face.

"Leave the lights off," Tor coos. Her heels tap over the floor, and she leans against the door as she closes it. Mussa's attention is so focused on her he hasn't even noticed me in the shadows.

The glow from the city outside casts enough light through the window that I can see her as she approaches him, each step deliberate, her hips swaying from side to

side. The white summer dress she's wearing is barely covering her fucking ass, leaving her long legs exposed. I can hardly make out her face, but can see a small smile playing over her lips. I know that look. It's one that could bring any man to his fucking knees for her. When she stops in front of him, his eyes drop to her cleavage.

"I can't wait to fuck you, sweetheart."

Heat radiates from me. I'll kill him right now. *Fuck*. I stop myself. This man is my last link to Joe. I can't fucking kill him yet. My chest is tight as hell, my pulse going ninety to nothing. I won't deny that I'm having a hard time standing here, letting this fucker think he can have her.

Tor bends over and slowly glides her hand along the material of her dress. He groans in approval, and I swallow. She slips her fingers underneath the hem, seductively inching the dress up her thigh. I have to grit my teeth. I'm about three fucking seconds away from losing my shit. If he sees any more of her skin, I'm going to cut his fucking eyes out.

She playfully bites her bottom lip as she trails her fingertips up the inside of her thigh. Mussa's gaze follows her every move. A disgusting moan slips from him the second she lifts the dress enough to reveal the lace top of her garter. I clench my fist, my index finger twitching on the trigger of the gun. I want to shoot him just for looking at her like that, stupid motherfucker. She leans toward him and places her lips too fucking close to his. He's completely fixated on her, basically salivating over her. I can't take much more of this. Tor needs to get on with it before my temper gets the better of me. Her hand skims further up her thigh, and she pulls a small knife from her garter so quickly he never suspects a damn thing. Before he can react, the pointed tip of the blade is pressed to his throat. *Fuck, Tor. What the hell are you*

*doing?* Mussa's eyes go wide, and a smile slinks onto her lips.

His hand creeps toward the gun tucked in the waist of his jeans, and I step out from the dark corner, aiming the gun as I quickly approach him. "I wouldn't if I were you," I say in a calm, even tone.

Mussa's attention turns toward me, and the knife scratches across his throat. I snatch the gun from his pants, cocking it and aiming both weapons at his face. He raises his hands in front of him and freezes. "There must be some misunderstanding here," he says.

"No, no misunderstanding." I press the gun to his temple. "Where the fuck is Joe?"

He arches a brow, one side of his lips quirking up. "JP?" he laughs. "Well, what a fucking surprise."

"Where is he? Tell me, or I'll kill you."

"Fuck you." He grits his teeth. "And fuck your whore."

I hand one of the guns to Tor, and when I do, the fucking bastard swings at me, but misses. I wrap my arm around his throat. He throws his body weight around in an attempt to loosen my hold as I struggle to drag him to the side of the room. This bastard's fucking massive, and I'm finding it a little harder to subdue him than I'm used to.

"You're gonna fucking tell me where that worthless motherfucker is." My voice strains as I struggle against him. "You will die tonight! Whether I make it quick or drag it the fuck out, well, that's up to you."

I force him down into a chair, and as discussed, Tor grabs the zip ties and rope from the bag set behind the door. The man's big, and I will give it to him, he is fighting hard, but with the amount of rage driving me, fucking King-Kong wouldn't stand a chance against me at this point. I press my thumb into the indentation between his collar-bone and he coughs.

"Be still," I grunt as I fight to restrain him.

Tor binds his hands and feet. The entire time Mussa is thrashing around.

"Fucking..." I raise the gun, aiming at his knee cap. A small pop sounds through the silencer when I pull the trigger.

"Stop moving," I say.

Tossing his head back, he screams bloody murder.

"Ew, Jude," Tor whines. I glance at her, and there's blood spatter across her chest. The ends of her blonde hair are stained red. "You couldn't have waited until I moved?" she asks.

I'm not sure if I should be worried that she doesn't give two shits that I just shot this guy or not, but it makes me grin a little. "Don't start with me, woman." I wipe the sweat from my brow and glare at her.

She ignores me and picks up a discarded piece of clothing from the floor. She grabs the back of Mussa's head, shoving the material into his mouth to muffle his cries. "Shut. The fuck. Up!" she says, rolling her eyes.

I'm out of breath from struggling against him, my chest heaving rapidly. My eyes rake over his body. This bastard thought he was going to fuck her, and that does not set well with me at all. I slam my fist over his face. It's been so long since I've beat someone, and all the rage I've been harboring toward Joe seeps to the surface. Damn, does it feel fucking good to beat the fuck out of him. I keep punching Mussa until I feel my knuckles split open, and I stop to catch my breath.

I snatch his jaw, jerking his face to mine as I yank the gag from his mouth. "Where the fuck is Joe?"

He laughs, blood bubbling at his lips. "Fuck you." His thick accent makes that comment seem all the more demeaning. I grab his chin, twisting his jaw and shoving the gag back in. I swing my fist back and punch him in the gut. He tries to double over, but the restraints stop him.

"This is going to take all bloody night at this rate," Tor grumbles, sighing impatiently.

I glare at her. "I can go all fucking night." I raise my bloodied fist up and hit him once more, feeling the bones of his cheek crush beneath the force.

"Well, the longer this takes, the more likelihood there is of someone missing him. He doesn't strike me as more than a ten minute kind of guy." She smirks.

"You *cannot* be serious? Fuck, woman. Just... stay over there, would you?" I point to the corner of the room. I'm about to go back at him, and she starts in again.

"Well, *hurry* the fuck up with it!"

I stalk over to her, snatching the knife from her hand. "Hurry the fuck up with it then," I mock her under my breath. Shit this woman knows how to grate my damn nerves sometimes.

I drop my hand and turn as I wipe the blood down my shirt. "You want to find Joe, or not? You can't hurry fucking torture." I yank the material out of Mussa's mouth again and grab his chin, pressing the tip of the blade to his throat. I set my eyes on his in a cold stare. "Tell me where he is."

He laughs, his teeth gritted in pain. I shove the old t-shirt back between his lips and throw another three punches at him until his face is a bloody mess.

"He's going to bleed out," Tor says in a bored voice. I glance up, sweat dripping down my temples, and find her sitting on the bed, inspecting her bright red nails.

Groaning, I tilt my head back to look at the ceiling. *This fucking woman...* "Real helpful there."

"Let me try."

I can't help but laugh in disbelief. "Let you..." I drag my hand down my face and glance back at the guy drifting in

and out of consciousness. "Let you *try*? Jesus Christ, who the hell are you?"

She flips me off before pushing in front of me, standing between me and Mussa.

"You're gonna get blood on you..." I snicker.

She narrows her gaze on me before swinging a leg over his lap and fucking straddling him.

"Since when is a goddamn lap dance torture?" I growl, grabbing her shoulder and trying to pull her away from him.

Her head whips to the side, and she shoots a glare at me daring me to touch her again. "Go brood in the corner or something," she says as she lifts a brow at me. *Fuck me is she walking a fine fucking line.*

All I can do is stare at her, wondering what in the hell crazy-ass demon possessed her. I'm almost ready to tie her the fuck up so I can get this shit over with, but as sick and twisted as it is, I feel like she needs this. She's just as angry as I am, and she needs to get that out.

"Mussa, you know we don't want to hurt you, right?" she purrs, her voice seductive as she removes his gag. "We just want Joe. Give us Joe and we'll let you go." She leans into him, stroking her fingers over his face, provoking him.

He laughs, pulling against his restraints until he's centimeters from her face. "I know who you fucking are, bitch! I'm almost jealous Joe got to fuck that pussy."

"That's it!" I shout and stomp toward them. I slam my fist against the side of his face. "I'll fucking kill you!" I grab his throat and squeeze as tight as I can manage. Tor places a hand on my arm and shakes her head, signaling for me to move away. I release him, and he gasps for air. I hesitantly walk to the side of the room, fuming over this entire fucking ordeal.

"I tried to be nice to you, I really did," she says. "Remember that."

I cross my arms over my chest and watch as she slides off his lap and squats in front of him. The next thing I know, he's screaming and wailing like he's fucking dying. Tor backs away just enough that I can see the knife, still in her hand, is planted in his crotch. I taste vomit hit the back of my throat, and instinctively cup my balls. When she releases the knife, it stays put.

"Holy fuck, woman! Did you just nail his nuts to the chair?" A large red stain bleeds from the crotch of his jeans and spreads down his thighs. "I may cut fuckers tongues out, but even I have a fucking line..."

She glances over her shoulder at me, and she's fucking *smiling*! "We need him to talk." She turns back to him. "Now, where is Joe?" she asks in that prissy accent of hers.

"I..." he stammers, his face washing white like he's going to pass out any second.

"Mussa, right now, your testicles are impaled on this knife, and as unpleasant as that is, you do still have them. However, I'm not a patient person. So, if you'd like to keep them..." She grabs his hair, yanking his head back as she inches her face toward his. "I suggest you fucking tell me where he is."

He doesn't say a word. His lips tremble, sweat beads on his forehead.

"Tell. Me," she demands and exerts some pressure on the handle of the knife.

He howls and blows deep breaths from his lips trying to manage the pain. Tor jerks the blade up, then slams it down between his legs again. He lets out a blood curdling scream. *Fuck, someone is going to hear this shit.*

"Pretty sure you lost one that time," she says, her face completely expressionless. "Tell me, Mussa." She leans

forward until her lips are at his ear. "Joe took something from me, and I just want to return the favour..." She yanks the knife out of the chair, her body tensing as she uses most of her weight to free it from the wood. Her gaze is locked on the tattered, bloody material of his jeans. "Have you heard the saying, 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned'?" she whispers as she twists the blood covered blade between her fingers. "I am fucking scorned, Mussa, and I will kill you without a second thought if you stand in my way." She rises, looming over him. "Your choice. I can castrate you before, or after I let Jude have you. Such a crying shame to think you may be buried as the dickless bastard you are."

Holy fucking shit, when did Tor become so fucking violent? The fucked up part is that it's making my damn dick hard.

She paces, her movements agitated like a cat that's about to stop toying with its prey and end it. And I see the exact moment she decides she's done. She takes a step toward him and brings the blade back, ready to strike and slit his throat.

"Tor!" I grab her wrist, and she snaps her head around. The expression on her face is devoid. She's about to kill him, and there's nothing there. On anyone else I wouldn't think twice about it but on her... it's fucking wrong. She's covered in blood, she's angry, she's fucking vicious, and *shit*, how much harder can my dick get over this? I bite down on my lip.

"Stop." I nod. "You gotta stop, doll."

"Please..." Mussa mumbles. "Please..."

A smile creeps over my mouth, and I squeeze Tor's shoulders. This right here makes me think she may be a bit crazy, but damn, she fucked him up. I step toward Mussa, pointing back at Tor. "I'll let her keep at you unless you tell me where to find Joe."



"He's out of the country," he manages his words through heavy breaths.

"Where?"

"I don't..." he chokes on a painful moan. "I don't know. He doesn't tell me things like that." Mussa's chin drops to his chest.

I wet my lips with my tongue as I lean into him. "Who does he tell then? Who knows everything about Joe?"

He hesitates.

"It can take an awfully long time to be beaten to death if the person dishing out the beating knows what they're doing, Mussa. Don't make this worse on yourself. Die with some fucking dignity. "

"Stan Solomon."

I reach into his coat pocket and take his cell phone. I scroll through his contacts. "Is he in here?"

He nods just as I find his name in the directory. "See, that wasn't so hard now was it?" I say as I place the gun to his temple and pull the trigger.

His body slumps to the side. Blood covers his legs, some of it spilling over the chair onto the carpet. The steady dripping noise and the rush of my own heavy breaths are the only sounds in the room.

I turn to look at Tor and find her sitting on the edge of the bed, wiping the bloodied knife off on the duvet. Her disheveled hair has red patches of blood streaked through it. I grab the bag set behind the door and unzip it. Pulling a hacksaw out, I glance over my shoulder at her. "You're probably not gonna want to watch this."

Her gaze drifts down to the saw and disgust crawls over her face. "Do I want to know what you are going to do with that?"

I stand, shrugging as I walk toward Mussa's lifeless body. "Start a fucking war."

Tor slowly steps toward the window, opening it to climb out.

"Just sit on the window sill. Don't go all the way out."

She nods, swings her legs over the ledge, and sits with her back to me.

I grab Mussa's thick hair and yank his head up as I place the blade to his throat, dragging it back and forth. There's little resistance as the serrated edge slices through his flesh, only requiring a bit more force when it reaches his windpipe, but when I hit his spine, the saw catches. Sweat drips down the ridge of my nose as I cut away, and I have to place my foot on his thigh to get the leverage I need in order to snap through the bone and cartilage. I hold the decapitated head up, blood dripping from the mangled flesh. Even for me, this is a little disgusting, but I will be fucking damned if Joe Campbell will ever think he can break me. I can't help but smile as I imagine the expression on his face when he hears that his right hand man's head has been delivered to one of his businesses. I toss the saw down, cram the head inside the bag, and zip it up. I use the sheets to wipe the blood from my hands before I pull my phone out to call Marney.

It barely rings. "Yep?"

"Get those fucking cleaners in here to get rid of this shit."

"They're on their way. Leave the window open so they can get in?"

I end the call, strap the bag over my chest and stand behind the window "Come on, doll," I say touching my hand to her shoulder.

She rises from the window ledge, smoothing out her white, blood stained dress. The two of us climb down the metal fire escape and quickly make our way through the alley. The black sedan is parked just down from the hotel, and we hurry through the dark before anyone catches sight

of us. I open the door and usher her in before I set the bag in the trunk. I've barely shut the door when I crank the engine.

The dim yellow haze from the streetlights flickers through the windshield as I drive off. When I stop at a red light, I glance over at her. She reaches over and turns the radio up, staring out the window as she hums along with the tune. There's blood on her cheek. I can't help but replay the feral look that overcame her when she had Mussa bleeding and helpless beneath her. It shouldn't, but just thinking about how she fucked him up has my cock hard as all hell. I drive until we're at a safe distance before I pull into an empty parking lot and shut off the engine.

She glances at me, her eyebrows pinching together in confusion. I unzip my pants and shove them down before I grab her and drag her across the center console, trapping her between my body and the steering wheel.

"You make me so fucking hard," I growl against her lips, skimming my fingers over the back of her neck and fisting her hair. I yank her head back, and she gasps. I trail my lips over her throat, inhaling her scent which is now tainted with the metallic smell of blood. It's fucked up that it turns me on, but goddamn, my dick's never been this fucking hard in my life.

"You were gonna slit his fucking throat," I breathe against her skin, yanking the straps of her dress down, exposing her breasts.

"Hmm," she hums, her breath hitching as my teeth skim her nipple.

"Weren't you? Fucking say it. You were gonna slit his fucking throat." I grip her jaw, pulling her face to mine. She cocks a brow, her sex filled gaze locking with mine.

"I would have slit his throat with a smile on my face," she whispers, rolling her hips against me.

I growl and wrap my fingers around her throat as I slam my lips down over hers. I'm not careful with her because the woman who just fucked up Mussa is not the broken woman of a few weeks ago. Tor may be broken, but she's evolved, she's dark and deadly, and sexy as fuck.

"I'm going to fuck you so damn hard," I say through gritted teeth, barely able to breathe as I grind my dick against her.

"Well hurry up with it then," she smiles like the fucking devil.

I shove her dress up, grab the sides of her underwear, and rip them off of her. I grip her hips with both hands and slam my cock into her.

"Fuck, Tor," I groan, as she clenches around me. A breathy moan slips from her lips and her nails rake across my shoulders.

I don't give her a chance to adjust. I hold her hips, grinding her against me. "Fuck me. I want you to fuck me," I growl as I force her up and down on me.

A small smile pulls at her lips as her chest rises unevenly. She teasingly rolls her hips against me, and I wrap my hand around the side of her neck, cupping her cheek with my palm. I brush her bottom lip with my thumb, and her eyes focus on mine as she grazes it with her teeth, daring me. I adjust my hold, gripping her jaw and bringing her face to mine. I kiss her, then bite her bottom lip.

"I said," I move my hands down to her hips and squeeze, "fuck me!" I force her to move, meeting every fucking thrust with my own, each harder than the last.

She throws her head back and moans my name. I lean forward, pinching her nipple as I bite down on her throat. Her hands fly to the back of my neck, her nails digging into my skin. She screams as she rides me harder, her pussy

rhythmically gripping me like a fucking vice, her fingernails scratching over my shoulders.

I dig my fingers into her ass and squeeze as I force myself inside her as deep as possible, fucking her hard from underneath. My muscles tense, my teeth clenching as I come inside her tight body. I throw my head back against the seat, my chest heaving as I try and catch my breath. "Goddamn, I love your pussy," I breathe.

A smile flickers on her lips as she sits up and brushes her tangled hair from her face. She scoots over into the passenger seat, pushing her dress back down. "Good."

I never have in my life met a woman quite like this one. And I fucking love it.

# Chapter 17

## Victoria

I wake up, and Jude's not in the bed. He's probably trying to reap hell on Joe. I stumble into the bathroom and wash my face. I step back from the mirror and lift my shirt up, staring at the small, but very defined bump that is my stomach. I don't know how much longer I can hide this. Fuck, I shouldn't be hiding it, but I just... I don't know how to tell him. I sigh and go back into the bedroom, slipping on a loose sundress before I head downstairs.

Marney is sitting at the breakfast bar, drinking his coffee and reading the paper.

"You told—"

"No." I cut him off as I make my way to the fridge. I open it and take out the carton of orange juice, pouring it into a glass. "You ask me the same thing every morning, Marney, I'll let you know..." I open the freezer and screech. I drop the carton of juice, and it splashes my legs. "Are you fucking serious?" There, in the freezer, is Mussa, his bloodied head sitting there like a fucking bust. Vomit rises in my throat, and I slam the freezer door shut, leaning my head against it.

Marney looks up as he folds the paper. "Well, hell, what do you need ice for? The damn orange juice is cold. I would've warned you if I'd known you'd be going in the freezer. Gotta keep them cold, or they start to smell," he chuckles.

Fucking crazy arse bastards! I cannot deal with this shit. It's seven thirty in the bloody morning!

"Jude!" I shout at the top of my lungs.

Marney's still laughing as Jude's heavy footsteps come down the hall. "What in the hell are you screaming about?"

I turn around, leaning back against the fridge. I press my hand against my stomach that is threatening to rebel. "Well, you know, I just go to get some ice and there's a fucking head in the freezer!"

"Oh, yeah." He smirks. "It's a present for Joe."

I bend over, bracing my hands on my knees as I take deep breaths. *It's a head.* "And it has to be stored next to the ice cream why?"

"Because, just like fucking ice cream it needs to stay cold to keep." Jude pushes me away from the freezer and opens the door. "What did you want, doll, some ice?" he asks like it's normal, everyday life to have a man's head in there. He grabs a handful of ice cubes and drops them into my glass. "There. There's your ice." He places a tender kiss on my forehead and walks off.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Maybe it's just me. Maybe I'm being irrational and hormonal. Maybe it's entirely unreasonable of me not to want a fucking head in the freezer. "Jude!" I shout after him. "Get rid of the head, before you find yourself sleeping on the fucking couch next to it!" I say through gritted teeth.

"Yeah, yeah. Marney have that courier pick it up this afternoon before the queen loses her fucking shit, would you?"

I chuck the orange juice down the sink and leave the room. When the hell did this become bloody normal?

# Chapter 18

## Jude

I flick the cigarette into the woods and hold the nicotine inside my lungs. "I've done my research, but I need you to make sure I've got the right girl. Sofia Solomon," I speak into the phone, smoke seeping from my lips, "make sure she's Stan's daughter, alright?"

He doesn't say anything. David's being too fucking quiet, and it's making me paranoid.

"You gonna help me with that, David?"

He draws in a hesitant breath. "Yeah. I'll see what I can do, but..."

"But what? What the fuck, David?"

"JP, this has all just gotten outta hand. There's only so much I can do, I mean, fuck, I'm a cop, not the FBI."

I clench my jaw and lean over the wooden railing of the porch. David's always helped me out of shit, I shouldn't be so agitated with him, but damn it, I can't help it. "I'm kinda fucking stuck here, David. Hell, I don't know if you remember, but I blew my damn house up. I'm limited on supplies here. After I get Joe, I'm gone. And you can live your life in fucking peace, but until I get him, I need your help."

He groans. "God, what are you gonna do with her, huh? Cause I tell you what, I draw my line if you're gonna hurt her. How old is she JP, do you even know that?"



"I found her Facebook profile. She's twenty-one. And, no, I'm not gonna hurt her. I just need him to *think* I will."

"Fine. I'll call you back." He hangs up. I know he's angry with me. I don't give a shit as long as he gets me the information.

I shove the phone into my back pocket and stare out over the ridge, and as I do, Caleb creeps into my thoughts. I try my damndest not to think about him because it bothers me so fucking much. It hurts, and I'm not used to that unsettling feeling. My mind sorts through the hazy memories of coming up to Marney's cabin with my dad as a kid. He taught me and Caleb how to shoot in these woods, just like I taught Tor...

*"Now, when you shoot someone, you can shoot to kill them, or you can shoot to make them vulnerable," Dad says, as he steadies my hands. "And what have I taught you boys about why you shoot someone?"*

*"To kill them," I respond.*

*"That's right because a dead man can't kill you."*

*"What happens if someone kills you, Daddy?" Caleb asks, and I spin around to glare at him. His brown eyes are full of tears. He's only seven, and he's scared of guns, but that's how old I was when Dad taught me to shoot. He has to learn. Dad has to know we can protect ourselves in case something ever happens to him. He's told me that countless times.*

*Dad glances down at him and scoops him up into his arms, placing him on his hip. "Oh, don't worry son, no one's gonna kill your pops. I'll be here for a long time, and if I'm ever not here to keep you safe, your brother will take care of you, won't you, Jude?"*

*I pull the trigger, watching as the bullet tears through the center ring of the bullseye. "Yep, I'll always take care of you, Caleb. Promise."*

I shut the memory down because I didn't. I didn't take care of him. My muscles tense and flex as I grip the edge of

the rail, trying to release some of the anger quickly flooding my body. I should have forced Caleb out of this lifestyle the day my father died because Caleb was too good of a person to be mixed up in this shit. He had a fucking heart. I don't. He always did.

I narrow my eyes on those woods, listening to my breaths as they grow deeper and angrier. I miss him, and every time I think about him the only thing I can see is the way he looked when I found him. All I can see is the bullet hole, and his vacant, milky eyes and grey skin. I can't even fucking have my memories because they're ruined. My pulse is hammering in my ears, my skin hot. Tension twists down my neck and across my shoulders. Drawing my hand back, I slam it into the rail, leaving divots from my knuckles in the soft wood.

I exhale as I turn and reach for the door and walk into the living room. Something on the stove is sizzling, and the rancid aroma of burnt tuna assaults my senses. I glance over and Marney's whistling, stirring something in the pan.

"God, Marney, what the hell are you fixin'?"

"Tuna melt," he says, hovering over the stove. "Want one?"

"Hell no."

"They came and got the head. Don't want her pitching another hissy fit," he chuckles.

I can't help but laugh a little. "Where is Tor?"

"Probably upstairs still sulking." He jumps back from the stove like he's burnt himself. "Shit. Damn grease," he says shaking his hand.

I shake my head and walk up the stairs. On my way to the bedroom, I hear the shower running, and push open the bathroom door. The room is full of steam, and I can just make out Tor's silhouette behind the glass door of the shower.

I stare at her shadow. I haven't seen her entirely undressed since before she left me. She won't take her shirt

off in front of me. Tor told me she doesn't want me to see her naked because of the brands. She's afraid I'll be disgusted... like anything about her could disgust me. To me, she's fucking perfect, no amount of scars will change that.

