

CROW'S ROW

Julie Hockley

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*For my husband,
thank you for your love, support and enthusiasm ... and for finally
convincing me to let you read this before I destroyed it. I couldn't have
written this without you.*

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Acknowledgments

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“The man who desires something desires what is not available to him, and what he doesn’t already have in his possession. And what he neither has nor himself is—that which he lacks—that is what he wants and desires.” Plato, *Symposium*

Prologue

The motor of my 1989 Chevrolet Capri was thumping against the hood, making the whole car jitter. We sat in silence, stuck at another red light while the oversized muffler gurgled.

For the sixth time in the last five minutes, I checked my watch and sighed, aware that my left leg was impatiently shaking with the rest of the car. I stepped on the gas about a half second before the light turned green, trying to coerce the old lady in front of me to react a little faster—honking, swearing when she didn't react at all. The old lady woke up and finally stepped on it.

My bumper practically rubbed hers, but I only had one thing on my mind. Colors. Would it be green or blue today? Maybe white—my favorite. A dark voice in the back of my mind offered no color at all as an alternative. I smothered that voice. The days of no color were simply too hard to bear. I needed color today. My cohort in the backseat echoed my edginess with a whine.

When the traffic came to Finch Road, the old lady veered off with everyone else. Finch was the line that separated city life from no man's land—that good people like the old lady ahead of me pretended didn't exist and steered away from as quickly as possible, lest it suck them in to the point where they would be forced to acknowledge its existence. I couldn't blame them—I wouldn't want my loved ones to ever come near this hellhole. This thought made my knuckles strangle the steering wheel.

As soon as I passed the Finch threshold, I switched the music on and turned up the volume until the tinted windows of my Capri were vibrating. I was definitely in the projects now. Rusty, souped-up beaters were lined up on the street, some half-parked on the crumbled sidewalks, others sat tireless on cement blocks. Men and boys amassed in the doorways of the decrepit apartment buildings, watching as I drove by. A place that even the police avoided, and one of our best moneymakers. I had nothing to fear

here, so long as I made sure to pay my respects before disappearing into the crowd.

I drove up to the last building at the end of the street where a small group of choice gangbangers was waiting for me—a reminder that I was on their turf. This last building was their headquarters, providing them with a full view of the business and goings-on of the street. I parked illegally next to a fire hydrant, threw my baseball cap on, and pulled my hood up. I took the revolver out of the glove box and tucked it into the back of my jeans, making sure that just enough of the handle could be seen by those who would be looking for it.

I then stalked out of the car, and Meatball pounced from the backseat, following me out.

In a motion that had become second nature, I scanned the area and gathered an infinite amount of information in a few short seconds: shadowed doorways, quick exit points, how many thugs with guns were staring at me, how many were avoiding staring at me. Basically, I spent my life with my stomach in a fist and my teeth clenched like I was already locked away, looking at the world through the steel bars of my cell.

But all was well in the projects today—as well as the projects could be.

The leader of the pack strutted over to me. He ordered his men to stand down, away from us, before he leaned in with a voice that only he and I could hear. “Afternoon, sir.”

He was known as Grill—paying homage to his fully gold-plated smile, financed with his illegal fortunes. I nodded to Grill. Though he was a low-ranker—a much lower-ranker—I was required to acknowledge him before entering his turf. This would ensure my safety, reassure him that my presence didn’t mean that the leaders were trying to oust him.

“Out for a stroll?” he asked, and then he hopped back when Meatball stepped forward.

I tugged Meatball back, and then I looked around us ... I didn’t need any trouble today.

Grill finally relaxed and cocked his head to the side. “You alone again today, sir?”

I checked my watch again. Then I waved him off and walked away. The look of indignation on his face told me that he didn’t appreciate being

dismissed in this way in front of his troops. But I had no time for ego-stroking.

Meatball shepherded us through the hoards of families that had gathered in the nearby clearing to enjoy the rest of the sunny May afternoon. He tugged ahead, and we quickly worked our way deeper into the clearing. I recognized some of the faces. From their stares, they recognized me too. There was no love lost there—I was the face to their problems; I couldn't hide the blood that stained my hands. But I wasn't trying to either. All I wanted, needed, today were a few seconds of peace.