Her head is tilted back, her hands running through her hair as she washes it. She leans back farther into the stream of water which causes her back to bow. Just the thought of her completely naked and wet and pressed against my body is giving me a motherfucker of an erection. With her, I need to take control of the situation sometimes. I kick off my boots and jeans and grab the handle to the door.

Steam billows out as I step inside. And as soon as the door clicks shut, Tor freezes, keeping her face to the wall. My eyes immediately land on her back. The raised scars from where Joe branded her have reddened from the heat of the water. The longer I stare at them, the more my chest tightens. *That fucker will pay.* I swallow as I gather her wet hair and drop it over her shoulder.

She pulls in a breath. "Jude..."

"You're so fucking beautiful," I say before I place my lips to the top of her spine.

I tenderly kiss over the thick scars marking her back. I want her to know I don't fucking care. Every mark I kiss over causes my stomach to knot because I know it represents a day I didn't fucking get to her. He did this to punish me, not her, and it enrages me to the point I have to consciously calm my racing pulse. I trail a few more lingering kisses over her skin and trace my fingers down her arms before wrapping my arm around her waist. She tenses, her hand bracing the wall, and I hear her breathing hitch.

"Just let me touch you, Tor, please," I whisper against her skin as I skim my fingers along her sides. She's so thin that my fingers bump over each of her ribs as I make my way over her body. She hardly eats, and when she does, she throws it up half of the time. The stress of everything has really taken its toll on her. I brush my hand lower, slowly

making my way between her legs, and I stop, my hand resting on her tight stomach. *What the fuck?* There's a slight bump underneath my palms. I slide my hands back up toward her breast, and I feel ribs, then back down, and her stomach is rounded. I grab her shoulders, spinning her around to face me. Her eyes are closed, her lips pressed together like if she doesn't look at me she can hide from me. My eyes dart down to her stomach where a small bump protrudes between her hips. I watch the water trickle over it, and then force my eyes up to her face. She staring at the shower floor, and she's biting her lip.

"Tor?" She doesn't lift her eyes. I feel the blood pulsing through my temples, my fingers twitching and tightening ever so slightly on her arms. *Surely she's not. She would have told me.*

I wrap my fingers around her chin, lifting her gaze to mine. Her brows pull together, as guilt and fear wash over her face. "Are you..." I inhale. "Are you fucking *pregnant?*" My barely restrained voice echoes from the shower walls.

Her eyes stay locked on mine, but she remains silent, and I take that as confirmation.

"Tor?" I make an effort not to raise my voice. "You're pregnant? How long have you fucking known?"

She watches me, no emotion registering on her face. "A while."

"A whi—" I can't even fucking breathe right now. Heat flashes over me, and I push my body flush against her wet skin, pressing her against the shower wall. "A while?" I growl. "How *long* is a fucking while, Tor?"

Her eyes squeeze shut, and I feel her slick breast pushing against my chest with each deep breath she pulls in.

"Weeks..." she whispers.

*Is she fucking serious right now?* Releasing her from my hold, I drag my palms over my wet face. *Weeks!* I take several deep breaths. The water trickles over my nose as I stare at her. Bracing my forearms on the wall beside her

head, I inch my face into hers. "And just when were you gonna tell me, huh?"

"Eventually."

Fuck, I am so pissed right now. I want to punch something and fucking yell at her. I close my eyes again, pinching the bridge of my nose as I let the water pelt down on me.

"Eventually? Tor? Fuck." I groan.

I glance up at her, and all she does is stare at me nervously. *She's been running around with guns, fucking beating the shit out of people. Fuck me, she knew this and went in after Mussa. She didn't tell me because she knew I'd flip my shit and not let her do a damn thing. Fucking manipulative...* "You can't just do that. You can't just keep shit like that from me!" I shout. "Goddamn it, woman. Why the hell wouldn't you tell me that...?" Staring down at that bump, I stop mid-sentence, my stomach turns as a possibility I don't even want to fucking acknowledge creeps into my head. It may not even be mine! *Fuck!* If it's Joe's... I exhale and close my eyes. I want to ask her who the fuck's it is... but I can't bring myself to do it. I drop my chin to my chest, my palms groaning as they slide down the slick wall to my sides.

"Awe, fuck." I swallow, then turn and slam my fists into the wall, cracking the tile. She flinches away from me. She nervously wraps her arms around her body, and her wet hair falls over her face. It's as though she thinks she can make herself invisible.

"I'm sorry. I... fuck!" I reach out to touch her but stop. I have no fucking idea what to do.

Her brows drop into a frown, and she looks away from me, pressing her body tightly to the wall, trying to put as much space between us as possible.

My eyes hone in on her stomach. "Is it..." I swallow around the lump in my throat, "Is it his?"

Her shoulders tense, and there's an awkward moment of silence. All I can hear is my own pulse hammering in my ears. Her next words hold the potential to completely fucking destroy me.

"No," she whispers.

I release the breath I've been holding in, and with it some of the tension dissipates. Now what the fuck do I say to her? Did she fucking know this before she left me? Fucking hell! I've never wanted a fucking kid, never even been able to stand the idea of it, but the thought that she left me *because* she is pregnant, that fucking hurts.

I step toward her, gently cupping her cheek, turning her face to look at me. "Tor, is this why you left me?" As soon as the words leave my lips, I feel sick as shit. If she was pregnant when she left, that means she was pregnant with *my* child when Joe beat her and raped her, over and over.

Her eyes close and she shakes her head. "No. I didn't know."

What the fuck do I do? She's cowering in the corner like a dog that's been beat. I'm angry, I'm fucking worried. And this doesn't help a damn thing.

# Chapter 19

## Victoria

*Shit!* I don't know what to say to him. I'm not ready for him to know because I don't even know how I feel about it myself. Honestly, I never really thought about it until this point. I've been living in blissful denial. I thought I would have more time. More time to... figure this out. Now Jude knows, and he's angry. His enormous body towers over me, and even though I know he would never hurt me, he scares me. I can't help it. Whatever happens now, I'm out of options. There is no more figuring out what to do.

I just need space. I can't deal with this and Jude going apeshit at the same time. It's too much. I duck and make a break for the shower door.

He grabs hold of me and shakes his head. "Where are you going?"

"I can't do this with you right now," I whisper, my voice hitching.

He gives me a stern glare. "You can't fucking ignore this, you know?" He's angry, but beneath the anger I can see the hurt. The last thing I ever wanted was to hurt Jude.

My chest tightens. Why didn't I tell him? I'm so obsessed with my quest for revenge that I haven't even thought about afterwards. I've been living for one purpose—kill Joe Campbell. This... this was never part of the plan, but I should have trusted him with it.

"Fuck," he sighs. "You need to go to the fucking doctor."  
I shake my head. "No, I'm fine."

He pulls me closer to him, his grip hard enough to brook no argument. "I wasn't fucking asking," he grates, the muscles in his jaw tense.

I glare at him and rip my arm from his grip. "I don't need a doctor, and I'm not going to be bullied into going to see one," I snap.

"If it's my kid. It's half my fucking responsibility. You *will* go to the doctor, Tor."

"If?" I breathe the one word, such a small word that says a thousand more. He thinks it's Joe's.

His jaw twitches. "Yeah, Tor. If. As bad as that sounds, you can't fucking blame me for thinking it."

I feel sick. I shake my head, meeting his torn gaze. "No," I whisper. "I can't because it's exactly the same thing I thought when they told me." I swallow and look away. "And my only thought was that I would sooner cut it out myself and bleed out than have it."

His shoulders droop, that hardened exterior of his faltering. Dropping my arm, he drags his hands through his wet hair. "Fuck. I'm sorry." His hand brushes my cheek. "Shit, you're pregnant." He shakes his head before his eyebrows drop into a frown. "You're pregnant," he repeats. "Shit. You can't go running around with a gun and fucking killing people, woman. You can't do shit like that with a fucking kid in your stomach. It's not right."

I roll my eyes. "Because you know so much about pregnancy and what's right."

"I know what's right for you. From now on, you are gonna do what I tell you to. You're gonna eat, you're gonna sleep, and you're not fucking killing anyone."

I feel my anger levels rising to irrational levels. "Fuck you, Jude." Do what he tells me? Is he even serious? I go to step around him, and he throws a muscled arm out, blocking



my exit. Water cascades over his biceps, making the dark ink on his skin come to life.

"I mean it. This changes everything." He glares at me.

"This changes nothing. And don't you, of all people, dare fucking preach at me about killing people."

He narrows his gaze and arches an eyebrow. "Fuck, I should have known something was going on the way you lost your shit over the head in the freezer this morning! You can go ahead and rein those damn hormones of yours in!"

I want to scream. "It is not fucking unreasonable not to want a fucking head in the freezer!" I scream. And you want me cooped up and wrapped in cotton wool? You're going to get it, hormones and all. Just you wait." I narrow my eyes at him smugly.

He rolls his eyes. "Jesus fucking Christ! I can't handle this shit. Take your damn shower and go eat something."

"This is only the beginning," I say, smirking as I duck under his arm and leave the shower. I glance over my shoulder at his powerful frame, completely naked behind the glass.

"Oh, fucking threats now, huh? Real mature, Tor..."

"Preparation," I correct him. If he thinks he's going to control me for the next six months, he is sadly mistaken.

I take a towel from the back of the door before leaving the bathroom.

I towel dry my hair quickly, and pull on a tank top and shorts. I open the drawer and grab the nine millimetre, the weight of the cool metal feels good in my hands.

I leave the bedroom and stalk down the hallway. I'm at the top of the stairs when I hear him call after me.

"You better call one of those fucking doctors that stare at pussies all day, and you make a fucking appointment, or I'll do it for you. Do you hear me, Tor?" He slams the door, and then apparently proceeds to slam every drawer and cupboard in the bedroom. *Fucking Neanderthal.*

This is classic Jude. Doesn't know how to deal with shit, so he

gets angry and tries to control me. I'm not going to the doctor. This baby survived this long, and it's survived a lot. The last few weeks have been a cakewalk compared to its first few. A doctor is an unnecessary risk at this point because all I need is for Joe to find out I'm pregnant.

"I'm not going to a fucking doctor, Jude!" I shout over my shoulder as I descend the stairs. He probably can't even hear me over his own temper tantrum. Of all the men I could have gotten knocked up with, it had to be him.

Marney glances at me as I pass by. He's sat at the breakfast bar smoking a cigarette and reading the paper. A cup of coffee sits in front of him that I'm sure is ninety percent whiskey. He peeks over the edge of his paper. His eyes flick down to my stomach. I'm wearing a tight tank, because well, what the fuck does it matter now? The way they're all acting, you would think I'm the size of a whale.

"I take it you told him?" he asks me.

I sigh. "No, but he knows. Which is fan-fucking-tastic."

He chuckles. "Aw, hell. Did he get his panties in a bunch?"

I roll my eyes. "What do you think? Go to the doctor, Tor." I try to mimic his voice. "Arsehole." I can talk to Marney, really talk to him. If Caleb was the brother I never had, then Marney is the father I always wanted, minus the murderous criminal thing.

"Humph." He pops the paper back out and reaches for his coffee. "He cares about you; that's all. Jude has one emotion. Anger. He's like a caveman."

I snort. "Yep, that's Jude. He'll be pissing on me and beating his chest soon."

Marney chuckles. "Let the man have his moment." His eyes stray back down to the gun in my hand. "You 'bout to go shoot? Jude, should like that, the woman carrying his seed with a gun." He arches an eyebrow.

"I swear to God, Marney. You start this shit..." I huff.

He laughs and takes a long drag of his cigarette, holding his hands up innocently. "Go on then."

I walk out the screen door, his raspy laughter following me. The warm sunshine hits my skin, and the scent of pine trees fills my senses. I love it out here. I love the vast open space around the cabin, the thick woods that surround it. You could live up here for months and never even know that another soul existed. It's peaceful.

I move just inside the tree line and flick the safety off the gun. I lift the weapon and point it at the target which is messily marked on a nearby tree. Various bullet holes disrupt the edges of the paint, splintering the bark. I fire one shot after another, allowing it to cleanse me. I find it therapeutic, a release if you like.

I release the empty clip and take a new one out of my back pocket. I've just clicked it into place when the screen door bangs and Jude comes barreling down the steps. "What are you fucking doing?" he shouts.

I sigh and turn back to the target, pulling the trigger again.

I hear the pine needles crunch beneath his boots, and he stops behind me. "Don't fucking ignore me."

I turn to face him. "Then don't be a fucking prick!"

I can see anger flash across his features, but he reins it in, which does nothing but infuriate me further. "Give me the gun, Tor. And that is not a request!"

"Oh, you fucking..." I grit my teeth and point the gun at him. "Fuck you, Jude!" I'm so angry. "I'm pregnant for fuck sake, not disabled or mentally deficient. I'm not suddenly going to shoot myself!"

Arching his brow, he reaches for the gun. "Give it to me!"

I shove the barrel into his chest. "Careful. You never know when I might have a hormonal outburst," I growl. He cocks an eyebrow at me.

"Give. Me. The. Gun."

I throw it on the ground and storm past him. "Arsehole!"

"Please tell me you did not just throw a loaded gun onto the goddamn ground?" he groans as he bends to pick it up. "Fuck, Tor. It was cocked!"

"Shame it didn't have a misfire!" I shout, without turning back around to look at him.

I walk into the kitchen and Marney is still sat there, paper in hand, a small smile on his face. He places his cigarette between his lips and inhales. "How'd that work out for ya?"

I want to scream. I want to fucking scream. "He's a fucking dick!"

Jude comes storming through the door behind me. "Stop acting like a fucking kid about it, Tor!" He glances over at Marney and shakes his head. He snatches the cigarette from Marney's lips, smashing it out on the counter. "No more fucking smoking around her! You hear me?" he shouts.

Marney's gaze drifts from Jude to me. "Did he piss on you yet?"

"Clearly not. I think he might be bordering on clinically insane. Tell him, Marney! Before I fucking kill him. He's known for half an hour, half a fucking hour, and I already want to slit his throat in his sleep!"

Jude's eyes narrow, and his jaw drops. He points at Marney. "Did he fucking..." he turns to face him, "Did you fucking know, old man?" Jude swats his hand over the top of his head. "You fucking told Marney, and not me? Goddamn it, Tor!"

"I didn't tell him; he overheard me!" I defend before he kicks the shit out of Marney. Ridiculous? Yes, but this is Jude.

"Overheard you? Who the fuck else knows?"

I glance at Marney, and his eyes are full of pity. I drop my gaze to the kitchen floor, and neither of us says anything.

"Who else knows?" Jude no longer sounds angry, he sounds hurt.

"No one," my voice breaks. I feel a hand rub my shoulder and look up to find Marney standing next to me, angling his body between me and Jude.

Marney takes a deep breath, squeezing my shoulder as he says, "Found her pouring her little heart out at Caleb's grave."

Jude's face crumples and he hangs his head. There's a tense silence, and then I watch his shoulders fall before he makes his way to the hallway. "No fucking smoking around her," he demands before disappearing into a room.

I watch him go, my emotions swinging from anger to pity and back again. Marney puts an arm around my shoulder and guides me to one of the stools at the breakfast bar. "Sit down, sweetheart. I'll make you a tuna melt."

I'm pretty sure Marney can't cook, but I don't argue. I fold my arms on the bar and rest my cheek on them. I just don't understand why Jude has to be so impossible. I guess I always knew I would have to tell him, and I always knew he would be crazy protective, that he wouldn't let me get the revenge I so desperately need. Maybe I was in the wrong, but he's just proved me right. There's no way he's going to let me go after Joe now, and without that... without it, I don't know what to do.

Marney puts a glass of water in front of me and grabs a pan from under the stove. I listen to the sound of him shuffling around the little space. Eventually, he places a plate on the counter. A slightly burnt piece of bread topped with some canned tuna.

"Thanks." I pick up a fork and take a mouthful of food. I have no appetite. I never do.

Marney goes back to reading his paper, but I can feel him watching me. At least he's subtle I suppose, unlike fucking Jude.

"Tuna melts ain't no good cold," he says as he turns a page.

I fight a smile and take another mouthful.

If I'm going to have to take six more months of the Neanderthal, at least I have Marney.

Jude leaves, angry at me, and I guess I can't really blame him. The rest of the day drags on, and Jude doesn't come back. I go to bed alone. I don't like sleeping alone. It's as though my own mind can sense it, and the nightmares are just waiting for me the moment I close my eyes.

# Chapter 20

## Jude

The door slams shut behind me, and I climb into the car, crank the engine, and drive off. I probably shouldn't leave like this, but I am pissed, and I just need some fucking time to think about it.

I find a bar at the base of the mountains. The parking lot is nearly empty. I guess not that many people here like to get hammered in the middle of the day, which serves me just fine. The little bell jingles as I open the door, and I walk directly to the bar to take a seat.

There's a college-aged girl drying glasses behind the counter. When she looks over at me, her gaze drags seductively down my face, over my shoulders, and down my arms. She bites her lip as she smiles. Fuck. I am not in the mood for this.

She saunters over and slings the bar towel over her shoulder. "What does a man like you drink?" she giggles.

"Just put some ice in a glass and some whiskey. I don't care what kind. You just watch me, and when it gets empty, give me another."

She wrinkles her nose. "Wow, you're so gnarly. What's got you all angry?" She reaches underneath the counter and pulls up a glass, then turns to grab the bottle of whiskey.

I groan. "Just get me my drink. I'm not in here for fucking therapy." I pull my wallet from my pocket and slam it on the

counter.

She shrugs as she slides the full glass across the bar top to me. "Want to start a tab?"

"No, I'm paying with cash."

She rings up my drink and then thankfully leaves me the fuck alone, and goes back to drying the glasses.

I take a long sip, set the drink down, and drag my hand down my face. I shift on the stool as I rhythmically run my thumb along the curved edge of the glass. Pregnant. Fuck.

What the actual hell am I going to do with a child? I'm not exactly the fatherly type. I wasn't *raised* with a man that was the fatherly type. I loved my dad, but he didn't teach me how to throw a ball, how to ask girls out, hell, he didn't even come to my high school graduation. My dad taught me how to be a criminal. How to kill someone and get away with it. He taught me to fight when you don't get what you want; he taught me to go for blood. I have no idea what a normal life is like, so how the hell can I teach someone how to live one? I've planned things, made adjustments so I can give Tor something close to what I deem as normal, but a kid was not in those plans, at all. Ever.

I finish my first glass, and the bartender pours my second. I tip this one up and down it in three gulps, slamming the empty glass back down on the worn counter. "Another!" I demand as I wipe the back of my hand over my mouth. She places a new drink in front of me, and I continue drinking. My head swims, the tension in my shoulders melting away with each long sip. *A kid!* I'm fucking pissed that she kept this from me, or maybe, I'm hurt. I don't know, I just know I don't like it. I hold her captive, she falls in love with me, I knock her the fuck up... Jesus, this is some fucked up shit. *Fucked up*. This kid doesn't have a damn chance. I wipe my hand over my brow and shake my head before polishing off my third glass of cheap-ass whiskey. Things are just going to have to change. After Joe, *everything* is going to



fucking change. She needs to take care of herself. She can't ignore this, and neither can I.

I sit at the bar for hours, attempting to think everything through, but all the whiskey is doing is making it harder for me to rationalize it all. I leave the bar, slowly driving up the winding, narrow mountain road. My phone rings and vibrates across the center console. Glancing down, I see David's name blinking on the screen.

"Hey!"

"So, I got Stan's phone bugged for you..."

# Chapter 21

## Victoria

"Ria."

*It's dark and I can't see anything, but I know that smell. Mildew mixed with the faint scent of blood. I'm on my hands and knees, desperately trying to find my bearings. My fingers run over the smooth stone floor, as familiar to me as my own skin. My prison, my own personal hell.*

*"Ria. Where are you?" Caleb, that's Caleb's voice.*

*"I'm here." A small cry falls from my lips.*

*I hear his whispered footsteps, and then a gentle hand on my arm. He pulls me to my feet. I can feel the heat from his body, as though he were a furnace in the dead of winter. He takes my hand and pulls me. "Follow me."*

*I follow him blindly. I would follow him anywhere. I keep walking until a soft light starts to surround us. It's like the sun slowly rising, painting everything in shades of grey. I study Caleb's face, and a tear tracks down my cheek.*

*"I miss you," I tell him.*

*That brilliant smile of his makes its way across his face, but he says nothing. He leans forward and presses his lips into my forehead. He steps back, and I meet his eyes. A loud bang reverberates off the walls, disrupting the silence and making my ears ring. A tiny dot appears between his eyes. The smile disappears from his face as the circle spreads outward becoming a small red patch. Blood pours down his*

*face, running off his chin and soaking through his shirt. I scream and reach for him. My fingers clench at his shirt, and he sinks to his knees, his eyes wide.*

*"Caleb!" I shout, my vocal chords straining with the effort.*

*I feel firm hands on my shoulders pulling me backwards, away from Caleb. All I can do is scream his name.*

I'm torn from the dream screaming and gasping for breath as sweat slicks my entire body. I sit up holding my chest against the festering pain that feels like it's ripping my chest wide open. All I can see is Caleb's face, and a broken sob tears from my throat in response. God, I *miss* him.

"Tor," Jude's low voice rumbles in my ear. He leans over me, sweeping his finger along my hairline. "It's okay. I'm sorry." He touches his lips lightly to my forehead and the scent of him, heavily laced with whiskey, wraps around me.

I can't talk. It hurts too much. I've never had this dream. My nightmares usually feature Joe, but this one. It's bittersweet because I saw Caleb, but then I had to watch him die all over again. Tears of sheer anguish stream down my face.

Jude drags me against his chest, wrapping his thick arms around me. His hand moves in circles over my back, his other palm pressed against my cheek as though he's trying to shelter me from the world. His heart beats strong and steady under my ear, and I close my eyes, using the rhythmic beat of it to calm my erratic breaths.

"I am sorry, doll," he whispers.

"What for?"

He drags his free hand over his face and takes a deep breath, his chest expanding under my cheek. "Fuck, Tor. For every-fucking-thing."

There's a moment of silence where all I can hear are our mingled breaths. He smells like he drank half a distillery, and his movements are slow. He's drunk. I feel him press his lips into my hair and his hand brushes across my stomach. I

tense for a second because I still don't know how to feel about it. I don't know what terrifies me more, being pregnant, or Jude knowing I'm pregnant.

"Just go to sleep, doll. You need to sleep." He shifts me and lays down, before pulling me onto his chest. I don't fight him. I feel like Jude is the only thing holding me here, in one piece, and the second I move from his arms I'll disintegrate.

He clicks the lamp off and drags his fingers through my hair slowly.

"I miss him," I whisper into the darkness of the room.

He swallows. "I know." Moments pass and then I feel his chest rise from the deep breath he takes. "When were you gonna tell me about the baby, Tor?" He sounds so dejected.

"I'm sorry," I breathe. *And I am. I should have told him.* "I was scared," I admit in a broken whisper. "I still am."

"You still should've told me. I mean, hell, it's my kid too." I feel his chin brush against the top of my head.

"I thought you would either run for the hills or do this macho shit."

"Run for the hills, huh?" He laughs. "Not a fucking chance. I would never leave you, and I sure as shit would never leave my own kid." He sighs. "I would never leave you, Tor." He gently kisses my forehead. "I love you."

My heart skips a beat. I know he's drunk, but I also know he's telling the truth. I know Jude, I love him, I trust him, but he always seems like such an anomaly. I know I have him, but I never trust that I can truly keep hold of him. He always seems like sand, slipping through my fingers, no matter how hard I try to hold on. His words bring me relief that I didn't know I needed. They give me the strength to dare to want this with him. I twist my face to look up at him. His eyes shimmer in the darkness. He looks at me like I'm his world, and I have to swallow around the lump in my throat. I always thought that Jude had cost me everything, but somewhere along the way, he *became* everything.

"I love you," I whisper into the darkness. He pulls me closer to him, and I throw one leg over his muscular thigh. His hand moves from my stomach to my thigh, grasping it.

"Good." He smirks. "So you'll take my macho shit."

I sigh. He can't be like this, and honestly, this is the reason I didn't tell him. This is what now terrifies me.

He grabs my chin, tilting my head back to look at him. "What's wrong?"

I narrow my eyes at him and take a deep breath. *This is going to be a fight.* "Jude, I need you to let me kill Joe. I need you to promise you won't try and put me on the bench with this."

"You've lost your fucking mind, woman."

I sigh and fix my gaze on his chest, steeling myself. "This isn't up for discussion, Jude. I told you I was going after him and you agreed to help me. End of."

He groans. "Oh, it will be up for discussion. But you want to know what's not up for discussion? That you are gonna go to the doctor."

I scowl, because what the hell? It will be up for discussion? Jesus, where's the angry, controlling asshole I have impregnated myself with disappeared to? I swear to God, if he's tiptoeing around me already... "It's unnecessary."

I sigh. "It's unnecessary."

"Please." He brushes a kiss across my lips. "Just let me fucking take care of you and this baby."

There's no point in arguing with him. I'll let him do his alpha male thing if it makes him feel better. "Fine, but I'm not going every month."

"So stubborn," he mumbles and angles his head to kiss me again. His lips are soft yet demanding as his hand wraps around the back of my neck, holding me there. I moan as Jude's tongue teases along my bottom lip.

I want him. I always want him, but right now, I feel connected to him on an entirely new level. It's as though I physically need his touch. My fingers rake across the smooth

skin of his chest as I drag myself up the bed, trying to get closer to him. I move until I'm straddling his body, his fingers gripping my hips to steady me. The hot skin of his sides presses against my bare thighs, making me tremble. His hands drift over my waist as his tongue brushes mine, his fingers tracing the strip of exposed skin at my back. My breath comes in ragged bursts, my skin breaking into goose bumps under his gentle touch.

I nip at his lip and feel his cock hardening, pressing against me.

He makes a pained sound in the back of his throat and gently pushes me away, holding me by my shoulders. "Tor." His voice is raspy and sex laced. I bite my lip as my eyes lock with his. I can see the want written all over his face. "Fuck, I..." his eyes trail down to my stomach.

I scowl at him. "I swear to God, Jude..."

He shakes his head. "You're pregnant..."

He cannot be serious? "Yes, I remember," I growl.

I grab his chin, forcing my lips to his. He kisses me back, but it's hesitant, careful. I rip my lips away from his and I lose it. Before I can even stop myself, I slap him. Hard. His head snaps to the side, the noise reverberating around the room. I'm going to blame hormones and sexual frustration.

His eyes widen, and I notice his jaw tick. He takes several deep breaths, his fingers digging into my hips. "Watch it," he growls.

"Or what?" I whisper, narrowing my eyes. Daring him.

"Don't fucking make me lose my shit. You know my buttons, *don't* fucking press them."

*That's exactly what I'm trying to do.* My blood hammers through my veins, and all I can hear is my own pulse in my ears. Fear. Adrenaline. Lust. It's a heady mix.

"Fuck me, and I won't have to push your buttons." I cock an eyebrow at him as he glares back at me. I take the hem of my t-shirt and slowly lift it up my body, exposing myself to him inch by inch. A tortured groan leaves his lips, and I

smile. He may act angry, but his cock is like iron pressed against my pussy. He's turned on, even if he won't admit it, and it makes me brave, stupidly so.

Tossing my shirt onto the floor, I lean forward and kiss him again as I trace my tongue across his bottom lip, before biting him gently. My hands creep up his chest and wrap around his throat. He growls against my lips as my fingers tighten. He grabs my hair, fisting it as he throws me down on the bed on my back and pins me underneath his massive frame. My hands fall away from him, and he takes them, pinning both my wrists with one hand and pulling them above my head.

He cocks an eyebrow at me and lowers his face, his lips barely brushing against mine. "Woman, I will say this one fucking time, that is the *only* time you will ever put your hands around my throat." His voice is guttural and strained as it rumbles over me.

He grabs my underwear and tears them from me, making me gasp. He roughly drags one finger over my pussy, pushing inside me. "You want me to fuck you?" He pushes his boxers down and holds his cock against me. "What do you have to do if you want me to fuck you, huh?"

I bite my lip as violent tremors wrack my body. I tilt my hips up, desperately seeking more pressure, more friction, just more.

He laughs. "Come on, Tor. Be a good girl and *beg* me for it."

"I fucking hate you," I snap, but it's lost on a breathy moan as he brushes his thumb against my clit. I feel like I'm on fire.

"Really?" He pushes two fingers deep inside me, and my entire body thrashes against him. "This right here feels like you *really* fucking hate me." He pulls his fingers out, and one by one slips them into his mouth, sucking me off of them. *Oh, my God. I think my ovary just imploded.* A slow smirk

makes its way over his face. Bastard knows exactly what he's doing.

He lowers his face until his lips are at my ear. "Beg. Me." His teeth nip at my earlobe. Damn him, and his sexy as fuck voice and face and body.

"Fuck me!" I practically scream at him.

"Mmm, that's not begging," he whispers in my ear, his hands groping at my full breasts as he grinds his cock against my pussy.

"Please," I breathe. I don't know why I ever fight him or deny him. I always bloody beg him in the end, and he's well aware of it. Arsehole.

His cock pushes against me, teasing. "You fucking hit me, and then you choke me. And fuck me if my cock isn't rock hard," he growls. "That is the *only* fucking reason I'm fucking you right now, Tor."

I open my mouth to respond, but he slides inside me, and I groan loudly, shamelessly. He braces his arms on either side of my head as he holds himself above me. His jaw clenches, the muscles of his neck straining. Every muscle in his body pops from the tension, and the visual is almost too much. I drag my nails over his abs, feeling every bump and valley, watching them tighten and flex as he pulls out and thrusts back into me.

His hands glide over my skin, tracing my curves. His lips drop to my chest, and his teeth skim my nipple. "For fucks sake! How tight is your damn pussy?" he groans, driving harder into me. He feels so good, so right. I toss my head back against the pillow, pushing my chest into his face.

Jude grabs my leg, lifting it and placing it on his shoulder. He slides deeper inside of me, throwing his head back on a growl. His fingers dig into my hips, and his eyes lock with mine again as he presses his lips into my ankle and drags his teeth along my calf.

I'm trembling, my body on the verge of exploding. His hand moves between my legs, and he pinches my clit as he



grinds against me. Everything tightens as my entire body feels like it detonates. He fucks me until I'm flinching away from him, my over sensitized pussy unable to take any more, and then he lets out a primitive roar as he stiffens above me. I watch every one of Jude's muscle pop, his face twisting in tension before falling slack. He's beautiful. I love watching him come apart and lose control. I love that I can do that to him because he's Jude Pearson, and he's the embodiment of controlled power.

He falls forward against my chest, his hot breaths blowing against my skin. My chest is heaving from the force of that orgasm. If there's one thing Jude does well, it's fuck.

"Shit." He lifts himself off of me, his eyes tracing over my stomach frantically. He gently skims his hands over the small bump. "Shit... did I hurt you?" He's still staring at my stomach, and I cover a smile because it actually looks like he's asking the bump.

His eyes flick to mine, a small frown marring his features. I can't help but smile. He's so cute. I reach out and smooth the frown lines, tracing my fingers over the stubble of his jaw. "No, Jude. You didn't hurt me." I push up and place my lips to his in a lingering kiss.

His hand cups my cheek as he groans against my mouth. "This is going to kill me," he grumbles. "You two are going to fucking kill me." He sighs as he rolls away and lays on his back on the bed. "Shit." He drags his hand down his face, and I try not to smile.

# Chapter 22

## Jude

I'm lying in the bed staring up at the ceiling with Tor sound asleep on my chest. I took her to the doctor yesterday, and we found out she's nineteen weeks pregnant. I gently brush my hand over her stomach, amazed that this baby survived all the shit she's been through. *Our little girl is already a survivor.* Seeing the grainy image of that tiny human hit me in a place I didn't know could be touched. I have this sense of pride, and this innate urge to protect her. My entire fucking outlook on life changed yesterday. A few days ago, I didn't want to be a father, and now, I'm ready to change my fucking life to be one. I will do whatever it takes to make sure my little girl never knows how fucked up our lives have been.

I sigh and press a soft kiss to Tor's forehead. A slight breeze kicks up, rustling the leaves outside the open window. This is what I want. Peace just like this. Not the shit I've been living in. I just want this. Once I get Joe... this will be all I have. Just me and Tor... and eventually a little girl.

"Jude?" Marney shouts from the kitchen. "Looks like you got a bit of a problem here..."

*Well, shit, so much for fucking peace.* I let go of a breath and carefully slide out from under Tor, gently laying her arm across the pillow.

"You awake, boy?"

I shut the door behind me. "Yeah, yeah. I'm coming."

As soon as I round the corner I find Marney sitting at the table with his coffee and a smoldering cigarette. He's staring down at a newspaper. His eyes slowly raise to mine and he shakes his head. "Your name's in the paper. Front page. National News."

I toss my head back and rub my hands down my face. "Fuck!" I shout.

"Well, now, they got here that you're dead. Blown to smithereens in your house, but shew at that number of murders they're trying to pin a dead man for." He turns the paper around and taps his finger over the black print.

I drag the chair out and plop down. *Jude Pearson, an honor graduate of the University of Alabama turned illegal bookmaker and career criminal is connected with more than thirty-five murders. A string of killings throughout the Tennessee Valley occurring several months ago have evidence linking the late Pearson to at least three of the murders. Investigations are underway.* And there, next to the article, is my college graduation picture.

Marney slides a chipped coffee cup in my direction. "My concern is, what exactly is *under investigation*?" I watch as he twist the top from a bottle of whiskey and pours a generous amount into my cup. "You talked to David lately?" he arches a brow.

I can feel my pulse in the back of my throat. I grab the phone from the table and dial David's number. I hear it connect, but it doesn't ring. *The number you are trying to reach is out of service or has been temporarily disconnected.*

My fingers clench around the phone. "Motherfucker," I growl.

Marney settles back in the chair and stares silently at me, his lips straight across his face. "Think time's about up here, son. You wait too much longer and you won't ever get to that house on the beach. You need to think of what's best

for her... for your family now. Revenge ain't all it's cracked up to be. Your father'd tell you that."

Part of me knows he's right. I know we should hightail it the fuck out of here and never fucking come back. But then there's Tor. She is still so angry, so mad for bloodshed; if I told her we were leaving she'd stay right here and try to handle Joe herself. Besides, I have to kill Joe because if I don't, I'll never really feel safe. I don't only have Tor to protect now; I have a child. I feel sick. What the hell do I do here?

"I don't have a good feeling about this Jude." Marney shakes his head. "Not one good feeling."

# Chapter 23

## Victoria

I'm restless and unable to sleep. Jude's steady breaths sound behind me, his chest rising and falling against my back as one strong arm wraps around me, pinning me to his big body. I absently trace the ink work that winds over his muscles and stops at his wrist. I feel him stir, his lips pressing against the back of my head as he pulls me even tighter against him.

One second I'm lying in Jude's arms, the next, an enormous bang shakes the entire house. A brief orange flash illuminates the room before it's blocked out by Jude's body covering mine. He places his hand on top of my head, pressing me into the mattress, his heavy breaths drowned out by a second loud explosion.

Marney's shouting from the bottom of the steps. Jude sits up, his bare chest heaving as he reaches for a gun and places it in my hand. He cups my cheek, forcing me to look at him.

"You stay here. Anyone comes through that door, you shoot first and ask fucking questions later."

I nod, and he kisses my forehead quickly before storming out of the room like he's about to bring on the apocalypse itself.

I slide off the mattress and press my back to the wall, placing the bed between me and the door to shelter me from anyone who might walk into the room. This is Joe, I know it is. He found us, and if he found us, then there's every possibility that he's come for me. My hands shake as I train my gun on the door. I listen intently for footsteps. My heart is beating so hard; my entire body vibrates with each heavy thump.

After what feels like an eternity, I hear footsteps down the hall and my finger twitches on the trigger. There's a gentle knock on the door.

"Tor, it's me."

I release the breath I'm holding, and lower the gun as the door cracks open and Jude steps inside. He notices my position on the floor and cocks an eyebrow at me, a small smirk on his face.

"Car bomb," he says. Outwardly he seems calm, but there's a category five hurricane ripping across his irises.

I stand up, clicking the safety to the gun and placing it on the bedside table. "He knows where we are," I whisper.

Jude's nostrils flare and he nods. "It's just us here. He could have killed us, but again, he didn't." I can see the confusion and frustration on his face.

"He wants to rattle you," I say. "It's all part of his games. We're all just chess pieces, waiting for him to decide to end us, and he wants you to know it. He wants you to believe he has complete control." I sigh. "And apparently, he wants to be theatrical about it."

"I have fifteen different people looking for him. Why the fuck can't I find him?" There's vulnerability in his tone. He slams his fist into the wall and growls.

I move behind him, wrapping my arms around his waist and pressing my face into his back. "You just have to wait, think, be smart. Anticipate his next move. He acts controlled but trust me, his rage blinds him. Don't make the same mistake. At the moment, we're always behind him. Get ahead," I say.

If only it were that simple, but this is Jude. He just needs to focus.

Jude nods and turns to walk out of the room.

"Where are you going?"

"Fucker wants to play games? You can't play fucking ball without a team." He walks out of the room, slamming the door closed behind him, and I smile.

# Chapter 24

## Jude

I stand in the middle of the living room. The fucking window is blown out. Glass is all over the place, wood is splintered across the room. The smell of gasoline saturates the air and a thick cloud of smoke swirls in through the gaping hole. Marney's outside hosing the car down with a fire extinguisher. That fucking car was parked only feet from the front of the house. An enormous dark circle surrounds the smoldering vehicle, the tree limbs above the car are black, some of the leaves still burning.

I place my arm against the doorframe and rest my head against it. This is fucking shit. That was no accident. That was Joe. He knows where we are. The phone vibrates in my back pocket, and I answer the call.

"Hello?"

"Did you like my present, JP? I have to say I was impressed with yours. A fucking head?" he laughs. "I rather enjoyed that. I do have a flare for the dramatic."

I brace my palm against the counter and take deep breaths. This motherfucker always seems to have the upper hand.



"I hear a congratulation is in store," he says. "Question is for *who*? You or me?"

My face heats and my jaw tightens. "When I find you..."

"There is no finding me, JP. But as you're well aware, I already know where you are. I just hope it's a boy. I always wanted a son; he can replace the one you took from me."

*What the hell is he talking about?*

"You—"

Marney snatches the phone from my hands and chucks it against the wall. "Threatening him's not gonna do shit." His face is red as hell. He slaps his palms on the table, leaning over to catch his breath. "You wanna kill the son-of-a-bitch? Great. But I'm taking her on down to that house. There's no reason she should stay here until you gut him."

I swallow as I nod. "Fine. That's fine."

She's pregnant, no matter how much she thinks she needs this, I can't put her, or the baby in this kind of danger. Joe is no longer playing with me; he's threatening my family.

# Chapter 25

## Victoria

I'm sat on the bed when Jude bursts back into the room and immediately starts emptying drawers into a duffle bag. His shoulders are tense, an air of aggression clinging to him.

"What are you doing?" I ask, my voice raspy.

He stops and turns to me. He smiles, but it doesn't reach his eyes. He closes the space between us and leans over me, cupping the back of my neck. He gently presses a kiss to my forehead, his fingers clenching possessively against my skin. "We're leaving," he murmurs.

I frown. "This is what he wants, Jude. You are playing straight into his hands."

"I don't give a shit if this is what he wants! This is stupid, Tor. You're pregnant. I'll get Joe, I swear to God, but you are going to go somewhere I know you'll be safe. Marney's going with you, and I'll come for you once Joe's dead."

I'm shaking my head before he's even finished speaking. "No, I'm not going." My fingers wrap around his wrists, holding him to me. I don't want to leave him. I won't leave him.

A low growl rumbles up his throat. "I wasn't asking if you wanted to. I let you do this to me before by letting you leave me, and look how the fuck that turned out!" His words make

me recoil slightly. I pull away from him, glaring into his green irises. "That's not fair," I whisper. "That was different."

He steps back to the chest of drawers and tosses more clothes into the bag. "No, it wasn't."

I fist the comforter. Maybe he just doesn't want me here.

"He knows you're pregnant, Tor!" The breath in my lungs seizes as an intense fear grips me. My stomach clenches violently, and I press my hand over it. Jude takes a pained breath. "How the fuck does he know you're pregnant?"

I shake my head. "I don't... fuck! It must have been the doctors. I knew that was a fucking bad idea. What did he say?" I whisper. I'm not sure I want to know, but I need to. I need to know what has Jude so spooked.

He paces, dragging his fingers through his thick hair. "We're leaving. It is my job to protect you." His eyes fall to my stomach, skimming over the small bump. "Both of you. I can't let you do something that could end up with you getting hurt, Tor. I just can't."

"What did he say?" I repeat, my voice soft.

He hesitates, then caves. "I'm afraid he's gonna try to take the baby." He resumes pacing. "He said he was gonna take the baby to replace the one I took from him, which I don't know what the hell he's talking about..."

Oh, fuck. "His wife," I breathe. "She was pregnant."

He stops mid-stride, his face going pale. "What?"

"He said..." I glance down at my hands. "He said she was pregnant when you killed her."

"I didn't kill her," he whispers as he sits on the edge of the bed, dragging his hands down his face. "Fuck." Resting his arms on his knees, he holds the sides of his head and drops his chin to his chest. "She wasn't even supposed to be fucking there." His jaw tenses. "It was supposed to be Joe,"

he shouts. "Then none of this shit would have even fucking happened!"

"I don't care if you did." I narrow my eyes at him. "Don't you dare feel an ounce of fucking guilt, Jude. That man deserves to have everything he loves taken from him. He certainly doesn't deserve your guilt or pity. He's the monster other monsters run from. Never forget that."

His gaze meets mine, and there's a beat of silence. "We're leaving," he says sternly. He stands and continues shoving items into the bag.

"He's calling your bluff, trying to flush you out." In my time with Joe I learned a thing or two about him.

"I know Joe. I know how he thinks. What makes him tick...."

"No, Tor. I'm done playing fucking games with him."

He zips the bag and drops it to the floor. Appealing to his rationality isn't going to work, so I move on and appeal to his heart.

I bite my lip and force myself to tell him how I feel. "Please, Jude. I don't want to be apart from you. I don't..." I steel myself. "I don't feel safe without you." Jude can be overbearing, and bossy, and downright bloody irritating, but he also makes me feel whole. He does protect me, but he can't protect me if I'm not with him.

He turns from me, grabbing the sides of his head as he dips his chin to his chest. This is his weakness. I know it, and I'm a horrible person for exploiting it, but I am not being packed off to some island while he goes off half-cocked, to war with Joe.

"Tor..."

I pull my knees to my chest and wrap my arms around them. "Please," I whisper.

His back is to me and I can see his shoulders rise and fall from each hard breath he drags in. "I've lost everything. You

are all I have. Please, for the love of fucking God, Tor, just let me keep you."

He's not hearing me, so I try another angle, the real reason I still don't want to leave, because no matter how much I think I'm okay, I'm not. I will never be okay until I watch that man die. This baby, it's a future for Jude and I, but what can I possibly offer her? I'm half a person, still tormented and damaged in too many ways to ever be a mother to anyone. Killing Joe, I need it, so I can move on and have a life with Jude.

"Jude, you told me that the only way to heal was to take revenge. Don't try and take that from me. Don't try and send me away. I will never forgive you for it."

He spins around, his face angry, red. "Really? You won't forgive me?" He stomps toward me. "That's fucking fine. I'd rather you be pissed off at me and beg your forgiveness than you ending up dead."

I rake my fingers into my hair and rest my forehead on my knees. "Jude, I have come as close to death as it fucking gets. I'm not dead yet. Why am I running now?"

"Because I'm asking you to."

My patience snaps. "Well, fuck you, Jude! I don't fucking want to. I am fed up with this shit, just go find Joe already and get it over with!" My pulse thrums against my eardrums as my fingers clench into my own arms.

Glaring at me, he picks up the bag and throws it over his broad shoulder. "Come on." He's heading toward the door. He's gone off in his alpha-zone and isn't fucking listening to me. I need this. *Fucking asshole.*

I jump up, and stand, facing him, keeping the bed between us. "The only thing that has got me this far is the thought of killing that bastard. Just knowing he's alive makes me feel like I can't breathe. I need to *watch* him die. Please don't take it from me."

His eyes set on mine, almost pleading. "There's more to life than revenge, doll. Trust me on that one."

*Fuck this.* Frustration and anger course through me, and a rage unlike anything I've ever experienced takes over my body. "No! There is *nothing* more than revenge! You don't have a fucking clue what I need. You weren't held down and raped time and time and time again. You didn't watch your best friend die. You didn't have to stay locked in a room with his body. You can't possibly imagine how much I need to kill that man. You want to know why I didn't tell you about the baby, Jude? I couldn't see past killing Joe. I was prepared to die to kill him if I had to. That is how much this means." By the time I'm done, tears prick my eyes, and I angrily swipe at them. He might think I'm selfish, but I don't care.

He stands silently staring at me, shock and hurt written all over his face. He drops the bag onto the floor, and strides towards me, pulling me tightly against his hard body.

"Until he is dead it doesn't matter where I am," I say. "If he wants me, he will find me. I'm safer with you than I am anywhere else."

"Damn it, Tor. I just don't want anything to happen to you." His hand rubs over my back, his lips pressing into my hair. "As soon as he is dead, we are leaving. Do you hear me?"

I inhale the scent of him and nod against his firm chest. "Okay."

"Joe will have to be so fucking out of it by the time he is anywhere near you that all I have to do is breathe on him to kill him." He pulls away to look at me, his fingers wiping away my tears. He swallows and his eyes dart back down to my stomach. He sighs. "If I let you do this... fuck, Tor, you're gonna have to be strong. It's not just you anymore."

I pull away from him, biting my bottom lip nervously. "I know."

Honestly, those first few weeks were hard. I've never felt so angry and yet utterly destroyed at the same time. I vowed to kill Joe, and it seemed like the only thing that mattered, possibly even more than my own life, but at times I glance up at Jude, standing protectively in front of me... and, well, things change. It sounds so cliché, but I guess sometimes you need to be reminded of what you could lose, of the people you would leave behind. Jude and I only have each other. I still want Joe dead, that hasn't changed, but I know that Jude will help me and protect me. Jude would never let anything happen to me.

He cups my face, his thumbs stroking over my jaw line. My eyes lock with his. "You'll fucking kill me, woman." He leans down and presses his lips to mine gently. "You don't listen worth a shit."

I smile at his southern twang. "Of course not," I whisper.

"You were fucking made for me, huh?"

"Who else would put up with you?"

Jude grins as he grabs my hair and yanks my head back. "I wouldn't want anyone else to."

His lips slam over mine, his hands running down my back and grabbing my arse. He lifts me easily, and my legs wrap around his hips. "Don't pretend you don't love it." He throws me on the bed and leans over me, a predatory look on his face. My stomach tightens, and my breath quickens.

"I do love it," I breathe.

"I know," he says, palming me. "And I'm about to fucking remind you exactly why you love it so goddamn much." His fingers creep around my throat, a devilish smile on his lips.

I really do love it.

# Chapter 26

## Jude

I park the car in front of the bookstore and flip the mirror down, quickly swiping my fingers through my hair to give it a preppier look. I didn't tell Tor what I'm doing. It's fucking wrong as hell.

Marney and Rich have both been monitoring Stan's calls. This morning I found out Joe comes back tomorrow, landing in Nashville, and that Stan is scheduled to pick him up. I need Stan to be so desperate he will do exactly as I tell him. You can threaten someone's life all day long, but it doesn't have the same effect as when you threaten the life of someone they love.