We found a vacated picnic table and hid in the crowd, waiting. I pulled my shirt over my gun.

After a few minutes, Meatball's head shot up, and his ears went flat to his skull. My breath quickened, the fist inside me loosened a quarter of an inch, and the dark voice inside my head was made null and void, finally.

Chapter One: Forever Freakish

By the time the instructor called time, I had already meticulously gone over my exam paper five times. It must have been at least two hundred degrees in that auditorium, like the school needed to make sure that absolutely no one would be spared the sweat of exam week. The crevasse, dug into the back of my neck by the steady stream of sweat, was proof that I too hadn't been spared.

The few students that lagged behind left the stifling auditorium. Callister University was not an Ivy League school. It had probably never even been in the running for a top one hundred, top one thousand, any list of any schools in the country. But I still needed to maintain an A average to keep my full scholarship. So I took an extra second to check the dotted line at the right hand corner of my paper, on the off chance that Professor Vernon was one of those profs who still gave students an extra point just for spelling their names correctly. *Emily Sheppard*. My name was spelled right, though I still cringed, just a little.

Then I put my pencil down, turned my exam paper over, and had to let a very small sigh escape me. At the very least, I had survived one year of college, which meant that I was temporarily free of cramming for exams, of listening to endless lectures.... school was such a great way to kill time. I would miss that.

I rushed back to the house and stepped into complete chaos—then again, when you share a three-bedroom hole with six other roommates, everyday is chaotic. You just learn to measure in degrees of chaos. In our house, chaos ranged anywhere from the morning run through the obstacle course of empty beer cases to get into the one bathroom ... to keep your head down, and hope that nothing with sharp edges was within reach of the couch. Making it out the door in time for your next class was a challenge, to say the least.

Today was in the range of controlled anarchy. All of my roommates were moving out for the summer. There were hampers and garbage bags bunched at the door, most of them filled to the brim with dirty laundry—a common end-of-term gift for the parents. Everything was being packed—thrown really—into whatever container they could find, while their parents were shouting orders, trying to get out of our hole as quickly as possible.

Everyone who could escape Callister did so at their earliest opportunity. I was the only one of my roommates who wasn't going home for the summer break. Burt and Isabelle, my parents, were spending the summer in France, where Isabelle was born and over-bred. Europe was a regular retreat for the Sheppard family. I had put an end to that too—even a hot summer in a dead city was better than that torture.

My roommates were rushed with their good-byes and have a great summer. And then they were gone, and I was left standing in the living room, alone with the abandoned school books and empty pizza boxes.

The house had been dubbed by some—mostly of the parental origin—a dump. I loved it. New and interesting stains appeared on the living room carpet, unrecognizable smells emanated from the basement, the kitchen housed a family of ants, the sole bathroom with the tub that often doubled as a beer bucket was booby trapped with rotting plywood. These were but a few of the marvels of this student housing. And I would have it all to myself for four glorious months.

I basked in silence for a few minutes more and then ran upstairs to my bedroom before I ran out of daylight.

My bedroom was the one at the end of the hall. Except that it wasn't really a bedroom, but a broom closet that had been converted into a "rentable" space. In other words, if it was big enough for a semi-grown person to lay in, the landlord could charge student rent for it. It had no windows, no lights, no electrical outlets, and a curtain hung in place of a door because my single bed took up all of the floor space. I'd had to run a fire-hazard electrical cord from one of my roommates' room into mine just to be able to plug in a lamp and an alarm clock.

What my room lacked in square footage it made up in character. My doll-sized bed, squeezed between three walls, stood on three-foot high stilts made of milk crates that had been secretly borrowed from the corner store. My clothes, my shoes, and my schoolbooks were stacked in Rubbermaid

bins under the bed, and two-dollar Van Goghs hid most of the holes in the walls. The best part: it only cost me a hundred bucks a month—all inclusive.

I closed the curtain door, switched my jeans for sweatpants and ran back down the stairs.