I hope luring this girl will work, because I don't want to resort to actually kidnapping her by force, but I will if I must. I open the car door and step out onto the sidewalk, smoothing out the creases in my slacks. The bell dings as I walk inside and, just as luck would have it, Sofia Solomon is rearranging books on the far right wall. Her ink-black hair is tied up in a neat bun, her high cheekbones stained with makeup. I walk past her, pretending to browse but keep drifting my eyes over to her. Finally she glances up, smiling when our eyes meet. I grin and blatantly drag my eyes over her body, deepening my smile as I do. Her cheeks flush and she quickly turns around to tend the books laid over on the shelf. I run my mind back over the things she listed as her



interests, where she's enrolled in school, what her major is. Social media makes it all too easy for fuckers like me to do things we shouldn't.

I wait a few minutes before slowly walking up behind her, and touching my hand to her shoulder. She jumps from the unexpected touch. "I'm sorry. Didn't mean to startle you, but I'm looking for the Apocrypha. Does this store carry it?" *For fucks sake I sound like a fucking tool.*

"Yes, we do have it." A bemused look plays over her face. "I'll show you." I follow her down the aisle, and let the lies begin. "Thanks," I say. "I'm studying it for my dissertation. I'm getting a doctorate in historical religion."

She glances over her shoulder, smiling. "Me too."

An hour later we're discussing different religious theories and laughing. I shut the book and glance at my watch. "I've got to go." I pause and narrow my eyes on hers. "Do you want to get a drink or something?"

She bites down on her lip and giggles. "Yeah. Sure."

"Meet me at The Blue Monkey at eight?"

She nods, and I head to the counter, pay for the book and leave.



"How can you not like Taylor Swift?" she slurs over her fourth martini. *Fuck me, she's annoying.*

I glance around the dimly lit bar, force a smile, and shrug. "Just don't. You want another?" I ask pointing at the empty glass she's just slammed down onto the table.

"I probably shouldn't. I get really horny when I drink," she laughs. "And you are super-freaking-hot. I would do dirty, dirty things with you mister man."

"Mmm, is that so?"

"Very so," she says, leaning in to kiss me. I grab her chin to stop her and her eyes widen.

I stare into her eyes, gently stroking my thumb over her chin. "Oh, trust me. You don't wanna do that here. I'm not very good at controlling myself." I drop my hand, and she teeters on the stool. "I don't play like all those little boys do." I smirk, and I can practically see her swoon. I pull a hundred dollar bill from my wallet, lift her glass, and set it back down over the cash as I take her hand, and pull her from the barstool. "Want me to show you what I mean?" I growl.

She giggles and follows me up the stairs and out of the bar. My heart slowly picks up its pace. I am kidnapping this twenty-one-year-old girl. They look nothing alike, but all I can see when I look at her is Tor. She is innocent, and that pricks at a part of me I wish it didn't. I swallow as I open the passenger side door and watch her climb in, blowing out a hard breath as I walk around to the driver's side. I start the engine and glance over at her. She glances up at me, a nervous smile playing over her lips.

"I've never done this before," she says timidly as I back out of the parking space.

"Neither have I." *I've never fucking kidnapped anybody before. Shit...*

"Somehow, I don't believe that."

I turn the radio up as I speed down the road and merge onto the interstate. I catch her anxiously fiddling with a piece of her hair. "So where do you live?" she asks.

"Not far from here at all."



I close the door, locking it behind me as I toss the keys onto the table. There's a nervous energy buzzing through me. My eyes lock on the back of her head and I try to calm my racing pulse.

"This is a nice place," she says as she steps into the living room. Rich emerges from the hallway and she jumps.

"Well, hello there," he says, his eyes raking over her. Sofia spins around to face me; her face drained of all color.

My brows pull together as I frown. "I'm sorry," I say as I step toward her. She screams and goes running for the door, but I grab her shoulders and hold her in place. She thrashes around, shouting.

"Get her fucking hands, Rich."

I feel teeth rip into my forearm and I grit my teeth. She somehow yanks one arm free and punches me in the mouth. My lip throbs as warm blood trickles over my chin. I take hold of her arms, shove her against the wall and spin her around. Using the weight of my body to hold her in place as Rich ties her wrists together.

Using the back of my hand, I wipe away the blood from my split lip as I stare down at her. She's bound and gagged, but still squirming around, trying to get out of the restraints.

Rich eyes me. "How long do I have to keep her?"

"Until tomorrow. I hope." I squat down in front of her, and she closes her eyes. "Sofia, I am sorry, but I need your father to do me a favor, and this is the only way I know he'll do it."

I pull my phone out. "All you have to do is scream, okay?" I stand up and walk a few steps away from her as I dial Stan's number. I put the call on speaker.

"Hello?"

"Stan, I'm gonna need a little favor from you, partner."

"Who is this?"

"Oh, now, don't worry about who the fuck this is. What you need to worry yourself with is who the fuck I have." I lean down to Sofia, her eyes welling with tears. "Sofia, wanna tell your father hello?" She screams against the gag. I wedge a finger beneath the cloth and wiggle it free. The tattered material lips down her neck and her screams bleed through my ears.

"Daddy! Daddy, please help me. Please..." she sobs. My chest tightens. This right here is fucked up.

His breath is audible over the line. "If you hurt her in any way—"

"That's all up to you. All I want is Joe Campbell. You do as I say, she'll be just fine. You don't..." I swallow because I haven't really thought about what I'll do if he doesn't. I don't want to think about that shit.

"I'm not a man you wanna fuck around with. I'll just say that."

"Please don't hurt her." There's this edge of desperation to his voice, and I know just how he feels which makes this harder than I want.

"You will not call the cops, the feds; you will tell absolutely no one about this. You do, she dies." Sofia's sobs grow louder, and I attempt to block them out. "I'm going to call you tomorrow, and you're going to meet me. I'm going with you to pick that bastard up. You let him know anything and one of my guys *will* kill her. I will not give Sofia back to you unless I get Joe. You understand that?"

"Daddy... please. *Please* do it. I don't want to die!"

"You're not, baby. Daddy's not going to let these bastards hurt you." He pauses for a moment. "You don't give her back to me, and I will find you."

"You do as I asked, and you won't need to go to the trouble."

I hang up the phone and stare at Rich. "Feed her. Be nice to her. Don't fucking touch her!" My gaze falls to Sofia. "I will ask you if he hurt you, and you will tell me the truth." I turn back to Rich. "You don't hurt her, and I will give you a quarter mil. You touch a hair on her fucking body, and I'll kill you."

He rubs his hand over the back of his thick neck. "Yeah. Got it."

"Your father just works for the wrong man, sweetheart," I say as I turn toward the door to leave.

# Chapter 27

## Victoria

I'm sitting at the breakfast bar with a cup of coffee in front of me. My gun is in pieces on the counter, and I'm cleaning the barrel.

The screen door bangs open, and Jude walks into the kitchen. He looks exhausted, and he's wearing... "Are those chinos?"

He glances down. "Yeah. Don't ask," he grumbles.

His eyes skate over the dismantled gun, and he cocks an eyebrow at me. I shrug. "You know you have issues, right?" he says.

"Um, have you looked in the mirror? This right here..." I wave my finger at him. "Is issues. Have you got... hair gel in your hair?" He swipes his hand roughly through his hair. "I thought I told you not to ask?" He seems agitated about something. "Grumpy," I mumble, turning my attention back to the gun.

He walks behind me and pours a glass of water. I sigh and stand up, moving toward him. He stares down at the glass in his hand and doesn't look up until I'm right in front of him. My eyes hone in on a small bloodied split in his bottom lip.

I grab his chin, turning his face to the side so I can inspect it. "What happened?"

"Again," he growls as he snatches his face from my grasp. "Don't fucking ask me any questions." He tosses the glass in the sink and unbuttons his shirt as he makes his way out of the kitchen.

"Jude!" I shout, chasing after him. "Do not just fucking walk away from me. What happened to your lip?"

He keeps walking, throwing his shirt to the floor before he shoves his way through the bedroom door. I follow him, refusing to let him do this. Something is very wrong, and I want to know what the hell it is. When I walk in he's leaning over the dresser, staring at his reflection.

"Just leave me alone, Tor. I'm not answering your fucking Spanish Inquisition."

"What the hell is wrong with you? You storm in, with a massive fucking bug up your arse, and apparently I'm supposed to deal with your shit?" I snap.

He spins around, his body tense, his tattoos popping against his skin. Glaring at me, he starts to move past me, but I grab him, his arm rigid beneath my fingertips. He could easily break my hold, but he doesn't. His muscles bunch and flex like a coiled snake, and in this mood, that's exactly what he is.

"You want to know what's wrong with me?" His nostrils flare. "To get to Joe, you want to know what I've had to go and do, huh, Tor? Do you *really* want to fucking know?" This is Jude I'm talking about, a man with few morals and no limitations. If he's this upset over something, then I'm not sure I do want to know. I can see it's troubling him though, so I push forward.

"Tell me," I whisper.

His eyes meet mine, a cold look twisting his features into someone I barely recognise, a stranger I met, what feels like a lifetime ago. He releases a breath. "I just kidnapped a fucking girl."

There's a beat of silence as I absorb what he said. He took a girl, a girl just like me. "Why?" I ask. He must have a reason. He wouldn't just take someone without good reason. I know him.

He breaks free of my hold. "She's Stan's daughter. This is the only way I know I can trust him. The only way I can be sure he will go against everything he's been taught and betray anyone is if I take the one thing that matters more than his own life."

I nod slowly. "Is she hurt?" My voice hitches.

"No."

"Are you going to hurt her?" All I can see is a young girl lying naked on a concrete floor with a two-foot long gash down the centre of her body. An innocent girl just like I once was, an innocent victim.

He won't look at me. "I can't do this with you. I'll do whatever I have to do to keep you safe." He walks out of the room.

I follow him again, this time more determined, but scared for the girl who I now know stands between Jude and Joe.

"Jude!" I call after him, my voice shaking. He halts, and glances over his shoulder at me. I step up behind him and wrap my arms around his thick waist, pressing my forehead between his shoulder blades. My palms lay flat over his defined stomach. I just need to touch him. I need him to remember that I'm not the enemy here. His body is tense, his breaths laboured.

"I understand why..." I start. "Just. Please don't hurt her," I beg, my voice barely rising over the sound of my own strangled breathing.

"I don't want to..." he takes in a shallow breath.

"Please," I whisper so quietly, it's more of a prayer than a request to Jude.

"This is why I didn't say anything to you about it. It's too close to you." He sighs and turns to face me, his hand running along my back. "It was so fucking hard to do, Tor, but I have no other choice." His eyes are full of turmoil, and I can see the pain this causes him. "There is not a line I will not fucking cross to protect you."

I take a deep breath and cup his cheek, rubbing my thumb over his stubble. "I know, and I love you for it, but I need... I need you to promise me that you won't hurt her, Jude. We can't live our lives at the expense of hers. I know you need to her, but just, don't hurt her." My stomach churns uncomfortably for even condoning this in any way. She's a person, not a bargaining chip.

"I'm not gonna let anything happen to her. I don't know what the fuck I'll do if Stan doesn't bring me Joe. We'll be more than fucking fucked."

"Okay. Well, then we try something else, but whatever happens, you let her go, unharmed. Where is she?"

He closes his eyes. "With Rich..."

I take a step back away from him. "Rich? You left her with Rich?" There's an edge of hysteria in my tone. Why the hell would he leave her with him? I lean my forearm against the nearest wall and hunch over, clutching my stomach as a wave of nausea hits me.

"Shit," he mumbles, rubbing his hand over my back. "I told him if he didn't touch her I'd pay him a quarter million. That bastard would let his own dick rot off for fucking money. He won't do anything to her."

I shake my head. "Marney. You need to send Marney," I tell him.



"I need Marney with me, Tor. I know you hate Rich, but he won't touch her. You have to trust me."

I turn around, pressing my back to the wall. "It's not you I don't trust." Fuck, I hate the idea of this, but what choice do we have? This is a war we're fighting with Joe.

"It's just for tonight. Joe comes in tomorrow. Twelve hours from now, she'll be free and we'll be gone. Joe will be dead."

"Okay, but you're going to call that spineless shit and you're going to let me talk to him. I'll cut his fucking dick off and feed it to him if he touches her. That's not even a dramatic threat. I mean it," I growl.

He raises an eyebrow at me. "Really?"

"Ask Mussa." His lips pull into a smirk at that comment. "Damn." He places one hand on the wall and leans into me. "You're hot when you get violent." His lips skim up the outside of my throat, stopping just below my ear. My pulse skitters wildly, but I press a hand against his chest, pushing him back.

"Call him. Now."

He smirks. "As you wish."

# Chapter 28

## Jude

The old truck rumbles along the interstate, the street lights casting an intermittent glow across the cab. Tor fidgets nervously beside me. Her hand is in mine, her leg bouncing anxiously.

"Tor," I say, and she glances up at me. She's biting her lip; worry etched across her face. "When Marney drops me off, that girl is going to get in the car with you. Do *not* fucking untie her."

She closes her eyes. I know that is going to be hard for her to deal with, but there is no way around this. "Just don't even look at her, okay? Pretend like she's not even here."

She nods. "Okay." Her eyes dart to mine. "Please be careful." She closes her eyes again and takes a deep breath.

"When am I not careful?" I smile as I brush a fingertip across her cheek.

Her eyes flash open, the steel blue of her irises searing right through me. "The second anything happens, you get out." Her fingers trace over my jaw. "I will not lose you to him too," she whispers.

"Nothing's gonna happen to me." I take a quick breath as I glance out of the window.

We're pulling off the interstate. I need to quickly make sure she understands this all before I leave. "You don't get

out of the car. If Marney tells you to leave, you do it. Don't argue."

The truck sputters to a stop. She looks utterly terrified and grabs onto my arm.

"Tor, I'm coming right back."

She releases me and I climb out of the truck. I hear Rich coughing, and see the interior lights to his car come on when he opens the door. He lumbers around to the trunk and opens it. I come up behind him and my stomach knots. Sofia is crammed into the trunk, arms and legs bound, mouth gagged. All I can think about is that this is how Tor was brought to me. I shut that thought out.

Sofia's eyes are wide, her face soaked with tears. Rich reaches down and grabs the restraints, yanking her up, and I shove him out of the way. "Don't fucking hurt her," I shout, and Rich steps back.

I gently pull her out of the trunk and carry her to Marney's truck. She's shaking in my arms and whimpering. My chest tightens. I make a conscious effort not to look down at her as I approach the car. Rich walks ahead of me and opens the back cab of the truck.

"This will be over soon enough," I say as I place her in the back seat.

Marney glances back at me. "We'll be waiting on you," he says.

I make my way to the front passenger side. Tor's gaze is fixed straight ahead. I know she doesn't want to look back. I know that girl being in the car with her is probably killing her. I open the door and lean in. Tor turns her face towards me, her fingers brushing over my jaw. Her brows pull together in a frown and fear masks her features.

"Don't worry about me, doll," I say, taking her face in both hands and pressing my lips to hers.

Her fingers wrap around my wrists and hold me in place. She kisses me back harder, desperate to keep me there, but

I pry myself away. And damn, is that hard. I force a smile onto my face.

"You gotta let me go." I step back, my eyes locked on hers. "I love you," I say before I shut the door. I watch the taillights disappear as Marney speeds off and inhale deeply.

"Now what?" Rich asks as he lights a cigarette.

"We hope to fucking God this guy's alone when he shows up."

We stand on the side of the road, guns in hand, and wait for the limousine to drive up. I've spent fifteen years imagining what the hell I would do when I finally get my hands on Joe Campbell, and now that I'm so close, it's a strange mix of excitement and fear. Headlights appear in the distance, and my heart drums into my throat.

"Alright, you check the back when he pulls up, okay?"

"Yep," Rich says. I hear the click of the gun cock.

The car slows and veers over onto the shoulder, dust flying up in the red taillights. I keep my finger on the trigger, stepping back into the tall grass as the black car rolls to a stop. I point the gun at the window as I reach for the passenger side door handle and open it. "You better be fucking alone," I say, staring in at Stan.

He glares at me, hatred written all over his face. "Where's my daughter?"

Rich moves to the back and opens the door. I see him climb inside out of the corner of my eye. "It's empty," he says.

"Roll the partition down," I order Stan before shutting the front door and getting into the back seat with Rich.

"Where is my daughter?" Stan asks again.

Ignoring his question, I press the barrel of the gun to the seat and glare at him through the opened glass. "I have this 45 Magnum buried in the seat behind you. You piss me off; I pull the trigger, and that bullet will rip right through your intestines. You do exactly as I say, or I will fucking kill you,

and then your daughter doesn't stand a chance. Got it?" I exhale.

He doesn't say anything. "Got It? I shout.

"Yes," he growls.

"Good, now, drive. Don't stop until you get to the airport. You don't answer your phone if it rings."

His jaw ticks as he puts the car into drive and pulls off. It's silent, only the low hum of the tires rolling over the pavement. All I can think is this can't be so easy. If this guy said anything to Joe, tipped him off at all, this will not go as planned, and really, I don't expect it to. Nothing ever goes as planned in life. *Nothing*. I play out various scenarios of what may happen. Thinking maybe we're being driven to some abandoned house where fifty of Joe's men are waiting on us. The uncertainty causes my pulse to race. It's not that I'm scared to die, because I'm not. I'm afraid to leave her. I don't want to leave her. I can't leave her... I promised.

We pull up to one of the gates at the airport, and Rich shoves his gun into the waist of his jeans, flipping the bottom of his shirt down over it.

I push the door open, and he clamors out. "Get your fucking ass down to his gate right the fuck now," I say before slamming the door shut.

The limo navigates the airport drop offs. I glare through the partition at Stan. "Don't do anything stupid." I scoot, placing myself in the corner of the limo so Joe can't see me until he's inside. The car comes to a complete stop, and my heart immediately burst into a full-on sprint. While we wait, I watch the swarm of people pouring through the airport doors, my gaze frantically searching for Rich. I locate him standing to the side of the sidewalk, both hands shoved in his pants pockets.

Time seems to drag on; my body is pumped full of adrenaline. It's only been a half hour, but it seems like a fucking eternity, and then, I spot Joe exiting the doors. He's dressed in a black suit and red tie, briefcase in hand. My

body heats the second I lay eyes on him. Each step he takes toward the car seems to be in slow motion. My heart violently slams against my chest, the sound of each hard beat is nearly deafening. I swallow when Joe reaches for the handle. Someone comes chasing after him, waving something in the air he must have dropped. Rich makes his way toward the car, standing directly behind Joe.

CLICK. The door opens, and Joe gets in the car. Rich lunges for the door grabbing onto it and slinging his body in behind Joe. Joe goes for his gun, but I point mine at his head with a resounding click.

"You fucking underestimated me," I say.

Joe looks up, and a sly smirk falls over his lips. "Did I?"

I use my free hand and tap over the glass. "Drive," I tell Stan.

The limo pulls away from the curb, bumping over the speed bumps. Rich grabs Joe's shoulders and forces him to turn around. Rich forces his hands behind his back, binding them with rope. Once he is finished restraining him, Joe laughs and slinks back into the seat.

We drive for miles; Joe and I sit glaring at each other coldly. He lifts a brow, a dark grin spreading over his mouth. "So, this is how it all ends is it? How are you going to kill me, Jude?"

I swallow hard as I stare at him. Even though he's at my mercy at this moment, he is completely calm, collected, unaffected by any of this, which makes me worry. "Slowly," is my only reply.

He laughs. "Always with the dramatic, your father was the same. Me, I like to kill emotionally before physically, it's more difficult, more agonizing. You see, I didn't kill your father physically, but he was already dead years before his heart gave out, wasn't he?" He chuckles again. "He hunted me until the day he died, trying to right something that couldn't be fixed, and now you're doing the same. I guess I should be flattered really."

I grit my teeth. The amount of sweat building in my palm is making the handle of the gun slippery. I will not acknowledge this piece of shit. I want to fucking put a bullet in his head right now; my finger twitches over the trigger. *I could do it. I should do it. But he deserves to fucking suffer.*

"Of course, I knew your father would come for me after I sent him that video." He grins. "I made him watch his virginal daughter get fucked again, and again."

Tension builds in my chest, my pulse going so wild I can feel it ticking in the end of my fingertips.

"You're having a daughter, right, Jude." His smile deepens. "I've already fucked her mother, so if you think about it, I've already fucked her while she was barely a thought in her mother's womb." White hot rage simmers beneath my skin. He leans forward slightly. "I've fucked every woman you ever cared about," he breathes.

Heat floods every last fucking inch of my skin. My heart is hammering against my ribs like a wild animal determined to escape, forcing the blood through my veins so hard black spots impair my vision. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying desperately to fight every fucking urge in my body. I have to do this the right way so we can leave this shit behind us.

"She's a good woman that girl of yours, her pussy is even tighter than your sister's and seeing as mine was the first dick to have her, that's saying something."

I pull the trigger. Joe grunts as the bullet rips through his shoulder. "Shut the fuck up!" I hiss.

He laughs maniacally, and then everything happens at once.

"Drop it," Rich shouts, panicked. "Drop it!"

I turn and Stan has a pistol pointed at my face. BAM. Blood splatters the windshield as Stan slumps forward against the steering wheel. The car violently veers off the road. Tires squeal, and we fishtail from side to side. I try to brace myself, but the sudden jerk throws me against the side of the car, my gun flying from my grasp. There's a bang, and

a moment of weightlessness, and then all I can hear is metal bending and glass shattering. There's a loud crunch as the car flips over, and I'm tossed around like a rag doll inside the cab as it rolls over and over again.

Suddenly, everything stops. My head spins as I try to find my bearings, and I attempt to blink away the dizziness. My ears are ringing so fucking loud.

The car is upside down, the windows all smashed out, the door frames buckled. The dim interior light casts enough of a glow that I can see Rich sprawled out in front of me, his neck twisted at a horrible angle, broken. Fuck. I try to sit up, but pain splinters through my leg. I glance down. My thigh is impaled by a jagged piece of glass, blood oozing around its edges. I grab the slick material, my hands shaking as I yank it out. A nauseating wave of pain courses through me, and blood spurts from the wound. I yank off my belt and strap it around my thigh, cinching it tightly above the gash.

I frantically feel around me, moving debris as I search for my gun. Movement catches my eye. Joe's scrambling out of the broken door. He leans back against the window frame, the snapped hinges creaking from his weight, and moments later, I hear his heavy footsteps as he jogs away from the car.

That motherfucker is not getting away. I'm so close.

I happen to spot the gun at the far end of the limo and crawl over to it, shove it in the back of my jeans as I drag myself through the crushed door. My leg hurts like a bitch. I pull myself from the wreckage, tripping as I go to stand. I catch myself on the ground, and my hands brush against a piece of rope lying beside the doorway. Shit! Joe was cutting the rope on the broken glass.

It's dark as fuck outside. I can hear the hum of the traffic on the highway above us, and I glance around, trying to see if I can spot Joe. I walk blindly after him, the pine needles crunching unevenly under my boots as I limp into the



darkness. With each slow step pain radiates down my leg and warm blood trickle down my thigh. I have to stop and lean against a tree. I grab my thigh, squeezing in an attempt to dull some of the pain. After a few seconds, I pull in a hard breath and continue through the woods until I come to a small clearing. There's a break in the trees allowing a trickle of moonlight to filter through. It sheds just enough light to make out vague shapes. I stop, listening for even the faintest sound, but all I can hear is my racing pulse and heavy breaths.

I panic. I cannot go on with my life if he is not dead.

The clouds sweep over the moon, utter darkness swallowing everything around me. My head is pounding. The ringing in my ears is so loud I can barely make out the sound of a footstep right behind me. A thick arm wraps around my throat, pulling back and crushing my Adam's apple into my windpipe.

"I didn't underestimate a thing, JP," he growls in my ear, tightening his grip around my throat.

I choke for air, clawing at his hands to get him off of me. I tuck my chin and use all my strength to throw my elbow into his stomach. His grip loosens momentarily, and I'm able to twist out of his hold. I swing my fist in his direction, hitting him in the side of the face. He stumbles, and I grab my gun, but before I can aim, Joe's kicked it from my grasp. There's a soft thud as it land in the brush behind me.

"No, JP," Joe pants. "You are going to fight me like a man. I want to kill you with my bare hands."

I lay into him, throwing punch after, which he meets. My face is throbbing, and my mouth is filled with blood. I've never fought a man as strong as him. Joe punches me hard in the face, knocking me to the ground. When I stand back up, he grabs me by the throat again, but this time, I latch onto his. We stand face to face, our eyes locked as we choke one another. His eyes narrow and his nostrils flare as I squeeze harder. His fingers dig into my neck, his thumbs

pressing beneath my chin. I can feel everything draining from my body, and my hold on him grows weak. I think of Tor and my clutch on him tightens. His eyes flutter as my vision blurs, and then, his hands drop from my neck and he falls to the ground. I bend over my knees, gasping for air.

I stare at his limp body sprawled out on the ground. "Fuck you," I breathe and walk toward the brush to search for my gun.

The clouds slowly roll away, and the light from the moon brightens just enough that I catch a glint. I reach down, relief washing over me as my hand wraps around the handle of my gun. My heart pounds relentlessly as I turn to put a bullet in that worthless fuckers head, but something collides with my temple. The force knocks me sideways, and I lose my grip on the gun when I land on my knees. My head throbs while my vision swims in and out. A large shadow falls over the ground beside me and feels the cold end of the gun press to the back of my head.

"Really, I *am* sorry for this to have to end," Joe says.

# Chapter 29

## Victoria

I drum my fingers nervously on my knee. The building in front of us is shrouded in darkness, the shadows hiding Marney's truck from the road.

The driver's window is open, and Marney blows a stream of smoke through the small gap. His gun rests on his thigh, his free hand casually resting on the steering wheel. I wish I could be as calm as he is. Marney has done this so long; nothing phases him.

Sophia is in the back seat, her hands bound together. Rich had duct tape over her mouth, but I removed it. Not that it seems to make any difference. She doesn't talk anyway. Normally that would bother me, and I would be trying to console her about her current situation, but I can't. The only thing I can think about is Jude.

"He should be here by now," I mumble.

Marney turns to look at me. "You just calm yourself there, sweetheart, Jude'll get here when he gets here."

I huff an exasperated breath. *What if he doesn't get here though? What if something went wrong? What if Joe killed him?* Oh, God, I feel sick. If my quest for revenge gets Jude killed...

Minutes tick by, and still nothing. "They should be here," I repeat, more to myself than anything.

Marney nods, blowing out a stream of smoke. "Yep." *Why isn't he panicking?* He pulls out his iPhone and taps the screen, narrowing his eyes at it. The bright backlight illuminates the haggard lines of his face. "Hmm," he hums.

"What?" I snap. I'm so on edge, I feel like I might explode.

He raises an eyebrow at me. "They stopped."

He turns the phone towards me, showing me a map, and in the middle is a green blinking dot, just sitting there, unmoving.

"What's that?"

"Jude's cell. He should be in that car, and it should be moving." A sense of dread creeps through me. Something is wrong. I know it is. Where Joe Campbell is involved, it's extremely likely.

"We need to go, Marney."

He glances at me.

"Now!"

He sighs. "Jude won't like it."

"Jude might be dead already!" My voice cracks as I say the words. *Please* don't let him die.

He nods and turns the ignition. My heart races as we drive along the interstate, back in the direction of the airport. Marney glances down at the little green dot flashing on his phone. I keep my eyes on the opposite side of the road, looking for a black limo, in case they pass us. I don't see one.

We pull off the interstate, and end up on the back roads. There's no street lighting out here, and cars are a lot less

frequent. As we get closer to the dot on the screen, my eyes furiously search ahead of us. Marney slows down, and it's then I see the thick black tire marks veering across the road.

Marney pulls over, and I throw the door open. I can instantly smell burning rubber mixed with the petrol. The tire tracks lead off the road and ripped up undergrowth leaves freshly exposed earth in front of me. I run straight down the embankment. My eyes adjust to the darkness, and there, in the tree line is the limo, on its roof.

"Jude!" I scream, but Marney is there behind me, covering my mouth with his hand.

"Joe might be in there," he hisses. "Stay here and keep an eye on the girl," he says, but I ignore him and push away, pulling the gun from the waist of my jeans.

I move towards the car. The windows are all smashed out, and the only sound is the slow tick of the engine as it settles and cools. *If Jude is alive, there would be some noise, right? Shit.* I crouch down, pull out my phone, and turn on the torch. With shaking hands I shine it into the dark interior of the limo, my other hand firmly wrapped around my gun, my index finger pressed against the trigger. I'm scared to look, scared that I might find Jude's lifeless eyes staring back at me.

There's a body laying across the roof of the car; the limbs sprawled out. The sandy brown hair tells me it's Rich, and from the angle of his head, his neck is snapped. I don't see anyone else. I move forward and look in the open driver's side door. A man hangs from the seat belt. I go to check his pulse, but as I lean forward I see the large bullet wound that has ripped through his throat. Blood trickles down his face, dripping onto the upturned roof.

Jude is nowhere to be seen, and neither is Joe.

I stand up and glance back at Marney, who is standing at the top of the embankment, probably so he can keep an eye on Sofia. I look back at the body in the driver's seat, her father. Her life will be forever tainted because of what we did to her, and I hate that.

Marney opens his mouth to say something, but then I hear something in the woods, and he snaps his mouth shut, listening intently with me.

Before he can stop me, I take off running in the direction of the sound, it's Jude, I know it is. The farther I run, the more distinguished the noise becomes, shouting and the sound of fists hitting flesh. I shove through the thick undergrowth and stumble into the edge of a small clearing. I hang back, lingering in the dark shadows created by the moonlight. The two figures are raining blows down on each other. I can't tell who is who in the dim light, can't see who has the upper hand. I raise my gun, ready to shoot, but I can't. I can't risk hitting Jude.

I lean back against the nearest tree, hiding myself from sight. My breathing is erratic, my pulse hammering in my ears like a freight train. My hands shake as sweat slicks my palms. The sound of punches being traded stops, and I glance around the tree. Someone is on their knees with a gun pointed at their head.

*Shit!* I need one of them to say something, because if Jude is the one on the ground, then this is my opportunity to kill Joe.

"I've waited for this for so fucking long, and I must say, it has been well worth the wait," Joe growls. It's then that I realize Jude is the one on his knees, and I feel sick. "You are so fucking weak. Your father would be disgusted."

I point the gun, my hands shaking violently, but I can't get a good shot because he's circling Jude like a lion.

"I'm going to kill you; then I'm going to go find that whore and cut your fucking baby right out of her stomach."

This is it. I close my eyes for a second and block out everything as I try to slow my heart rate. I hear Jude's voice in my head. Joe is fifty yards away from me, that's twice the distance of any shot I've made at home, but I can't miss. I can't. Focus, breathe in and out. Staring down the sight, I aim at the shadowy figure pointing a gun at the man I love, the man ready to kill my everything. I inhale, pause, and squeeze the trigger. The gun explodes in my grasp, and I can barely make myself look up. If I failed, we're both dead.

# Chapter 30

## Jude

There's a loud bang, and I wait for the pain, for the state of nothingness. And then Joe falls forward, his heavy body crushing me to the ground. Warm blood pours over my chest. I hear footsteps running through the woods, then Tor screaming. "Jude!"

I shove Joe's body off of me. Trying to shake the state of confusion I'm in.

Tor runs toward me, dropping to her knees when she reaches me. She's crying and shaking with a gun in her hand. I sit up, grabbing onto her and pulling her to me. "Shh. I'm fine, doll." I rub my hand along her back as I stare over her shoulder at Joe's lifeless body.

"You shot him?" I ask in disbelief. I never even saw her. *He's dead.* Joe Campbell is finally dead, after all these years of chasing what seemed to be a ghost, he's gone.

"He was going to kill you," she says, her voice trembling. I take the gun from her and lay it on the ground beside me.

"Shh, Tor. Calm down." I stroke her face, swiping away the tears with my thumbs. "It's okay. It's all okay." She won't stop shaking, and I'm terrified this may be the thing that's finally going to cause her to have a mental breakdown.



She nods, her fingers clinging to my shirt. I kiss her forehead and slowly stand up. Everything spins around me, but I make my way over to Joe's body, snatching my gun from his hand. I stare at him, hate and rage fuming to the surface. I aim at his face and pull the trigger. I wait, and shoot again and again, until my magazine is empty and his face is unrecognizable.

This was the moment I lived the past fifteen years of my life for, and it's over, but nothing's changed. I always thought that in this moment I will feel justification, I would feel a sense of righteousness, but I feel nothing. I stare at him. I fucking hate him, everything he did to my family, to my Tor. Revenge is a debt that not even death can pay. I've spent my entire life seeking vengeance because I thought it would make me whole, but all it's done is cost me everything, except for her.

I turn back to Tor. She's frozen in place, staring at Joe. The expression on her face makes me think she's realized that his death won't numb the pain.

"Come on," I whisper, grabbing her hand and leading her back through the woods.

Dawn is breaking as we climb up the ravine. As soon as we reach the top, my heart stops. "Fuck," I mumble beneath my breath as I drop Tor's hand.

I'm staring across the tall weeds at a highway littered with men dressed in black uniforms and bulletproof vests, guns aimed at us.

"Throw any weapons you have down, and lay on the ground."

"I'm sorry," I whisper to Tor as I pull my gun and toss it onto the highway "You just say you had nothing to do with this. Nothing. You look after our baby, Tor. You hear me?" I glance sideways at her, and she nods slowly.

I carefully lower myself to the ground and lay my body flat. Men rush toward us, yelling, "Get on the ground!"

"I am on the fucking ground!" I shout.

"Get on the ground. On the ground!"

It's not me they're shouting at, it's Tor. I strain my neck to look back at her. She's on her knees, her face white, tears pouring down her cheeks, and it's then I notice her bloodstained clothing and hands. Joe's blood is all over me, and now it's all over her. Shit!

"Don't move!" one of the men yell at me.

"She's fucking pregnant!" I lift my head to argue and find the barrel of a rifle pointed in my face.

A man steps behind Tor and forces her to the ground, yanking her arms behind her back. Her cheek presses against the asphalt of the highway. Her tear filled eyes focus on me. "Jude!" she cries. And I can't do a damn thing!

"Let her the fuck go!" I plead. "She's innocent. I took her. She's my fucking hostage. She had nothing to do with any of this. Just let her go."

"Jude!"

The past seven months rush through my mind. How the hell can I protect her from this shit right here? She's murdered people. She's in love with me. She's pregnant with my child. "Stockholm Syndrome!" I yell in desperation. "She has Stockholm Syndrome. Just let her go!"

An officer jerks my arms behind my back, and the cold metal handcuffs snap around my wrists. Panic rises in my chest. This is the risk that comes with my lifestyle, the fear that's always lurked in the back of my mind, that one day I would get caught. I've always known that if I get caught, I'm

done for because my list of wrongs is a bottomless fucking pit, but Tor... this was a risk she never bargained for.

"Her name's Victoria Pears..." I stop as I'm hauled to my feet. "No, her name's Victoria Deveau. She was kidnapped. She's innocent!" I shout.

Two guys drag Tor to her feet and pull her toward a black SUV. All I can think is that if they hurt her, I will find a way to fucking kill them. I'm marched to an unmarked car. A guy in a suit is leaned against the trunk, scowling at me. He pulls his suit jacket open exposing his badge and gun as he narrows his gaze on me.

"Jude Pearson," he says my name with an edge of awe and respect, like he's just stumbled upon the Holy-fucking-Grail. The corner of his lips curl up and he chuckles. "Thought you were dead. Hmm. Come for Joe Campbell, and find you. Surprise, surprise." He pushes me forward and I stumble. "Man, I'm getting promoted for this." He gives me another hard shove toward the car. "Get in the car." I go to lean down and he pushes me into the small backseat, smacking my skull against the door frame. Fucking dick!

I rest my head against the back of the seat. I peer through the chained metal separating the front and back seats and am barely able to make out Tor being carted to another car. I will do every-fucking-thing to get her out of this. My girl will not go to prison, and my kid will not be raised by strangers. I watch the man gently place his hand on the top of her head as she's guided in. She is in the back of that car because of me. She is fucked in the head because of me. She's pregnant and in love with me because everything else was taken from her. Had I met her on the street, she wouldn't have given me a second fucking look. This may be love for me, but for her, it's anything but. It was survival. Deep down inside, I believe as long as she goes

free, this is for the best. She can have her life back. She can have the things she deserves.

Joe got what he had coming to him, and I guess, so did I. In the end, that's what life's all about anyway, everyone getting what they deserve.



I haven't said a fucking word to them. I chose my right to remain silent.

The car pulls up to a tall chain length fence topped with barbed wire. A buzzer sounds and the gate slides open allowing us to drive onto the prison grounds. My stomach sinks when I hear the metal gate slam shut behind us. This is it. I feel helpless and I don't like that feeling at fucking all.

"Welcome home, Mr. Pearson. Just the place a man of your caliber belongs," the agent next to me smirks.

I want to tell him to fuck off, but there's no point. The damn cuffs are cutting my circulation off so I focus on that uncomfortable tingling sensation instead of him. I exhale and slam my head back against the seat.

"You're gonna spend a long time here," he mocks.

I can feel my blood pressure rising, and I just can't help myself. "You shouldn't be so sure of yourself," I say, staring up at the ceiling of the car. "I haven't had my trial yet."

He laughs. "Okay. I've never heard of a man as low-down as you walking free."

"And I'm sure you've never met a man quite like me. I've just been in the wrong place at the wrong time an awful lot."

"You're a bookie, a killer, a criminal. You are going to fucking die in a jail cell."

"We'll see what my lawyer says about that."

The car stops and the agent opens the door, grabs my elbow, and yanks me out of the car. "Get out." He shakes his head as he pulls me toward the open door on the side of the concrete building, and pushes me through.

I'm taken to an office where they fingerprint me, strip me of my clothes, and give me a full cavity search before handing me a bright orange jumpsuit. I'm told I'm wanted on five counts of first degree murder, kidnapping, running an illegal gambling ring, money laundering and tax evasion before I'm ushered against a wall, handed a plate with my prison number on it, and told to look straight ahead. I smirk when the light flashes.

Two prison guards are brought into the room. One stands on each side of me and holds onto my arms as they walk me down the hallway.

"Two? Aren't I fucking special?" I groan.

One of the men glances up at me. "No, just insane," he says as we round a corner.

We navigate through several long corridors and down a set of stairs. *They're taking me to solitary confinement? Fuck me.* The entire hallway smells like bleach. Inmates bang on the doors and shout as we pass by.

"Hey, piggy, piggy..." one sings behind his door.

The officer bangs his fist over a door. "Marshall, shut up!"

We stop in front of a metal door that has a tiny window at the top. The guard unlocks the door and the hinges creak

as it swings open. The room is tiny, with a stainless steel toilet and sink in the corner, a small cot against the wall.

"Don't cover the window. That will get you an extra week in confinement once you're sentenced, buttercup. Don't shit in the floor either."

They uncuff me and turn to leave the cell. The door slams shut with a heavy finality. I stand, staring at the thick bars, completely in denial that this has happened. *Five counts of first-degree murder.* I will never get out of this fucking place. I pace with my hands clasped behind my head. This is not how my life is supposed to go. I'm supposed to be with Tor, far away from all this shit. I promised her I would never leave her... the baby... I wipe my hand down my face and stare at the cinder block wall. The longer I let myself think about the life I was so damn close to, the more enraged I become. I draw my arm back and punch the brick. Pain splinters up my arm. I slam my fist into the concrete again, and again, and again. I keep hitting the wall until my arm is weak, my knuckles busted and bleeding; until the pain grows numb. Breathing hard, I stare at the patch of blood on the white bricks. Out of everything that has happened in my life, out of all the fucked up, gruesome, heartless shit I've done, failing her is the worst. Knowing that she'll raise our baby alone, that I can't take care of them the way I should; there's no other way to explain how this feel besides that it breaks my fucking heart. I was *going* to have a life. Was going to.

"Fuck!" I shout, my voice bounces around the small cell.  
"Fuck!"

I hear some of the other inmates laughing, and I fall onto the cot, the worn springs groaning under my weight. Trapped for the rest of my goddamn life. This is worse than death. It's worse than hell. This is the cruelest form of torture I could ever be sentenced to. Knowing I had a chance at life, at a

family, at things I know I never deserved, but, instead I'm stuck in this fucking place. The rest of my pathetic life to rot in here and think about how badly I fucked up.

# Chapter 31

## Victoria

I'm taken to a room, with white walls, a mirror on one side, and a table with four chairs in the middle.

A woman strides into the room wearing what looks like a very expensive suit. "Remove her cuffs." She waves off the officer who brought me in.

He releases the cuffs from my wrists, and the blood rushes back into my hands. I wince as I work my fingers, getting the feeling back. The officer leaves the room, and the woman flashes me a smile.

"I'm Detective Lawson," she introduces herself. I don't respond. "Please, sit." She gestures to the chair in front of me, and I take a seat. "Is there anything I can get you? Anything to eat or drink?" She keeps her voice soft, as though she might scare me.

I glare at her. "No. Thank you."

She nods and pulls out the chair opposite me. There's a long moment of silence as she watches me.

"Can you tell me your name?" She asks.

I instantly tense. Anything I say could implicate Jude, so I say nothing, keeping my eyes fixed on the table. I jump



when I feel her hand touch mine. "He can't hurt you anymore, Victoria."

I narrow my eyes at her, pulling my hands underneath the table. "So you already know my name."

She purses her lips. "Your facial profiling and fingerprints match one Miss Victoria Deveaux. Only, Miss Deveaux is presumed deceased."

"Well, I'm not," I whisper.

"I can see that." Her gaze strays down to my stomach. "I can see that." She repeats, and then hesitates. "Victoria, I just want to ask you some questions. I want to help you, but I need to ascertain your involvement in the murder of Joe Campbell, and your connection to Jude Pearson."

I don't want her help; I just want Jude. My stomach twists violently as I think about what has happened to him. We killed Joe. We're going to prison. Tears prick my eyes as I think of spending my life behind bars. I press my hand to the small bump, straining against the front of my t-shirt. Will my baby be raised by strangers? Will she never know who I am? Worse, will she think I'm a criminal?

She nods as she exhales. "Victoria, you went missing seven months ago..."

I grit my teeth. "I know."

"How does a resident from Vanderbilt University end up with a notorious bookie from Alabama? Help me understand why you were with him when you were arrested." I start to feel pressured to say something, anything. I couldn't even make up a lie elaborate enough to cover this, so I tell her the truth. Rich took me.

"I... My ex-boyfriend owed him a debt. One of his enforcers took me instead. It was a mistake."

She nods, and something in her expression changes. She's curious, eager to know my story. "Your ex-boyfriend being Euan Wright." I nod. "Are you aware that Mr. Wright was killed shortly after your disappearance?"

Again, I don't respond.

"I can't help you if you won't say anything."

"I have nothing to say."

"You had Joe Campbell's blood all over you Victoria. You are a suspect in a murder case."

I flash her a cold, hard look and remain silent.

"Jude Pearson abducted you, held you hostage." Her eyes flick to my stomach again. "Abused you," her voice is barely above a whisper.

I glare at her, anger bubbling to the surface. "He did not abuse me," I snap.

She pauses, narrowing her eyes at me. "Do you know who the father of your baby is, Victoria?"

"Yes." I grate.

"Who is the father?" She pushes, refusing to take my one-word answers. I say nothing.

"We can take DNA samples and find out either way," she threatens.

I don't want them touching my baby. "Jude is her father."

I see the judgement in her eyes, the pity for the poor girl who was abducted and raped. "I don't have to explain myself to you. Charge me or release me."

She nods solemnly and leaves the room.



I'm going crazy. I keep telling myself this is all just some nightmare, that Jude will get out of this because he's Jude, and he always gets out of everything right? Shit. He has to. I know he wouldn't leave me. I've never felt so vulnerable. Whatever happened to me, no matter how awful, I somehow always knew that he would come. I knew that he would save me from anything, but with him in prison... I feel so painfully alone.

Everyone keeps telling me it's over now, and no one will hurt me. I don't want it to be over. I would rather live in Jude's world, surrounded by danger, than in this one without him. Safety, security... what's it worth really? Safety assures survival. Jude is my life. I want to live, not survive.

I've been asked the same questions over and over for what seems like days. Back and forth they go until I snap and tell them again what I've already told them: I love Jude, and I killed Joe. They take my clothes, DNA samples, photograph the scars littering my body, and even want to do a rape examination on me. It's at this point I lose my shit and refuse to speak to them anymore. It's clear that I've gone from suspect to victim over the course of their questions. Eventually they send a woman into the room to ask me more bloody questions. She wants to 'help'. I'm a doctor. I know a shrink when I see one. She was doing a psych evaluation. They think I have Stockholm syndrome, which is bullshit. I mean, yes I fell in love with a man who held me hostage, but... he didn't really. He let me go. I chose to stay with him. I was with him by choice, not necessity.

Just when I think they can't possibly have any more questions, I'm led to another interrogation room, this one without a mirror.

When the detective walks in, I can tell she's not like the others. She has a no bullshit manner about her. She's wearing a fitted trouser suit and high heels. Her red hair is pulled into a tight ponytail, showcasing her sculpted cheekbones. She's pretty, except for her eyes, which remind me of a snake stalking its prey.

"Miss Devaux, I'm Detective Lowe." She throws her badge onto the table and takes a seat opposite me. I glance at it. FBI.

"I already told them..."

"I'm going to cut to the chase. I'm not after you, Miss Devaux. My job is to go after much bigger fish than you. I want Jude Pearson."

I narrow my eyes at her. "I don't know anything."

She smiles. "I have a trail of bodies all pointing to Pearson, but not enough evidence to nail him to the wall, and I really want to nail him to the fucking wall, Miss Devaux. I need a witness statement saying he killed Joe Campbell, and you watched him do it."

"I killed Joe Campbell," I say coldly.

"Oh, I *know*." She pulls out a file and dumps out pictures. "This is the gun used to kill Campbell. It has your fingerprints on it, and there was gun powder residue on your hands, meaning you fired it. Lastly, the trajectory of the bullet when it hit Joe Campbell's body was the wrong angle for someone of Pearson's height, but the perfect angle for someone of your height."

"Why are you telling me this? I just told you I killed him."

Her lips twist into a smile. "Because I don't care that you killed him. You are going to testify to the fact that Jude pulled the trigger."

"What?" My head is spinning. "Why?"

Her eyes lock with mine. "Because if you don't, I will put forward this evidence and have you arrested for the murder of Joe Campbell. You will serve life in prison, and that baby,"

she points at my stomach, "will be brought up in foster care." I swallow hard.

"I'm not going to let Jude take the fall for something I did," I choke, trying to conceal my weakness.

"Oh, honey." She huffs a small laugh. "He's going down either way. I have him on money laundering, illegal gambling, extortion, perverting the course of justice. I have enough to get him fifteen years, but like I said..." She leans forward in her seat. "I want to nail him to the wall. I need something solid." She sits back again and smooths the front of her jacket. "Your call. You can both go to prison, or you can save yourself and raise your love child." She cocks an eyebrow.

"I've already told the other officers I killed Joe."

She shrugs. "The ramblings of an abused girl suffering from Stockholm syndrome."