After hiding the key under the front mat, I hit the ground running, literally, and zipped down the streets. I dodged people and the heaps of garbage that were piling up on the sidewalks—remnants of all the students who were gradually abandoning the city. By this time tomorrow, the city would be bare of the students that gave it life, the heaps would have been well looted, and only the real garbage would remain.

This part of Callister was considered the slum of the city—a stark contrast to the manicured lawns I had grown up with. What had been—probably a million years ago—a cute, middle-class neighborhood was now another dilapidated, though nicely affordable, sore spot on the city’s good standing. With its proximity to the university, it accommodated this weird mix of college students, underprivileged families, and drug dealers. It had a certain charm—most of the houses were small, wartime wooden homes built about three feet from the street and barely two feet apart from each other.

I was sure that the neighborhood must have been pretty at some point. Now most of the paint was chipping away. Multicolored layers started peering through spots as if the houses bared the scars left by the previous owners before being abandoned for good.

I hiked up one of the busier drags—my least favorite part of the run. Too many cars were driving by with practically everyone turning their eyes in my direction, like this was the first time they had ever seen someone run. I told myself that it was because of where I was—in this city, someone who ran was usually running away from something, like the cops or the barrel of a shopkeeper’s gun.

But somehow I knew it had nothing to do with the bad neighborhood, and everything to do with me—I was a beacon for curious stares. My hair was the color of spaghetti sauce. Not the expensive, gourmet kind, but the kind that was usually in a can, usually sold in bulk, and mostly made of carrots. And to say that I was pale was greatly fallacious. The reddish-brown freckles that speckled every inch of my ghostly skin were enough

color for my taste. To top it off, I was skinny. Not the “you-should-be-a-model” type of skinny—but the bony, awkward kind of skeletal. I held out hope that I would someday add something, anything, to my bones, but given that I was still my skinny mother’s carbon copy, hope faded with every year that passed.

I wasn’t paranoid ... but still, I turned up the sound on my Walkman. It’s easier to ignore people’s stares when you’ve got music blasting in your ears. Then I ran up the hill and took a right into an almost hidden alley.

Behind two brick buildings there was a small patch of trees that towered over the laneway, shedding a carpet of little white beans all over the street. It was one of the few areas in the ghetto that had anything green still living. I veered onto the pathway that led through the cemetery. Like the rest of the neighborhood, the cemetery had been left neglected, with weeds growing everywhere—around, and within the slow cracks of tombstones. Street-gang graffiti, spray-painted art covered almost every surface of the graveyard, including some of the stones.

It was among the broken beer bottles, cigarette butts, and fast-food wrappers that stood the only tombstone that had been maintained by the caretaker—he must have been paid handsomely by my parents to keep the weeds and garbage away from my brother Bill’s grave. I ran this same route almost every day after school. Some days I would stop and sit to talk to Bill or just stare at the head of his stone.

Today I kept running, trying to make the most out of the lingering daylight, because I was running late, because a graveyard was definitely not where I wanted to be after dark. I had watched too many movies for that.

The pathway snaked the cemetery and eventually led through a fence of overgrowth and trees. I ran into the opening of the field of weeds and into the projects. The projects were a city within the city, a bouquet of high-rise public-housing apartment buildings built by the good people of Callister. What they really were was ugly and, as far as I could tell, barely habitable. They were built quite hastily by the city in the middle of a large piece of land—an unusually large, vacant, removed, industrial piece of land. The city’s plan was to keep the poor off the streets, or away and out of sight from the rest of the city. Entering the projects was like entering another world.

While the cemetery had been virtually deserted, the field around the buildings was veiled with people. It had been the first really warm day of the year. The sun was shining, and the city—even the city within the city—was suddenly coming out of hibernation. Hard-up kids played and screamed in the tall grass, families were grouped around tiny barbeques, rap music was blaring, and foot traffic congested the walkways. So I made my way through the crowd, weaving in and out of the foot traffic to the beat of my breath and Bob Marley on my headphones.

Contrary to one of my roommate's theory, I wasn't trying to be retro with my ancient Walkman. I'd discovered it in our basement when we first moved into the house. It was free, and free was all I could afford. Yes, the Bob Marley tape that was already in there had melted into the Walkman. And yes, I was forced to listen to the same tape over and over again. But it didn't matter—it was all I needed to quiet the voice in my head long enough to put one foot in front of the other without tripping.