My heart is thrumming, my breathing laboured. I'm going to jail for killing Joe. It seems so unjust, to suffer what I did at the hands of that man, and then go to prison for the rest of my life for killing him.

I shake my head. "If they think I have Stockholm syndrome, then I can plead insanity," I whisper.

"Yes, you can, and they will section you, and take your baby away as soon as it's born." She tilts her head to the side. "I'm giving you options here Miss Devaux. As I said, I care very little about you, it's him I want. I need a witness statement from a girl who he kidnapped. I need the jury to see the man that Jude Pearson is."

"He's not a bad person..." I fumble.

Sighing, she rolls her eyes. "Yes, yes, I know. You love him. I guess you really do have Stockholm." She meets my eyes. "In a few months, when you're rotting in a jail cell, and you've gotten over this little thing you have for your captor, you will regret not taking this opportunity."

I shake my head, cutting her off. "No, I won't do it."

Her lips purse, and she pauses for a moment, drumming her fingers over the desk. "I tell you what, I'll give you a week. Go home, be with your family, and think about the fact that Jude Pearson *is* a criminal who *kidnapped* you. Your loyalties to him are misplaced. Think long and hard about whether you are willing to spend your life behind bars for a man who has killed enough people to serve ten life sentences."

I can't say anything. She has me over a barrel, and she knows it.

She stands up and moves to the door, holding it open for me. I move past her.

"One week." She repeats. I walk away without looking back at her.

"I'll be in touch." She calls after me. I keep walking.



Finally, they contact my sister and tell her I'm alive.

I sit in the small family room, staring blankly at the TV on the wall. I used to want nothing more than to go back to my old life, to see my sister, to go back to my job. Now though, I can't think, I can't feel. My sister seems like the distant memory of someone else, someone who hasn't seen and experienced all I have, someone untainted by the darkness that now clings to the edges of my world. I am not the same person I was all those months ago.

A few minutes later and the door clicks open. The shrink from earlier steps into the room, an overbearing smile on her face. "Victoria, your sister is here. Would you like me to bring her in?"

I hate this, the tiptoeing around as if I'm some fragile abuse victim. I nod mutely. I have to get this over with at some point. The woman disappears and then my sister is walking into the room.

"Oh, Ria!" Just the sound of that name on her lips makes me flinch. I've come to associate it with Caleb, because in these past months, he was the only one to call me by that name.

As I watch her approach, I can't help but feel as though Caleb was more of a sibling to me than the woman walking towards me. Maybe my mind is warped. I should be thrilled to see her, happy to be back with the only family I have left. When did the people who ripped me away from her become my family?

Lizzy throws her arms around my neck, sobs wracking her body. I feel... I don't know... the tug of old memories, pulling at the edges of my mind. I wrap my arms around her.

"I can't believe it," she cries. "I thought you were dead." She pulls back, her tear filled eyes meeting mine.

Her eyes are the same steely shade of blue as mine; her pale blonde hair hangs in a neat bob. Lizzy has always been so perfectly put together. She always knew what she wanted, had it all planned out, and so did I, until Jude.

"I'm so happy to have you here, in my arms." She sniffs. I still don't say anything. I'm not sure what there is to say. Her eyes study my face, searching for traces of emotion. "Are you... are you okay?"

I look away from her, focusing on a spot over her shoulder. "Yeah, I'm fine." As fine as I could possibly be right now. I don't know how much they've told her.

"What happened to you?" she whispers. I meet her eyes again and stare at her for a long moment. She won't understand any of this.

"Nothing."

Her eyes flick downward and fix on my throat, on the ugly scar that runs six inches across it. She swallows hard, her eyebrows pinching together. "Ria—"

"Please, call me Victoria." I cut her off. She looks hurt, and for a second I feel bad. She's always called me Ria, but

it's just... I can't.

She nods and glances away, the tension thick between us. "Well, I guess I should take you home."

*Home.* The word makes stomach clench. It's as though the second I step foot back into my old life, my life with Jude will disappear, as if it never really existed. The two cannot exist side by side.

She takes my hand, linking her fingers through mine. I just feel, numb, disconnected, as though I'm watching someone else go through the motions, but it's not really me. What choice do I have but to go with her? Jude is locked up. Lizzy is all I have .

I shove my free hand into the front pocket of the massive hoody one of the officers gave me to wear after they took my clothes. I hate that it smells of another man.

I can feel Lizzy's eyes on me the entire way back to her house. Her husband John drives, quietly humming along to the radio.

My eyelids start to grow heavy. I'm emotionally and physically drained. I'm tired of fighting every step of the way, and just when things look up, I'm knocked flat on my back again. I pull my knees up to my chest and curl up against the door of the car. As soon as I close my eyes, all I can see is blood, and Joe's lifeless body. I fall asleep with a smile on my lips.



# Chapter 32

## Jude

The door opens. "Put your wrists together," the guard says. I do as told and the cuffs click over my wrists. He squats and places shackles on my ankles.

"Is that really necessary?"

"Yep."

I sigh and follow him out of the cell. I'm brought to a room and set at the table. Seconds later, the door creaks open, and a woman in a dress suit struts in. She glares at me, not trying the slightest to hide her disgust with me. She looks like a fucking bitch from hell, overly confident with something to fucking prove.

"Mr. Pearson. I'm Detective Lowe. FBI," she says as she flashes her badge.

I slump in my chair and glare up at her. "You're wasting your time coming in here. I know my fucking rights."

"I'm not here to ask you questions." She smiles and rests against the edge of the table in front of me. "I'm just here to let you know exactly how much you've fucked up."

I wash all emotion from my face and stare coldly at her.

"I must say, I am impressed." She braces her hands on the table, leaning forward towards me.

"How a man like you ever managed to make a woman like her fall in love with you..." I feel my nostrils flare, and she laughs. "Or maybe, just maybe I should say I'm

impressed that a woman like that made you fall in love with her?" She pushes off of the desk and walks in front of me.

"You ruined her life, sad thing is, you aren't done just yet."

I grit my teeth and train my eyes on the floor. I won't talk to this manipulative bitch.

"Mr. Pearson," she coos. "Victoria has confessed to the murder of Joe Campbell. I have enough evidence to put her behind bars for the rest of her life. Granted, they may question her sanity, but then she'll be deemed too unstable to bring up that child of yours." She narrows her eyes at me, a small smirk on her lips.

My heart slams violently against my ribs. "She didn't do anything." I say through gritted teeth. I want to rip this bitch's head from her fucking shoulders.

"Sadly, the evidence suggests otherwise. She is willing to go to prison to save you, but you and I both know you are beyond saving." She turns and walks toward the door, pausing when she reaches it. "You say you love her?"

I don't answer.

"You can still save her and your child Mr. Pearson." She opens the door and leaves the room.

*Fucking bitch!* I'm not an idiot. I know what she's doing, but I don't even care. She wants to ensure I go to jail for a long fucking time. She wants to be the one who brought down Jude Pearson. That's fucking fine. I don't care what the hell happens to me; my only concern is Tor and the baby.

The longer I sit here, the harder my heart races. I cannot let her go to jail. I cannot let her lose that baby. "Fuck!" I shout, my voice booming from the walls.

Several minutes after that bitch has left, my lawyer strolls in. I always hoped I'd never have to use this fucker. He pulls his suit jacket off and drapes it over the chair, staring at me as he shakes his head. He drops a file folder onto the

table, and I glance at the guard who is lingering in the doorway.

"Is he just gonna stand there?"

Robert glances over his shoulder, and the guard turns, closing the door behind him.

He stands at the end of the table, drumming his fingers over the edge. "Well," he inhales, "this is a big pile of shit you've fallen into JP."

"Yeah, yeah," I mumble. "Look, I don't really give a shit if you get me outta here, you just make sure she isn't even tried. She's not in the wrong here. At all."

"She's not my client..."

I go to stand up but am chained to the goddamn chair. "Fuck!" I shout, as my blood pressure quickly rises. "You make sure she has a damn good lawyer. She's not spending her life in jail. She's not having my damn baby in jail!" My voice booms from the walls. My pulse drums up into my throat. "You fucking hear me, Rob? Get her the fuck outta there."

He stares at me for a second. His lips press into a hard line, his chest expanding as he pulls in a breath. "You know she had blood on her hands, JP, literally? They might try and paint her as an accessory. She won't get jail time, but they can section her. Anyone in their right mind will call her mental health into question. I can't promise—"

"No." I shake my head. "You can't let them question her fucking sanity! They'll take the baby away from her." I can feel the panic creeping around my throat again. "You get her the fuck out."

He releases a hard breath and drags his hand down his face. "This is a mess. You realize that?"

I wrack my brain, trying to think of some way to make her understand she has to make me out to be a heartless fucking monster. "Can you give her a letter from me?" I ask.

He taps his fingers on the desk. He's hesitating.

"Rob, just give her a fucking letter for me, would you?"

"Yeah, fine. I'll give her a letter." He plops down into the chair, folding his hands on the table in front of him. "Now, what the hell are we gonna do about you, and this trail of blood you left across half of the southeast?"

# Chapter 33

## Victoria

I wake up the same way I usually do, screaming and sweating, with Caleb's name on my lips. There are no strong arms to comfort me, no rough voice mumbling reassuring words in my ear. It's just me, in a strange room. Soft morning light drifts through the window. I glance around at my surroundings as I try to calm my breathing. I'm in Lizzy's spare room.

I've been here for two days, but it still feels completely strange to me. Lizzy and I haven't really spoken. I haven't left this room, haven't left this bed. She brings me food, which I eat despite my constant nausea whenever I see food. I eat it because Jude asked me to look after the baby, and I will.

Lizzy tries to make conversation with me when she visits, but I can't. I know she hasn't done anything wrong. It's me. I'm not in the right headspace for her to ask me questions. I don't have a clue what to tell her. There isn't one facet of the truth she'll be able to handle because the second she hears it, she'll think the same as those cops, and she'll shrink. She'll think I'm delusional, abused... Every time I think of Jude, all I can hear is him shouting after the police as they dragged me away. *She has Stockholm syndrome.* Was he just saying that or did he mean it? Does he really think I have a mental problem, and if so, does he really love me, or was he acting

out of guilt for everything that happened to me while I was with him?

My heart tells me that this is Jude. I know him. He's not a man to appease some girl. But my mind is clinging to the seeds of doubt. How can it not?

I shove the duvet off me and go into the bathroom, starting the shower. I slip off my tank top and underwear, and stare at my reflection in the mirror. My body is marred with scars, all from injuries inflicted during my time with Jude. There was a time when I hated them, when I couldn't see them without loathing him and everything he represented, but now every one reminds me of a time when he would kiss them better, or look at them and tell me I was beautiful regardless.

My eyes trail over the long scar running between my breasts and over my stomach, widening as the skin stretches slightly over the bump. My body is thinner. The last few months and my experience with Joe having taken their toll, except for my rounded stomach which seems to be getting bigger by the day. I want to wallow in this pit of despair, but the more I think about the baby inside me, the more I feel this indescribable urge to fight. Jude may be locked up, but I'm still here, and I'm all she will have.

I get in the shower, washing away the depression of the last few days.

After I've dressed, I step into the kitchen and take a seat at the breakfast bar, watching my sister as she bustles around the cabinets, dancing to the radio. I smile because she seems so happy. She spins around and spots me. Lizzy's eyes go wide, and she quickly turns off the music.

"Oh, my God. Are you okay?" Her accent is softer than mine, with just a hint of the American twang creeping in.

I nod. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Um... Can... Can I get you anything?" Lizzy always did like to fuss. She's the oldest, the mother if you like.

"Coffee would be great." She moves across the kitchen, but I move around her breakfast bar, cutting her off.

"I can get it," I tell her. Her treating me like an invalid is not helping.

She doesn't say anything. I glance at her and she's standing there, mouth open with her eyes fixed on my torso.

I follow her gaze, looking at my abdomen. "They didn't tell you?"

Since I've been here, I haven't left the bed in front of my sister, and at the police station I was wearing a hoody that was five sizes too big for me. Now though, I'm wearing a tank top she donated to me, and it's showcasing a very prominent bump.

She shakes her head. "No," she chokes on a whisper.

There's a minute of silence as I pour the coffee. "It's a girl," I tell her quietly. I guess I haven't had a chance to talk about her, to consider her a person yet. I've always been on the run, unable to think that far ahead.

"Is... do you know who the father is?" she asks carefully, as though it might upset me.

"Yeah, I do." She stares at me, waiting. "It's Jude."

"Oh, God." She presses her hand to her lips, a choked sob leaving her.

"And I will tell you what I told them," I snap. "I love him. He didn't rape me, or manipulate me." I don't know how to explain this to her. "We were two people thrown into a situation against our will, and... It wasn't planned." It's true. I never in a million years thought I would love Jude, but sometimes, life throws the unexpected at you.

Lizzy fiddles with her watch, something she does when she's nervous. "Ria..."

"I said, don't call me that," I say too quickly. Shit. I drag my hand through my hair.

"Victoria." She hesitates. "I know you say you were thrown into the situation, but he held you hostage. He should

never have done that." She says it as though I can't see this. I can.

"You wouldn't understand."

Her eyes flick to my throat again, the ugly scar my most visible, but certainly not the most awful, because that one I did to myself.

"I think." She takes a deep breath. "I think maybe you should talk to someone." She flashes me a small smile.

I get up and turn away from her as I leave the room. "I'm not crazy, and I'm not talking to someone." I snap.

She will never understand this.



I'm sat in the window seat of Lizzy's snug with a book on my lap though I can't register what's written on the pages. It's been a month. A long month without Jude, or Marney, or anyone. I've heard nothing.

I've tried to call the prison where he's being held, but they won't allow me to speak to him or see him given the situation. Lizzy has tried to make me speak to various shrinks, and I tell them all the same thing, I'm not crazy, and I don't have Stockholm syndrome, but as time goes on, I'm starting to question even myself.

I mean, if someone has Stockholm syndrome, surely they are unaware of it? Maybe I just don't want to think of myself as one of those people, because I've always thought it's a load of bullshit, fabricated by weak women who fall at the feet of abusive men. Isn't that exactly what I did though? The problem is; I can't stop loving Jude. It's like I need him, as though my body and soul are physically grieving his absence.

The doorbell sounds, reverberating through the house. I frown and put the book down on a side table.



I move to the front door, and open it to a very well dressed man. His suit looks expensive, and the brand new Mercedes on the drive verifies this.

"Miss Devaux?" He has this professional manner about him, but with a hard edge.

"Yes."

"I'm Robert McKinley, Jude Pearson's attorney."

I swallow hard. *This is it.*

He reaches into his suit pocket and hands me an envelope. "Jude asked that I give this to you and that you do exactly as it says." He takes a deep breath and frowns. "There's nothing you can do to save him. You need to focus on saving yourself." He turns and walks back down the drive, leaving me standing in the entrance with the envelope in my hand.

My fingers shake as I stare at the inconspicuous white envelope, my name scrawled across the front. I close my eyes and take a steadying breath before I rip the envelope open and read the words that shatter me.

*Tor,*

*I love you. Know that above all else. You gave me something I never knew I wanted or needed until you were dumped in my office, scared, but fighting with every breath. I've had weeks to sit here and do nothing aside from think. All I think about is you. I miss you. Fuck do I miss you. I promised you I would protect you, and I always will, no matter where I am. Now though, you have to protect our daughter, because I can't. That means letting me go.*

*I'm going to jail, and nothing you say or do will help me. They will call you as a witness, and you need to testify against me. Tell them the truth. Do not lie for me.*

*You were kidnapped.*

*I held you hostage.*

*Everything you said, did, or witnessed was against your will.*

*I killed Joe, and you will testify to that.*

*Most importantly, you do not love me. I raped you, which is why you are pregnant.*

*Everything you did was to survive. For that is the end of it. This is the only thing I ask of you. I need you to be there for our daughter, because I can't, and she will need her mother. I would have given you both the fucking world, and I failed you... I'm sorry. You are my everything.*

*I love you,*

*Jude*

My knees give out and I hunch over on my sister's marble floor, my very soul feeling like it's bleeding from me. My chest heaves on frantic sobs as tears pour down my face, staining the paper in my hand. How could he ask this of me? He wants me to paint him as a monster.

This feels like I'm cutting out my own heart, and I have no idea how I'm supposed to find the strength to live without him, much less be the very reason that he is taken from me in the first place.

# Chapter 34

## Jude

I've lost count of how long I've been in this fucking cell. Alone. Nothing to do but stare at the damn walls, do push-ups, and think about how fucked up this all is. They won't even give me a goddamn razor to shave my face with. Shit like this is enough to drive someone fucking insane. *Why in the hell are they going to put people who are already not fucking right in the head in solitary confinement? Let's just drive them on over the edge into complete psychosis? For fuck's sake. I've started talking to myself. Fucking great.*

Robert said he delivered my letter to Tor. I asked how she looked, and he didn't respond, which worries me. Surely there's only so much one person can handle before they break. She needs me, and there's not shit I can do about it.

I hear Marshall banging on his door and howling. He does that every morning. Every single fucking morning. I push up from the ratty cot and take a piss. I turn the water and wash my face off, and then go sit on the edge of the bed and wait. Today is my hearing. I'm not sure how I will handle seeing her. I'm scared as shit she's going to say something I told her not to.

Eventually, I hear footsteps echo down the hallway, and I rise, waiting right in front of the door. The guard's weathered face peers through the window. "Pearson, put your wrists together."

I cross my arms as he opens the door, cuffing me as usual before leading me through the corridors and outside. The sun is beaming and it heats my skin. At one time I enjoyed the way that feels, but not now. I don't enjoy a damn thing anymore.

An officer shoves me into the back of a police car, and we drive off. I watch the farmland roll by and turn into a small city, and we pull up behind a courthouse. There are lines of people out front, along with various media vans. The officer guides me from the back seat, walking me toward the front of the court house.

My heartbeat picks up as I approach the building. This is going to be fucking torture, sitting in that room, face to face with her while she tells a courtroom full of people what happened. I swallow hard and take a deep breath.

"Better smile. It's your ten minutes of fame, Pearson," the officer laughs as we round the corner.

Swarms of people turn and stare at me. Flashes from cameras blind me, questions shouted at me as I'm lead up the concrete steps. I don't look up; I keep my eyes trained on the ground, watching my chained feet move beneath me.

The double wooden doors to the courtroom open. It's already full, which I wasn't expecting. I'm lead to the front and sat at a long table next to Robert. He glances at me, a nervous smile twitching over his lips. "Just try to keep your shit together, okay?"

I nod. "Where is she?"

"Behind us."

My face grows warm and my stomach knots. I can't fucking turn around and look at her. I just can't do it. I keep my eyes trained on the edge of the table, reminding myself whatever she says... I told her to say it.

# Chapter 35

## Victoria

"The prosecution calls to the stand, Victoria Devaux," a cold voice rings out.

I can't breathe. I can't do this. My sister squeezes my hand, reassuring me that the monster who took me can't touch me again. She knows nothing. I miss him. My very soul aches for him. This is akin to someone dying, only to discover that they are suddenly alive, and now you have to put a bullet in their head. I can't, but I must.

I rise, my legs shaking violently. I feel the weight of the stares from the jury as I make my way to the witness stand. I feel their barely concealed shock as they look at the pregnant woman, the pregnant woman who can only possibly have conceived during her time in captivity, as a hostage. I feel their horror and their pity in the tense silence of the courtroom.

I take a seat, and then, for the first time in weeks, I see Jude's face. I barely recognise him. His face is more drawn, and covered in a thick beard. My fingernails dig into the palms of my hands as my mind races through all the awful things that might have happened to him in that place. I always told myself no one would fuck with Jude, but in a place full of killers who is to say Jude is the worst?

He looks different, but his eyes, his eyes are the same, that deep shade of green that always makes my heart race. His eyes convey everything he cannot say to me. *I love you.*

A court clerk moves to the stand, holding a Bible up in front of me. I place my right hand on it, my eyes never leaving Jude. "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help you God?"

No. "Yes," I whisper, my voice breaking. Tears prickle my eyes because I feel like my heart is being ripped out.

My attention is pulled from Jude as the door to the courtroom quietly opens and two figures step inside, taking a seat at the back. It's Detective Lowe and another agent. Her eyes fix on me, a small smile pulling at her lips. I have never hated anyone as much as I hate this woman. I am only doing this because Jude asked me to, not because of her. I'm doing this for my baby. I'm about to drive a wedge between Jude and myself that is so big, I'm not sure I will ever be able to forgive myself. The prosecution lawyer gets up and comes to stand in front of me. "Miss Devaux, do you know this man?" She points to Jude, and I narrow my eyes at her.

"Yes," I say through clenched teeth.

"Can you please tell the court your relationship with this man?" she asks.

I take a steadying breath, squeezing my eyes shut. "He... he is the man who held me hostage." My voice is strangled, as though the very denial of what he is to me is impossible to verbalise. Jude's eyes meet mine, a reassuring smile on his face. He ever so slightly in a nods his head.

"And can you tell the court how you came to be Mr. Pearson's hostage?"

"My boyfriend owed him a debt, and when he couldn't pay it, he offered me to one of Jude's staff as collateral," I say without any emotion.

"So you were brought to his house, and then, what happened to you?" She studies me intently. I glance at Jude and his eyes are fixed on the table in front of him.

"I... I was held there for several days. I lived with him and his brother. Euan never paid the money."

She presses her lips together. "How were you treated while you were held captive? Did Mr. Pearson provide food for you? Reasonable living conditions?"

"Fine. I was treated well," I say quickly. I can feel Lowe's eyes burning a hole in me, but I don't look at her.

"When the prison physician inspected you upon your initial arrest, he reported several concerning injuries, inflicted during your time as a hostage." She points to the screen behind me. I turn and see the photograph of my torso, covered in scars. I quickly spin back around to face the front of the courtroom again.

"That wasn't him," I say, ashamed of the fact that this entire room of people have seen the scars I never allow anyone to see, except Jude. I stare straight at him, and he holds my gaze, a soft smile on his lips. "It wasn't him." God, this is so hard.

"But it happened under his supervision, did it not?" "It..." I pause.

I know what I'm supposed to say, what Jude wants me to say. "It happened whilst he held me hostage, yes," I whisper.

"So, you would agree then, that you were not treated 'well'," she adds, and without missing a beat goes on to her next question. "Did you witness the dealings within Mr. Pearson's house while you were there?"

"No, I never saw any of that." It's true really. Jude never brought business home. I never saw that side of his life,

unless I asked. I never saw it until I was no longer a hostage.

I know I've slipped when she smiles. "Any of *that*? So you knew what he did for a living?"

"I was taken hostage for a gambling debt." I point out.

"Do you know who Joe Campbell is, Miss Devaux?" My stomach bottoms out and bile rises in my throat. The thought of that man makes me sick, and I press my hand to my stomach.

I can hear Jude breathing from across the room. When I glance over at him, his jaw is ticking, the muscles of his neck strained.

"I do," I whisper.

"How do you know him?"

I glare at her. "He kidnapped me." My jaw clenches so hard my teeth hurt.

Her expression remains blank. "So Joe Campbell kidnapped you *from* your kidnapper?"

My eyes lock with Jude's. I know I should just say yes, but the way she says it implies that Jude and Joe are the same, as though what Jude did was as bad as Joe. I can't. I can't say those words.

"I..." I hesitate, and her face falls blank for a moment. There's a hum of noise from the people inside the courtroom. "I escaped. I was getting on a flight back to England when Joe found me and took me."

She's still standing there with her lips slightly parted. She doesn't ask me any more questions about the kidnapping situation. Instead, it gets worse.

"Can you please talk us through the events of the night of April 13th, 2015?"

I bite my bottom lip. This is the hard part, the part where I must throw Jude under the bus to save myself, and our child. This is the single hardest thing I've ever done.



"Joe... Joe hurt me, and he killed Caleb," I start.

"Caleb Pearson?" she asks.

I nod. "Yes." A fissure of pain ripples across my chest as my mind replays Caleb falling to his knees, a bullet-hole between his eyes. "He killed him, and so Jude..." Fuck, do I just say it? I meet his eyes again, and he nods, urging me to say it. "Jude killed Joe." There's a beat of silence in which I swear I just heard my heart break, like the loud bang of a crack ripping its way across a pane of glass. A low bustle of noise makes its way around the courtroom. I glance at Lowe, and a smug smile twists her lips.

"You were witness to this murder?" she pushes.

"Yes."

"I present to the Jury, evidence taken from the murder scene of Joe Campbell." The screen at the back of the room flickers again, and an image of Joe's mangled face comes into view. One of the jurors wretches. I can hear the clicking noise as the projector shows different images, displaying the evidence.

"Jude Pearson, coated in the deceased's blood, was arrested exiting the murder scene, gun in hand. The body was still warm. I ask the members of the jury to see the irrefutable evidence of Jude Pearson's guilt. This is overkill."

This woman has no idea. She thinks she is doing her job, locking up a monster, but I'm the one who pulled the trigger, and Joe was the monster that needed putting down. "He... he was a rapist, a murderer!" I shout at the jury. Tears spill down my cheeks at the injustice of it all.

Jude clears his throat, and I know he's trying to get my attention. I glance up at him, and he's pleading with his eyes for me to stop. I know I'm not supposed to defend him, but I can't... they need to know why.

The lawyer steps toward the stand. "Ms. Devaux..."

"That's enough!" Jude screams. "I fucking killed him, and I would do it again if I could. For her. I would do it every-fucking-day for the rest of my life if it would take away anything that bastard did to her. Do you hear me? I'm not fucking sorry!"

The judge frowns. "Sit down Mr. Pearson, or I'll hold you in contempt of court!" the judge booms.

There's a beat of silence as the courtroom settles again. The solicitor's eyes flick to my stomach. "Can you tell me who the father of your unborn child is, Ms. Devaux?"

I glance down at the bump, the only thing I have left of Jude. "That's not relevant," I say, panicked.

The judge sighs. "Miss Devaux, please answer the question." They want to defame his character, make him out to be the rapist, the murderer, and they want me to be the one to sway the jury. I can't lie, because a simple DNA test would prove I lied, and if I say he's the father, I will have to say... I glance at Lowe, who gives me a small nod, and then at Jude whose eyes are soft.

"Jude," I breathe, as tears slip down my cheek.

"And how did you become pregnant, Miss Devaux?"

"I..." My lungs seize, and my nails bite into the skin of my palms. My pulse pounds in my ears, my vision narrowing. I focus on Jude, on the look in his eyes that says he loves me. I love him, how can he expect me to say this?

"I'll rephrase. Did Mr. Pearson force himself on you, Miss Devaux?"

There's a heavy silence in the room. Jude flashes me a sad smile and gives me a small nod. I close my eyes as the pounding bass of my own pulse drowns out everything else until I feel like I'm under water.

"Yes," I whisper through my tightening throat, as tears stream freely down my face. Whatever Jude and I had, I just

took a match to it and burned it to ash with one word.

No one makes a sound, and I can practically feel their pity.

"I have no further questions, your Honor," she says, giving me one last sympathetic glance.

An officer guides me from the stand, leading me back to my place next to my sister. I can feel Jude's eyes on me, but I can't look at him. I just betrayed him, and even though he asked me to,

I can't live with myself right now.

My sister is crying, and John's arm is around her shoulders. I take my seat, my body tense.

Lizzy reaches for me. "Oh, God, Victoria." She wraps her arms around me, but I think it's more for herself than me.

She's shaking her head, leaning on her husband, breaking down because she thinks her baby sister got raped and knocked up by a murderer. I love her, but she will never understand this. She can't possibly understand the depth of my love for Jude, and I would never tell her. There are some things that bond two people irrevocably. Jude and I have been to hell and back. We have suffered loss and pain, the kind of pain that destroys you until all you have left is each other.

People say their loved one is the other half of them. Jude is the other half of my heart, both of us too broken to have an entire soul left. We're two halves making up a whole. And I need him like I need air to breathe.

Ours is a story of loss and suffering, of a love so fucked up it should be impossible, but despite all the odds, I really thought we would get our happily ever after. If I think about it though, we were always destined to destroy one another. I just never thought it would be me who destroyed him.



# Chapter 36

## Jude

I've been waiting in this small holding room for about an hour while the jury deliberates. I keep replaying the expression on her face when she said I raped her. That one word felt like a fucking piece of shrapnel had ripped through my chest. Even though I told her to say it, and I hoped that she would, it still fucking hurt. From the outside, everything she said appears to be true. It's easier for people to believe she was raped than it is for them to accept that she fell in love with a guy like me. Out of all of this, what bothers me the fucking most is that one day, our daughter will question who her father is. She'll wonder why I've never been there, and if she asks anyone but Tor, what will they say? Eventually, she will find out who I am, and when that happens, she will hate me, she will believe she is the result of something fucking awful. And she's not.

The door to the room opens, and the officer steps inside to get me. "Come on. They've reached a verdict."

I'm escorted back to the courtroom, all eyes hone in on me, judging me as I take my seat on the wooden bench. I'm immediately forced to stand back up when the judge enters and takes his place at the stand.

"Have the jurors reached a decision?" he asks, peering over his glasses.

One man rises, papers in hand as he says, "We have."

"Proceed with the sentencing, please."

The man's eyes nervously dart over to mine then back down to the papers. "On count one of murder in the first degree," his voice shakes and he stops to clear his throat. "We the jury find the defendant guilty." I listen to them rattle off the verdict, and then I hear "... death by lethal injection."

My heart drums up into my throat. Knowing your life is over is a fucking unsettling feeling. I turn to look at Tor, and she's staring at me, eyes wide, her face washed ghost-white. She grabs onto the seat in front of her and stumbles forward before her body goes limp. Her sister catches her before she hits the floor.

"Tor," I shout, jumping up and rushing in her direction. I make it just a few steps before I'm tackled to the ground by several officers. I fight to get them off of me. "Get the fuck off of me."

I'm dragged to my feet.

I pull against them as they push me to the side of the room. "Somebody fucking do something." I turn to face the officer to my left and glare at him. "Do something!" I growl through my clenched teeth. "Fucking get her help!"

"Mr. Pearson!" the judge shouts. "Sit back down in your seat! Bailiff, get Ms. Devaux some medical attention please."

They aren't moving quickly enough and fuck it; I've just been sentenced to death, what the hell does it matter?

"Get her help right the fuck now!"

"Take him out of my courtroom. Now!" the judge orders.

I'm not leaving this room until she comes to. Let them try and fucking make me! These fucking men are half my size. I manage to throw my weight around enough that I knock one of the officers off his feet. I snatch my other arm free, and I pull my cuffed arms back like I'm holding a Louisville Slugger and slam my fists against the remaining officer's temple. He

drops to the floor like a fucking fly, and the entire room erupts in panicked screams.

I turn around and see Tor groggily sitting up with her hand to her head. Four other officers are rushing toward me; two have guns pulled. I realize I may never see her again. I have no idea what's going on in her head, no idea if she'll soon accept how crazy this all was.

"I love you, Tor. It's gonna be okay, doll, I promise," I shout.

The weight of the officers slam against my back, and they tackle me to the ground. Knees dig into my back as they push down on my neck. "Don't fight. Don't fight!" they yell at me, and I give in, lying completely still on the floor.

I'm yanked to my feet; shoved and pushed in the direction of the door behind the podium. I keep my eyes lock on Tor. She's not really with it yet, but at least some of the color has returned to her face. She stares at me and fuck me, does she look broken. My view of her is obstructed when a woman, who I assume must be her sister, steps in front of Tor, glaring at me like she's trying to shield her from me. That woman fucking hates me, and it's evident by her expression.

All eyes in the courtroom are on me as I'm escorted out.

Tor thinks she just killed me because of her statement. The thing she doesn't understand is if I can't have my freedom, if I can't be with her, I'm fucking dead anyways.



"Five minutes," the bailiff says as he leans against the wall. My hands are cuffed, but I've learned over the past several weeks how to do most things with them bound like

this. I'm seated in front of a thick window, and on the other side of the glass is Marney. I pick up the receiver and cradle it with my chin.

"Well, orange ain't really a good look for you, boy," his hoarse voice comes through the line. I frown.

"Look, Marney, you make sure she's taken care of. You know where all the..." I stop myself, quickly glancing around the room. The guard's three feet away from me and I'm pretty damn sure there's surveillance in here. I guess I need to play this shit up in case they're onto Marney's ass as well. I clear my throat and set my gaze hard on him. "Make sure she has all the assets she needs." My eyebrow twitches as I stare him down, making certain he knows what I mean. I had more money than fucking Bill Gates stashed in my house and under an alias in stocks.

He nods. "Yeah, I'll make sure I find a way to help her out." Another subtle nod. He taps his fingers over the stainless steel counter in front of him. "What a shock it was to me that you got yourself all tangled up in this mess." I can see his lips straining against a smile, his voice cracking under a chuckle. "Boy, you was brought up in church. What the hell got into you? The devil?"

I roll my eyes. *Fuck, Marney. Don't go over the top or anything with this shit.* "Yeah, yeah. I'm an asshole, I know. Sorry to let you down," I groan. "Have you heard from her?"

"Nope. Most likely not going to." His face crumples. He'd grown pretty fond of her. He traces his finger over the counter. "Most likely not going to," he repeats.

We sit in silence for a moment. There's not much more to say at this point. Our lives are completely fucked. "Well, just make sure she has what she needs for her and the baby, okay?"

"Sure will kid."



I place the phone on the receiver, and Marney pushes away from the table, turns, and walks off. I rise and the guard automatically takes a hold of me to escort me back to my cell, but instead of taking a left at the end of the hall, we take a right.

"Lucky you, you've got visitors today," he says as he opens the door and walks me into a small room.

There is a rickety table with four chairs, and sitting in two of them are FBI agents. A bottle of water is placed in front of me, and the guard turns to exit the door. "I'll be right outside," he says as he reaches for the door. "That one there's a wily one. Angry too."

One of the agents smirks at me. "I think we can handle him."

The door shuts and both men's eyes set on me.

"Mr. Pearson, I'm Agent Tidewell, and this," he points to the man perched on the table beside him, "is Agent Wilson."

I say nothing. I just direct my gaze between the two of them and focus on the back wall.

The metal legs of the chair scrape against the floor as Tidewell rises from his seat. The heel of his shoe clicks over the concrete as he moves around the table toward me. He brings himself into my line of vision, and leans down, putting his face uncomfortably close to mine. "We've got an offer for you, so I suggest you listen up." He pops his gum before straightening back up. "You are quite the career criminal. Hell, you were the number one enemy of Joe Campbell... you took down Joe Campbell." His eyes roam over me for a brief moment.

Leaning back in my chair, I say, "I'm not into dealing with government officials. You're wasting your fucking time with me. I already told that woman I wouldn't say anything."

"The FBI knows your list of contacts must be..." he falls silent, which causes me to look in his direction, "...

impressive to say the least." His eyes almost twinkle with that statement.

I remain silent, my gaze locked with his in a cold stare.

He leans against the table and crosses his arms as he cocks his head to one side. "You know you've been sentenced to death, and you know they are trying their damndest to hurry your execution along, make a spectacle out of you for all the other criminals? You won't get a fifteen years sentence to try and appeal time and time again. I bet you'll be in the execution room within two years, Pearson."

I keep my face expressionless. It doesn't matter to me if I die today or ten years from now. I'm going to die. And that's that.

He glances down at his black tie and straightens it. "You know, we could make a deal here, Mr. Pearson. A very *generous* deal for the names of the people you work with. Politicians, cops; we know you have people in government working for you..."

"Very smart of you. How fucking long did it take you to figure that basic shit out?"

Agent Wilson taps his shoe over the floor. "That woman of yours, she's pregnant? Don't you want to see that baby? Don't you want it to have a father?"

*Oh, for fuck's sake. Really?* "Are you really trying to play to the emotions of a convicted murderer? Execution, no execution. I'm behind bars for life. What kind of father do you think I'll be? You can just drop that shit right now."

He frowns, and he crosses his arms. Surely to God he knew that shit wouldn't work on me of all fucking people.

"Jude, I can see to it you get life in prison if you just cooperate with us. I mean, come on, who really wants to die?"

Who wants to die? I've seen Tor at that point—where death seemed like a beautiful escape. I've put men to that point of desperation *because* of her. "A lot of people want to

die. Sometimes death seems like a much more pleasant option," I say.

Tidewell tosses his arms in the air before slamming them down on the table. "Oh, give me a break with the hard-ass bullshit!"

I laugh because he actually thinks he can entice me to sell-out other people for life in fucking prison. Rotting in a jail cell is not reason enough for me. One side of my lips flips up. "I have people underneath my fucking thumb that outrank you by a mile. Why in the hell would I make a deal with you?"

They both glance at each other.

"The only way I would tell you anything is if you could give me my fucking life back" I narrow my gaze, honing in on him. "Can you fucking do that?"

"Mr. Pearson," Tidewell glares at me, "let's not go to extremes here..."

"I have politicians, cops, people all the way up the chain of fucking command that have helped cover up my shit for years. I know an endless number of hitmen. Basically, if someone's in organized crime, chances are, they fucking owe me money." I slowly raise my eyes, shifting my gaze between the two men. "You make the fucking deal of the century, or I'm not saying shit. I don't take deals. I make them!" I shift in my seat and stare at them.

"Sorry to say, the government doesn't publically grant freedom to convicted murderers of your caliber. If you change your mind, Mr. Pearson," he throws his card down on the table, "you can have your lawyer contact us."

They both make their way to the door, shaking their heads as they exit. I sit back down in the chair, waiting for someone to take me back to my cell.

# Chapter 37

## Victoria

I haven't heard from Jude since he was sentenced. My calls and letters go unanswered, and I don't even know if he's receiving them. Worse, I worry that he is receiving them, but he hates me. I did what he asked of me. Is that justice enough for what I said? Of course not. Part of me died the second I lied to a courtroom of people about the man I love. But didn't I do it out of love? For our child? I don't know anymore. All I know is he will die because of me, and I can't forgive myself for it.

I haven't heard a peep from him, until now. My fingers glide over my name, scrawled across the envelope so heavily, it's engraved deeply.

I've been staring at this letter for hours, unable to open it, terrified of what it will say. I eventually pluck up the courage and open the envelope.

*Tor,*

*You need to move on with your life. You have your life back. You have your family back. You are where you belong.*

*You were meant to be a doctor, get married, join a fucking country club, not fall in love with me. I am not, and never was, right for you. You had no other choice but to love me, Tor, because you are a survivor. That is what you do,*

*adapt to survive. You loved me to survive. I know you can't see it now, but one day you will. I will make sure you are taken care of. The love I have for you, for our baby, is genuine. You are my world, and that is why this is the last time you will ever hear from me, because I love you.*

*Sometimes the lines between right and wrong become so blurred that everything seems like it's right. You may be right for me, Tor, but I am fucking wrong for you.*

*I will always love you,*

*Jude*

Silent tears fall down my cheeks. Is he doing this because he can't forgive me? Does he really believe that my love for him was borne of necessity? Does he really want me to move on? To forget about him? I know what he's saying makes sense in a twisted way. I should move on. Jude is going to be in prison until he dies, my pining for him is only causing my misery, but even so, his doing this to me hurts so fucking much.

I hear a throat clear and glance up to find Lizzy standing in the doorway of the snug, her hands on her hips. "Right, that's it. It's been weeks Victoria. I'm not letting you wallow in this any longer." I glance up at the scowl fixed on her face, but don't respond. She sighs and moves until she's right in front of me. "You're scaring me, Ri." She whispers. "I know... I can't even imagine what you've been through, but you have to go on with your life."

She's right. I have to, even Jude is telling me that, but how? If I knew, then I would.

"Look, I spoke to the hospital about allowing you to continue your residency, after..." She won't say the word baby. She avoids the topic altogether. No one wants to talk about the rapist's child. "They agreed to have you back, given the circumstances. Isn't that great?" she says a little too enthusiastically.

"Yeah, that's great." My voice is flat, emotionless. Isn't that what I want? To go back to the job that I spent seven years learning to do? To save lives? I don't know anymore. My views have changed. I no longer value life the way I used to. I've become numb to death, and that makes me a liability as a doctor.

"And..." She shifts uneasily and takes a seat next to me, sweeping her hair behind her ear as her eyes fix mine. She takes my hand in both of hers and swallows heavily. "I really think it would be for the best if you were to..." she takes a deep breath. "If you were to put the baby up for adoption." I drop her hand and jump up so fast the room spins. "I just... it's not healthy, Victoria. That baby will be a constant reminder, dragging you back to the past, to him. You could move on with your life, be a doctor, get married, have other kids."

This baby is all I have left, and she wants me to give her away, give away Jude's child, the child he made me testify against him for. "Never," I whisper, too hurt to voice it properly.

"Ria, please..." I leave the room, cutting her off. I feel sick. This is it, my so called family, my only living relative. She doesn't really love me. She loves me as long as I'm her sane and successful sister, doing the right thing. This version though, with the spawn of a convicted criminal... she doesn't want this version of her sister. I run up the stairs to my room.

I shut my bedroom door and slide down the wood. With shaking hands, I pull my phone from my pocket and take out Jude's letter, with Marney's number at the bottom.

I type the number into the phone with trembling fingers and place the receiver to my ear. I listen to it ring, hoping to God he fucking picks up.

"Hello?" his raspy voice croaks into the line.

"Marney," I choke out.

"Well, hello there little darlin'." I can almost hear him smiling. "I was wondering when you were gonna call me. What's got you all upset?"

I smile through my tears. I missed him. "Hey." I sniff. "I need. I can't..." More tears slide down my cheeks.

I hear a lighter click in the background. "You want me to come get you?"

"Please." I take a deep breath. "I can't stay here."

"Alright." He inhales, most likely taking a puff from a cigarette. "I'mma come get you. Pack you some clothes, and you best leave a note or tell someone you're leaving on your own accord, cause I ain't going to jail too. Where you want me to get you from?"

"My sister's house." I reel off the address quickly.

"Give me four hours. And make sure you tell 'em you're leaving."

"Okay." I hang up the phone and inhale.

Marney isn't Jude, but in a weird way I feel like there's a bit of him in Marney. He watched him grow up. He's practically like a father to Jude. If I can't be with Jude, then I want to be with Marney. He makes me feel safe, almost as safe as Jude. And at this point, Marney is the only person who knows just how much I love Jude. He knows what we have is real and not just the delusions of some poor raped and abused girl who's gone crazy.

I stand up and grab a bag from under the bed. I don't have much, only what Lizzy bought me. I've been dependent on her and John for the last few weeks. Jude made sure I had money, but I couldn't exactly spend it without raising suspicion. The last thing I want is for anyone to start asking questions.

I shove my few items of clothing and my toothbrush into the bag and sling it over my shoulder. Lizzy is waiting at the

bottom of the stairs.

"Where are you going?" Her voice is panicked.

"I'm leaving," I say without looking at her.



I stare out the window. All I can see is the clear turquoise waters of the Caribbean. The car takes a sharp left-hand turn, bumping over a dirt path. Minutes later we pull up to a beautiful villa situated on an inlet.

The house is white with plantation shutter windows and a Spanish tiled roof. Tall pampas grass lines the drive and palm trees sit to the side of the house. The car rolls to a stop, and Marney clamors out, immediately lighting a cigarette. The driver goes to the boot, pulls out the luggage, and sets it on the ground in front of my feet. This is my new home. Oceans separating me from the life I once had, and from Jude. This is hours from civilization, and I am fine with that.

The smell of the ocean drifts on the warm breeze, making me smile. I love the ocean. I instantly feel calm in this place.

Marney pays the driver then grabs the handles on the suitcases. "Alright. Well, come on," he says, the cigarette dangling from his lips.

I follow him to the bottom of the wooden stairs, and the wind catches my hair. He pulls a key from his pocket and opens the door. When he takes the keys from the lock they drop, the clatter from the metal hitting the floor echoes from the tall ceilings.

"Damn, boy," Marney mumbles, looking back at me.

"This place is beautiful," I say, glancing around the entryway of the house.

"Well, it's yours. Jude put it in your name, well, in your alias well before you ever left." He fidgets, looking at the



ground. "I guess he knew even then that he wanted to give it all up for you, sweetheart."

"I..." I swallow around the lump in my throat. "Why would he do that?" I stammer.

He shrugs and says simply, "Cause he loves you."

I bite my lip and look away from him. I can't have this conversation right now, because it's irrelevant.

The floor to ceiling window bathes the entrance way in light. A spiral staircase sits in front of it, silhouetted against the glass. The view is amazing, white sand and an endless ocean. The house is right on the beach. I step further into the house, taking in my surroundings. I walk through an arched doorway into a living room. One wall is nothing but French doors, all facing the water.

The wooden floors creak slightly as I move across them, exploring the house. Marney quietly follows me. There's a brand new kitchen, a pool and deck out the back, and a gym in the basement. I climb the stairs. As soon as I push open one door, I want to cry. There, in the middle of the room is the most beautiful crib. Gossamer hangs from the ceiling, covering the ornate woodwork. I run my fingers over the edge of the wood, taking in the room. Everything is here. The walls are painted a soft yellow, and all the furniture matches the crib. I can't believe he did this.

Marney clears his throat. "He wanted to surprise you. Been working on this since you went to the doctor and saw the 'blob'." He looks at the ground awkwardly.

I swallow hard and nod. God, I wish he was here, so much.

I leave the nursery quickly, before my emotions get the better of me and follow him down the hallway. He points to a

door and drops my bags outside it. "Well, here's the master bedroom. I'll be outside smoking."

I walk through the door. The room is huge. A four-poster bed sits in the middle, draped in white gossamer. It's simple but beautiful. I drop my bag on the bed and move to the shuttered doors on the far side of the room. When I pull them open, I see a balcony outside that overlooks the beach. I lean on the railing and take a minute to absorb it all. The warm sun touches my face, the slight breeze blowing my hair. I love this place, but being here reminds me that this was supposed to be mine and Jude's happily ever after. He should be here, and he's not, he never will be.

That thought tears at my heart. I grip the railing hard enough that the wood bites into my palm.

I have to accept it, and move on, for both my sake and our child. I have to accept it, and yet, I don't think I ever truly can. Part of me thinks it would be easier if he were dead. Knowing he's there, but never being able to touch him again, it's the worst kind of torture.



*Two months later...*

I'm lying on the beach, reading a book when I hear the rumble of a car engine in the drive. I get up and make my way back to the house. The fine sand slips between my toes as I walk.

"Marney!" I shout as I step back inside the house. My voice echoes off the high ceilings.

"In here," he grunts. He sounds like he's struggling with something.

Marney curses under his breath. He glances up as he pulls a large box from one of the plastic bags and tosses it onto the counter. "Diapers. Might as well go ahead and buy those." He looks at me and smiles. "Now, close your eyes for this one, little darlin'." I do as I'm told and hear the bags rustling. "A'ight. Open 'em up." When I open my eyes, I see Marney standing there holding out a onesie. A pink camouflage onesie. I press my lips together, trying not to laugh. *Where the hell did he even find that?*

"That's cute. Thanks, Marney." He smiles wide, the corners of his eyes wrinkling.

"I liked it. Hell, I couldn't find one with a gun on it. So I thought this was just 'bout as good." He tosses it on top of the diapers. "What do you want for dinner?"

This has become my life. I can't complain. It's beautiful here, and Marney is like a father to me in an odd way. Well, apart from the fact that he's spent his entire life killing people, but I like to think that doesn't define him as a person. Beneath his rough exterior, he's as soft as they come. He looks after me, and in a strange way, he makes me feel close to Jude. I know Jude told him to look after me.