But when I ran through the crowd today, I started to realize that something was different, wrong somehow. People were staring at me, maybe even more than usual. I stared ahead and tried to keep my mind on my pace, on my breath, away from my delusions.

Except that I wasn't being paranoid—people were definitely staring. And then they were moving. Away from me. Parting to the sides as I ran past, like the sea in that book—though nothing about this felt biblical. Was there something on my face? I brought my hand to my sweaty face, as coolly as I could, quickly passing my fingers over my skin. As far as I could detect, there were no nose bleeds or anything else that was abnormal—abnormal for me. That was when I noticed a lady in front of me a few yards away. The fact that she was wearing a yellow hat, and had a plastic yellow purse made me notice her more than the fact that she was looking right at me. She was mouthing something, but all I could hear was Bob's voice.

Before I could grasp that she was telling me to watch out, a large black shadow had sped to me. I never had time to react. Something hard and heavy had rammed into me from behind, and I was brought down to the ground.

I came crashing, face-first, into the pebbled walkway with barely enough time to pull my hands out in front of me to break some of my fall. And that

was where I laid—pinned. Then something bounced off my back, and I felt something hot, wet and sticky on my face. It wasn't blood.

Glimpsing up, dazed, I saw the cow-sized head of a dog too close to my face, very big teeth, leash hanging freely from its neck. I heard a winded voice but I didn't think that I could respond. Even if I could, I wouldn't—afraid the dog's tongue would slip into my mouth if I tried to open it to speak. A man had come to grab the massive beast's leash and pulled it away from my now-licked-clean face. I felt a strong hand on my arm, and I was tugged up to my shaky feet.

While I came back to life, I investigated my hands. They were pretty scraped up. And though I couldn't see any tears in my sweatpants, I knew that I would have plum-sized bruises on my kneecaps tomorrow. On the ground I saw my prized Walkman, shattered to pieces all the way down the walkway. I pulled the now useless earphones away from my ears and let them drop to the ground.

"I'm okay," I finally answered, though I wasn't sure if anyone had asked me.

Glancing up, facing the westerly setting sun, I brought my hand to my forehead to rim my eyes from the blinding light. What I could see was the dog's owner, the shadow of a boy or a man in a gray sweater. He was tall, and his face was hidden by the darkness of his gray hood and the ball cap that was pulled down to his eyebrows.

We stood there, studying each other like boxers do after they step into the ring.

I was waiting for what would generally come next after a dog attack, like an apology or an offer to get my clothes dry-cleaned or his lawyer's name so that our lawyers could connect easily when I filed a lawsuit.

But the boy remained silent, fingering his watch and swiftly scanning the scene before returning his darkened eyes to me.

"I'm Emily." I extended a hand out and moved in closer to see his face. Names, I thought, were a good start. But he stepped back and glanced down.

"Your shoelace is untied," he told me, almost angrily.

I pulled my hand back, feeling a little like a moron, and followed his gaze to my feet.

I crouched down to tie my shoelace; this provoked the dog to bark and lunge to the end of its leash. I couldn't tell if it was happy or angry. It didn't matter—I jumped back, fell on my behind, wondered how long it would take before the leash snapped and the dog was back on me again.

"He's not going to hurt you." The owner had said this with irritation—like he was upset with my fear of the beast that had attacked me a few seconds before.

I huffed and tugged on my thread of a shoelace—of course, it snapped.

"You need new shoes," he uneasily commented again.

"My shoes were fine till your dog used me as a springboard."

While I struggled to tie what was left of my shoelace into a knot and try to make sense of this guy's social awkwardness, I glared up and watched as his hands clenched into a fist and his shadowed jaw tightened. We were interrupted before the hairs on my arms had time to fully stiffen.

"Hey, girl," said a voice behind me. "Think you dropped this."

I came to my feet and spun around. A man in a baggy tracksuit handed me my Bob Marley tape: it had finally dislodged itself from my Walkman, taking pieces of the Walkman with it. I knew enough about the local gang colors and teardrop tattoos that this man was showing off to know that I should stay as far away as possible. It was clear to me that I was slowly being surrounded, outnumbered.

"Thanks," I mumbled.

"What is this thing anyway?" he asked me.

When I extended my hand to meet his and quickly grab the tape, the Rottweiler went wild again, barking, growling, almost snapping its leash.

I came to be very still.

The gangbanger stepped back, but his frightened gaze was not directed to the hostile dog, but to the dog's owner. "Sorry man," he stuttered, taking a few short steps back before turning around. I watched him leave and noticed that everyone around us was doing their best to avoid looking in our direction. Accidents, like holes in the ground, usually attract crowds of gawkers and do-gooders—don't they? Yet no one else had dared to come near us.

Perturbed, I turned back to the boy and confirmed that he looked quite plain—no signs of any gang affiliations. Though his dog had calmed down

again, the boy holding the leash looked as if he were about to spontaneously combust. When he spoke, I realized it was me that he was angry with.

“You really shouldn’t be running by yourself in this neighborhood. It’s a really stupid thing to do.”

With this revelation, I took a moment, and waited for further enlightenment.

But nothing else came from him.

“Are you serious?” I probed after a few seconds.

He stayed silently erect.

I lashed out. “Must I remind you that *your* dog attacked me and *your* dog broke my Walkman? You’re not seriously blaming this on me?”

The boy once again scanned the grounds and stopped at me without any retort. I could feel my ears turning red, which meant that I probably looked like a tomato that was about to explode in the microwave.

“Am I keeping you from something more important?” I asked.

He continued to stare at me from the darkness.

I was at a loss for words, which was a strange, new feeling for me.

Finally, with a punch to his chest, I handed him my broken tape and let it drop in front of him. He caught it before it fell to the ground.

I couldn’t think of a good exit line like “See you in hell,” or “Have a great life,” or “Hasta la vista, baby”—nothing cool like that came to mind quickly enough. So I spun on my heels and started running again, before furious tears broke the surface.

I didn’t look back again, but I could sense that he was still standing there, staring from his darkness, watching me run off. I waited until I was sure that he couldn’t see me anymore before I slowed down to a walk, limping the rest of the way home.

I wished that I would have turned around the other way, back through the cemetery—this would have been a much shorter route home. But this would have also given him the benefit of seeing me limp away and cry a little. I wouldn’t give him that satisfaction.

By the time I got back to the house, it was getting dark. The street lights were on, and Skylar was lounged on the front steps.

“Where were you? I’ve been waiting for almost half an hour,” he said with his casual smile, ignoring the fact that I was limping toward him.

“Sorry. I got tied up,” I said woodenly.

On my way to the door, when I had walked past him, I had caught a whiff of something—a vat of cheap cologne. Skylar was a pretty boy from Australia—the sandy-blond, tanned kind of pretty. But he was also a really big granola; he wore Birkenstock sandals, with socks, and corduroy pants year-round. He was a strict vegan and refused to put anything in his body that wasn't natural—whatever that meant. So for him to wear a smelly chemical substance on his pure granola body ... something was definitely up. And I had a hunch of what that might be.

I avoided his stare and lifted the rubber mat, revealing the hidden key.

“Since when do you guys bother to lock the door?” he asked, standing way too close to me while I jiggled the key in the lock.

“I’m by myself for the summer,” I said with a shaky voice. From my peripheral, I could see his wide smile turn wider as I said this, confirming my suspicions, my fears.

I left Skylar on the couch and went upstairs to have a shower.

This isn't a big deal, I kept telling myself, the hot water sprinkling over me. But my throat was swelling shut and my skin stiffened; my body was rejecting the mere idea of being with Skylar, alone, without any tormenting or distraction from my roommates.