A few moments of awkward silence pass before Marney clears his throat. "You thought of any names for her yet?" I shake my head. "Hmm." He dumps a box of noodles into the pot. "You're gonna have to name it. What about Marlene?" he chuckles to himself.

I cough, trying to cover my laugh. "Um, yeah, maybe. I kind of think I'll know when I see her." Honestly, the entire concept is still a struggle for me. At the moment, I have this thing inside me, this bump, but it will be a little person. My mind can't quite grasp the fact, so until that little person is in fact here, and no longer a blob, it shall remain nameless.

The phone rings. Marney reaches across the island to answer it. "Hello?" His eyes set on me, and he smiles.

"Well, 'bout damn time boy. How ya been?" He stands there just listening for minutes, then clears his throat. "Yeah, about that... hang on just a second." He pulls the phone away from his ear and holds it out to me. "Take it," he nods.

I press the phone to my ear. "Hello?" I ask tentatively.

There 's silence. Just breathing. "What the... Tor?" His voice is so low, so raspy.

"Jude." For a second I choke, my heart racing, and then I remember his letter, and I get angry, really fucking angry. "You fucking asshole!" I snap. "This is the last time you will hear from me. Really? Well, fuck you!"

He laughs. "So feisty..."

I growl down the phone at him. "I swear to God, Jude, I would kill you myself..." I take a deep breath. "You don't get to make that choice for me. You didn't even call."

"Look, Tor," his tone has gone serious, dominant, typical Jude. "I had to fucking do it. You need to move on."

I pause for a moment, absorbing the words that I know are right. "I can't," I whisper.

"You have no choice but to, Tor," he breathes. "Why in the hell are you with Marney anyway?"

I lean forward, resting my elbows on the counter. "My sister... it became difficult. She thinks... she thinks I should put the baby up for adoption."

There's silence. I can imagine his jaw is ticking at this very moment. "Fucking hell no!" he growls.

"This is what you don't understand, Jude. You tell me to move on, but to what? So your daughter can grow up in a family who thinks her father is a rapist, and her mother is crazy? I can't do this. Marney... Marney is all I have."

I hear muffled voices in the background. "Shit, I have to go. You did what you needed to do. I'm proud of you, doll."

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to commit his voice to memory. "I love you," I whisper through my tightening throat.

"Fuck, Tor..." he trails off, and my heart drops to my stomach. "You know I fucking love you, don't *ever* question that." And the line cuts off.

I clench the phone in my hand. He's right, I should move on, I should let him go, because this right here, hurts so much. Marney's hand squeezes my shoulder. "It'll be okay, sweetheart," Marney tries to assure me, and I really want to believe him.

# Chapter 38

## Jude

I've been in here for months, long enough to have a plan to get the fuck out of here.

I can feel the shank cutting into my ankle with each careful step. I set my tray down and slide onto the end of the bench. My pulse is drumming. I glance around the room and locate the guards. I'm in the middle of the room; they're stationed on the edges. I need to make sure there's enough time to do some damage. I twist the top from my bottle of water and take a drink. The cold water runs down my throat.

Dante sits down across from me. I've never spoken to him, hell, I've only been out of confinement for two damn days. All I know is that he is in for rape, and that's enough for me... for Tor. I take a forkful of the mashed potatoes and glare at him. His gaze drifts up from his plate and his brow quirks up. I keep staring.

He wipes food from his mouth. "Fucking problem?" he asks.

I laugh as I lean down and pretend to scratch my ankle as I slowly pull the shank from my shoe. When I straighten up, I say, "Oh, I've got all kinds of problems."

His head tilts to the side. "Fucking stupid one of them?"

"Nope."

I can feel the tension around us growing. The other inmates are intently watching as they continue to shovel

food into their mouths.

I slowly stand up. "The biggest problem I have is pricks like you. Fucking so low you have to rape a woman just to bust a fucking nut. Ugly ass motherfucker."

Dante jumps from his seat and launches at me. I grab him by the shoulder. *Damn. He's big.* I push him back before I throw a hard punch underneath his chin. His head jerks back, then I slam my fist across his temple. He stumbles backwards, stunned. Everyone around us is shouting. Some inmates jump up onto the table and yell at the guards. I have four seconds, best.

I shove Dante to the floor and jab the shank into his neck. Blood spurts from the gash in his jugular, spraying all over me in the process. Hands grab my shoulder, my arms... and someone throws me to the floor. The shrill prison alarm blares over the speakers. I look up at the swarm of people surrounding me.

"Aw, shit!" an officer groans. "Get the fucking medics."

I feel a kick in my ribs.

"What the fuck, Pearson? Two days outta confinement. Goddamn..."

A smile tears at the corner of my lips, and I quietly say, "Next time it'll be one of the guards."

"Next..." I see the officer lean over me, glaring. "Next time? Oh, no you piece of shit. You won't be in this prison for a next time."

My grin deepens. This is exactly what I wanted.



Later that afternoon I'm crammed into a transportation vehicle, handcuffed. The door to the van slams shut, and I settle back, thoroughly pleased with myself. There're only two other inmates. Two cops. I inhale and watch as we approach the gates. It's been five months since I was driven

through those damn gates. Five fucking months since I've been free, since I've held Tor... I can only imagine what she looks like with a huge stomach right about now.

"What are you smiling about?" the prisoner sat next to me asks. "We're going to hell. There's not shit to smile about."

I don't even acknowledge him; I just stare out the window. I am getting out. Somehow. Today.

We've been driving for nearly an hour. The four-lane highway merged into a backwoods, two-lane road thirty minutes ago. The only sound is the low lull of the radio in the front and the driver humming along to it. I'm beginning to wonder if I made a fucking mistake. How likely am I to get out of this fucking car alive, without being gunned down?

An engine revs outside and I glance back to see an eighteen-wheeler barreling down the road, quickly approaching us. The engine grows louder; tires squeal as it swerves into the oncoming lane to pass us. The truck veers over too soon, and the flatbed slams into the front of the van. I brace myself as the vehicle skids across the road.

"Shit," the driver yells.

He attempts to maintain control, pumping on the breaks, but it's too late. The seat belt cuts into my shoulder as I'm thrown against the side of the van. The tail spins out violently, flying off of the shoulder and tipping on two wheels. The van lands on its side, glass shatters around me. Metal bends as the van barrels through the safety rail on the side of the highway. Grass and earth fly in through the broken windows as it slides sideways down the embankment. My pulse accelerates, and adrenaline courses through me as I look through the window above me, watching the blue sky and tree limbs fly past the windows. There's a loud bang. Metal screams as it bends. The remaining glass breaks. And pressure builds in my ears. I'm slightly stunned from the force of the impact and sit dazed for a moment. I quickly



realize this is my one chance to get the fuck out of here. I go to reach for the seatbelt release, but my hands are cuffed. I strain my arms, stretching my fingers to press down on the button. When it clicks, my heart rate accelerates. I scramble to sit up.

The inmate who was next to me is still strapped in, hanging limply from the seat belt and groaning. I glance to the front seat and find the officer groggily moving his head. *Shit, I have to hurry the fuck up.* I manage to crawl out of the busted back window. I stand up and glance around, trying to determine the best way to escape. Out of instinct, I start to run, but the chains around my ankles catch, and cut into my skin, causing me to trip. I can barely move my legs. My heart is slamming around in my chest, my adrenaline burning through my veins like the fucking devil. I 'm afraid the officer is going to come to soon enough, and then I am fucked. Sweat beads on my brow as I take quick, short steps toward the tree line, away from the mangled wreckage.

Suddenly, I hear shouting. I don't stop. I just keep moving. The longer I run, the more accustomed I get to the chains, and the faster I'm able to go.

"Wait!" I hear a man shout and look back to see one of the inmates running after me. There's a loud boom, and I can't help but glance back. A blaze engulfs the van. Bright red flames spark up into the tree limbs, catching the leaves on fire. It's when I look back that I see the officer stumbling away from the inferno, arms raised in front of him, pointing his gun in our direction.

If I can just get to that fucking tree line... I think of Tor, of the baby. Air rushes through my lungs as my feet pound against the ground. I hear the pop of rounds firing.

"Shit," the other prisoner shouts, pushing himself to run even faster.

"Stop!" the officer yells.

There's a loud bang, and I feel the bullet tear through my shoulder, ripping the flesh clean off me. The sudden pain sends me to the ground, feet in front of the tree line. I watch the other inmate run past me, fleeing into the woods, and I attempt to stand. Another shot rings out, and I fall face first into the earth.

They say that when you die your entire life flashes before your eyes, but all I see is her. She was a weakness on every level to me from the moment she set foot into my office, and she has remained my weakness. I was always a man who took pride in his control, but in the end, what I took pride in was her. I did this for love. I did this for Tor. I did this for my unborn child. All I wanted to do was right all the wrong that had been done to my girl, and, if nothing else, I will die knowing at least I fucking tried.

Another explosion echoes through the air, and then... silence.

# Chapter 39

## Victoria

The warm water gently washes against my ankles as I splash through the shallow surf. I've become that classic pregnant woman with swollen ankles and feet. I still have three weeks to go, but I'm so done with being pregnant. I'm emotionally and physically done. I'm trying, I'm really trying, but I'd be lying if I said it isn't hard without Jude. I feel as though he's the other half of me, and the separation from him is slowly killing me. Maybe he was right? Maybe I should let him go, but how can I when I have his child inside me? It's impossible.

I make my way back along the beach. Marney and I have developed somewhat of a routine living here. We eat lunch on the back deck together every day. Ever since Jude rescued me, Marney and I have been close, but these last few months have surpassed that. He looks after me, and although it's not his forte, he tries to make me feel better about Jude not being here. I appreciate his efforts, even if they are fruitless. The main thing though, is that I know he will love Jude's daughter like a grandchild, because Jude is like a son to him. I think he secretly likes our settled lifestyle. Much like Jude, he's always lived a criminal life, looking over his shoulder every two seconds. He's not young anymore, and being here, we don't have to watch our backs.

I walk up the steps that lead to the back deck, and open the French doors leading into the kitchen. Marney isn't here, which is odd. He's always in the kitchen at this time. I go in search of him, and move towards the living room. The TV is on. As soon as I hear what's coming from it, I pause in the doorway. Marney is sitting on the sofa, leaning forward, and listening intently to what's being said.

On the screen is a woman with a microphone standing in front of what appears to be an over-turned prison vehicle.

"At three-thirty this afternoon, this detentions service vehicle veered off the road and crashed into the ditch. It is unclear at this point what caused the accident, although another vehicle was involved. The vehicle was transporting three high security criminals, Marcus Banes, Romero Gonzales, and Jude Pearson, who were being transferred to a maximum security prison."

My heart instantly starts to beat furiously against my ribs.

"Banes, Pearson and two prison officers were killed, their families have been informed. It's believed that the third prisoner, Gonzales escaped. A police search is now taking place. I'm Jennifer..."

I slide down the edge of the doorframe. *He's dead*. It feels like someone has grabbed my heart in their hand and is squeezing. *He's dead*. I will never see him again, never hear his voice. That's when I lose it and break down crying. I didn't have much with him, the occasional phone call, distant memories, but those moments when he would tell me he loved me... the words were said from what felt like a million miles away, but they still touched me, they still gave me a reason to keep going, to be strong.

When Caleb died, the pain was unfathomable, but I could block it out, make myself numb. This... I can't block this out. It feels like someone is ramming a knife in my chest and twisting it back and forth.

I'm aware of Marney next to me, but I can't respond to his concerned words.

"You'll be okay, sweetheart," he says. There are only so many times that a person can keep being okay.



I lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling fan. Hands are pushing against my stomach, feeling around. I grit my teeth as another wave of pain locks around my torso.

"This could be a false labour," the woman says in a heavy island accent.

"Well, what the hell does that mean?" Marney sounds panicked.

"It means she might go into labour, or it could be a false alarm. Her water hasn't broken yet," she explains.

"Is the baby okay? Shit. Why is she going into labour? She's supposed to have another couple of weeks." Marney paces in the corner.

"It could be caused by any number of things, but in this case I'm going to say it's stress."

I can feel her eyes on me. She came by last week to check on me, and Marney turned her away, explaining why.

"The baby will be fine either way."

There's a moment of silence, and I know they are both looking at me, but my gaze remains fixed on the swirling blades of the ceiling fan. I know I should be worried or something, but I just... can't. All I can think about is him, and I can't seem to climb out of this black hole I'm in, the more I try, the more pointless everything seems. Another contraction comes, and it has me hunching forward slightly, gritting my teeth through the pain. God, I'm not ready for this. I can't do this. I need... I need Jude. And it's every time I

have a thought like that, I have to remind myself he's gone, and my chest feels like it's being ripped apart all over again. So, no, I'm not ready. My daughter deserves more than what I can give her right now, but it looks like I may not have a choice.

There's a brief break in the pain, and the tension in my muscles releases, allowing me to breathe. I'm about to tell the midwife to leave, when my stomach tightens in a vice grip, knocking the breath out of me. I can barely move, all I can do is focus on the ceiling as I attempt to breathe through the pain.

The midwife looks at me. "Another contraction?" she asks as she glances at her watch. "Let me check to see how far you've dilated."

She goes to flip the blanket off my legs and Marney bolts toward the door. "I'll just be out here for a bit." He's wants to help me, but really, there's nothing he can do, and he knows it.

I close my eyes. And all I feel is pressure as she checks me.

"Four centimeters. Your cervix has thinned out. You're ninety-percent effaced." She pulls the sheets back over me and pats my legs. "I don't think the baby wants to wait any longer."

No sooner has she said that than another contraction racks my body. It's all I can do to breathe. My entire body breaks out into a cold sweat and a wave of nausea comes over me. My fingers dig into my palms and I clench my jaw.

The midwife comes to stand next to me, blotting my forehead with a cool, damp cloth. "Try not to tense up, it will just make the labour last longer."

Hours pass, and with each passing minute the pain grows more unbearable. It feels like this baby is going to kill

me before she comes out. The sun sets, and the pain continues into the night. When will it end?

All I can feel is pressure between my hips, as my entire stomach has tightened. I can't think of anything but getting this baby out of me. My skin burns as it tears, the pressure almost unbearable. I scream as my pelvis feels like it's being pulled apart, and then... nothing. I throw my head back against the pillow and try to catch my breath. I close my eyes, but they flash open when I hear a tiny garbled cry. I glance down and the midwife has the baby in her arms, suctioning out her mouth. She rubs the towel over her tiny back, wiping off the blood as she lays her on my chest.

I stare down at her pink face as she cries, at her tiny little fingers made into tight fists, and I cry. I cry because my heart feels like it's ready to explode, and I cry because I wish more than anything that her daddy was here to meet her. I gently brush my finger over her soft cheek and smile through my tears. I never wanted to be a mother, and the path that brought me here was like walking through hell itself, but I have known this little person for two minutes, and already the love I have for her is all consuming. I would do anything for her, die for her. She just became my everything.

I loved Jude with all my heart, but now I have to focus on our child. I need to let him go, for the sake of the little piece of him that he left behind, his daughter.

"What is her name?" the midwife asks.

I stare down at her wide eyes, not the green of Jude's or my steel blue, but the exact same shade of brown as Caleb's. "Cayla," I whisper.



Over the next few weeks, I feel happiness for the first time in months. There is always a lingering sadness that I'm

not sure will ever truly leave me. Jude left a hole in me that cannot be filled completely, but every time I glance at Cayla, I feel like I just might be okay, eventually.

I stand on the balcony, holding her tiny body to my chest as I rock her to sleep. The setting sun paints the ocean in orange and gold. That view never gets old.

Her steady breaths resonate in my ear, her little fingers grasping at a stray strand of hair. I walk back inside and put her down in her Moses Basket, leaning over her and prying her from my hair. I smile and place a kiss on her forehead as she sleeps soundly.

I love her, but I feel like I might never know what it is to sleep properly ever again. I lay down on the bed for a moment and close my eyes.

*Hands move up my thighs, slowly spreading them apart. Hot breaths touch my stomach as his lips drift downward, kissing and caressing me. My breathing becomes shallow, my pulse racing in anticipation. I tremble and moan as his lips brush against me, never quite giving me the pressure I need. My fingers fist in his hair, trying to bring him closer. A low throaty chuckle leaves his lips.*

*"You want me to kiss you here, Tor?" His warm breath blows across my clit, and my hips roll of their own accord, seeking him.*

*"Yes," I breathe.*

*His teeth nip at the inside of my thigh. "You know what you need to do, doll." I can hear the smile in his voice, and I want to slap him, but not as much as I want his mouth on me.*

*"Please, Jude." And then his tongue is caressing me, his strong hands pinning me to the bed as he tortures me in ways that only he can.*

*I yank on his hair until he hisses, and skims his teeth across my clit, making me whimper. He teases my entrance*



*with one finger, before pushing it inside me.*

*I throw my head back against the pillow as my body tightens. Pleasure explodes, igniting my entire being. I scream and my head spins.*

*I come so hard, I wake myself up.*

I lay there, panting and shaking, and then as always the tears follow. It's a blessing and a curse, to see him, to feel him, but to wake up and realise that he's not real, that he's gone.

I glance to my left, to where Cayla is. She's gone. I sit bolt upright, blind panic consuming me.

"I hope that dream was about me."

I frown as I thrust my hand under my pillow and pull out my nine millimetre, pointing it at the shadowy figure in the corner. Familiarity pulls at the corners of my mind, but I'm so blinded by fear for Cayla, that I can't acknowledge it.

"Where's my baby?" I say, my heart is racing with adrenaline. This is the worst feeling in the world, to fear for your child.

"Our baby is right here, Tor. She's so fucking perfect."

I falter, my mind coming back into focus.

"Jude?" I whisper, my heart hammering against my ribs. This can't be real. He's dead. I'm still dreaming. I watch him rise and step into the moonlight drifting through the open doors. He places Cayla down in her bed, and sits on the edge of the bed next to me. I reach out, tracing my shaking fingers down his cheek. The rough stubble of his jaw brushes against my fingertips. He turns his face, pressing his lips to my wrist. I choke on a sob and press my face into the space between his neck and shoulder, inhaling the scent of him that my mind hasn't been able to replicate no matter how many times I try.

He winds his fingers into my hair, and touches his forehead to mine.

"I miss you so much," I breathe, clinging to him, terrified that if I let go, he'll vanish. He gently pulls my hair, yanking my head back so he can look down at me.

"Hey, doll," he breathes. He brushes his lips over mine, his lips soft yet desperate. He tears away from me, cupping my face in his large hands. "I promised you I wouldn't leave you. Nothing can fucking keep me away from you. Not a damn thing!"

If this is a dream, then I hope I never wake up.

# Epilogue

## Jude

I glance over. Tor is reading a book; her feet propped up on the railing of the deck. The sun glints from her blonde hair, highlighting her tanned skin. Cayla wiggles against my bare chest, and I gently pat her back, slouching down in the sun-lounger. She grunts, flopping her head against my shoulder. "It's alright little girl. Daddy's got you."

The waves crash against the shore. The cool breeze blows over the porch, catching the wind chimes in their wake and creating a soothing tinkering. Tor closes her book and sets it on the table as she rises. "I'm going to go and make dinner."

I smile, and grab her wrist, pulling her into my lap. She leans forward and gently strokes the back of Cayla's blonde head, her eyes going soft. I've always thought she was beautiful, but the way she is with Cayla, it makes my cock rock-fucking-hard. I wrap my free hand around the back of her neck, and pull her forward, placing a kiss on her lips.

"Fuck me, you are beautiful," I growl. "And I fucking love you."

She smiles, caressing her fingers over my jaw. "I love you." She presses her lips to mine once more, and stands up, making her way inside the house.

I settle back down in the lounge and stare out over the turquoise waters, gently circling my finger over Cayla's tiny back as she sleeps.

Fate has a fucking funny way of working itself out. At one point I thought I had lost everything, but someone threw me a lifeline. Turns out, I was so damn good at what I did, the FBI was willing to stroke out a deal, even to a convicted murderer. I stood my fucking ground, refusing to give up anything to them until they granted me my freedom. Seems like letting one criminal go in exchange for dozens is an even trade. That wreck was no accident. It was planned, but the only people that know that are me and two government officials. I took a bullet for that shit, just to make it convincing, and now, as far as the world is concerned, Jude Pearson is dead.

Tor comes back, perching on the edge of my sun lounge. I place my hand on her thigh, pushing her dress up slightly. She cocks an eyebrow and shoves my hand away with a smirk. I'm determined to get her knocked up again, and she's not having any of it.

I look up when Marney clears his throat, and I choke on a laugh. Tor struggles to keep a straight face. He's wearing a vest, and his tattooed arms are covered in nicotine patches. He's one week into giving up smoking. Tor has tried to explain to him that you're supposed to wean off the fucking patches, but shit, he must be wearing at least ten of the fucking things. He slaps one on my arm.

"You need to give up too," he grumbles. "It's not good for the little'n."

Tor buries her face in my chest, but her shoulders shake as she laughs. I nod. "Sure thing, old man."

"Give me that baby," he says, taking Cayla from my chest. "It's my turn." He huffs and walks back inside the house rocking Cayla in his arms.

Tor laughs hysterically. "Oh, shit, he's so grumpy!" she howls.

"He has a point though. I should fucking quit."

"No!" She scowls at me.

"No? Fuck, you better be glad you aren't a fucking doctor, with that damn attitude we'd be filing bankruptcy from the goddamn lawsuits."

Her lips kick up at one side. "But I like that you smell of cigarettes," she says, a slight blush creeping over her cheeks. "It really..." she moves to straddle me, leaning forward as she teases her lips over my neck. "Really, does it for me."

"Oh, no, doll," I growl into her ear, nipping at it. "I know what fucking does it for you." I push her up, bringing my face inches from hers as I lace my fingers around her neck. "You like it when I treat you like a dirty whore..." I bite her bottom lip, and she moans against my mouth.

My hands skim up her thighs, brushing between them, and my cock hardens. I slip my finger beneath the edge of her underwear, and then...

"Hey! Hey!" Marney shouts from the door to the living room, and I hear Cayla fussing. "She's crying and she tried sucking on my neck. I think she wants some food."

I groan, resting my head on Tor's chest. "You're up, dairy cow." I slap her ass, and she glares at me.

"Arsehole," she mumbles, getting up, and taking Cayla. "I'll be upstairs if you need me."

I sit staring out at the waters, reflecting on the past year when my phone rings. I pick it up from the table and pull it to my ear. "Go ahead, partner..."

"This is Redcoat thirty three. I want to place a bet on St. Louis. Bottom five, half ten."

"Alright," I say. "St. Louis. Bottom five. Half ten."

I don't want to be Jude Pearson, infamous bookie, but sometimes, no matter how much you want to put the past behind you, you can't escape who you are.

I did make a fucking deal after all, and it was for more than a few names...

The. Fucking. End.

# Dear Reader

Thank you so much for reading Jude and Tor's story. You are the reason we write and without you we wouldn't be able to do what we do, nor would we want to. We write books to immerse you in our world, and pull you out of your own for a few hours.

So thank you for reading. Thank you for taking a chance on us.

We hope that you loved it!

If you would be amazingly kind and leave a review, then we would owe you a leg humping. Lauren gets the right leg, Stevie gets the left leg.

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We hope we haven't missed anyone out. Just know that anyone who has ever written a review, posted a teaser, or read any of our books...Thank you. Your ongoing support means the world.

*The Authors*

## **LP Lovell**

Lauren Lovell is an indie author from England. She suffers from a total lack of brain to mouth filter and is the friend you have to explain before you introduce her to anyone, and apologise for afterwards.

She's a self-confessed shameless pervert, who may be suffering from slight peen envy.

### **Other books by LP Lovell**

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## **Stevie J. Cole**

Stevie J. Cole is a secret rock star. Sex, drugs and, oh wait, no, just sex. She's a whore for a British accent and has an unhealthy obsession with Russell Brand. She and LP plan to elope in Vegas and breed the world's most epic child.

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