I would have normally been in and out of the washroom in ten minutes, tops. Our communal washroom was the most disgusting room in the house and there was almost always someone banging on the door, yelling at you to hurry up. Today though, I was going at a snail's pace, taking my sweet time at detangling my wet hair and brushing my teeth. I got dressed and patted my dripping hair with a towel until not a drop fell from the ends. I thoroughly examined my knees; they were already turning a dark shade of purple. Then, I looked at my reflection in the mirror for half a second longer than usual or necessary. If I would have owned makeup or a hair dryer, I could have extended my bathroom stay for five, maybe even ten minutes more; but even after searching the washroom, I came up with nothing else to do. So I put my hair up in its standard wet ball, and with an elongated sigh, I unlocked the door and stepped out of my hiding place.

When I got back to my room, Skylar was lying on my canary yellow bedspread with his legs dangling over the edge. It was a good thing I didn't make a habit of prancing around in a wet towel.

I threw my running clothes in the overflowing hamper. I would have to do laundry soon or run out of socks ... again.

While my mind was distracting itself, Skylar had flipped to his side. “So, what do you want to do tonight, E?”

I was named after my grandmother, Burt’s mother; this was the same grandmother who could still, to this day, never remember my name. Since I was born not-a-boy—one who could have carried on the recreated family name—naming me after the matriarch of the family was, in Isabelle’s mind, a way to legitimize her affair with Burt. My big brother Bill used to call me Emmy ... mostly because it irritated the hell out of Isabelle, his stepmother. I liked it, mostly for the same reason.

I didn’t really care that Skylar called me E. Anything was better than Emily. But I had a feeling that his reasons for doing so had nothing to do with any kind of special attachment he might have had to me; it was just easier to keep girls’ names straight if he only had to remember first initials. Maybe I could teach that trick to my grandmother.

I took my time dragging one of the Rubbermaid bins from under my bed and pulling out clothes for work.

“Umm ... we could go see a movie,” I finally offered. “I think the one you were talking about the other day is out.”

He sat up, clasped his hands between his knees. “Or we could just stay here and spend a quiet night in.”

I held my breath ... and the growl in my stomach saved me. “Are you hungry? I’m starving!”

“No, I’m not ... but you go ahead.”

He had looked thoroughly disappointed, and I had already made my way past the curtain door before he had even finished his sentence.

The kitchen was a disaster zone. The counters were crusted with a year’s worth of grime, and dirty dishes were, as always, piled in and around the sink. The only way to get a clean dish was to wash it right before using it—which I did before putting the freshly cleaned pot of water on the stove to boil. I drew a sink of soapy water and started doing dishes, almost excited by the fact that the dishes I cleaned would actually stay clean for longer than a minute.

Skylar just loitered by the fridge.

“You know I’m leaving in a few days,” he reminded me for the thousandth time. “I don’t even know yet if my student visa will be renewed next year.”

“Yeah, I remember you telling me that. Hope they’ll let you come back,” I said, pouring the contents of the Kraft Dinner box into the pot of boiling water.

“Ew. I don’t know how you can eat that stuff.”

I just smiled and stirred, thankful that I didn’t have to cook for the both of us. Otherwise I would have been eating twigs and blades of grass for supper.

Skylar wandered back to the television in the living room while I finished up in the kitchen. I sat next to him on the couch, taking more joy than I should have in watching his face turn a nice shade of green while I poured ketchup over my orange pasta.

Unfortunately his aversion didn’t last—as soon as I’d rested my empty bowl on the coffee table, his arm was around my shoulders.

Dating a guy for two months in college was like a lifetime to the rest of the world, or so my roommates had educated me. There were things that you were supposed to, just had to, experience in college. Everything moved so fast here ... and Skylar moved even faster. Before long, his free hand had crossed over and made its way to my thigh. And he kept turning his face to mine, trying to catch my eye.

“Do you think you did okay on your exams?” I asked him, finding ultimate interest in the *Seinfeld* rerun we were watching.

“Why wouldn’t I?” asked the A student.

“Then why do you think your visa won’t be renewed? I thought the school’s only condition was that you maintain your grades?”

He seemed to think about this. “Nothing’s ever guaranteed, I guess. There’s always a chance that they could deny my visa.”

Slim chance but good ploy, I thought.

“I’ll definitely be away all summer,” he added.

This was something I couldn’t argue with. So I got up to get a glass of water and stood at the kitchen sink.

I made a list in my head of everything that was right about Skylar. For all intents and purposes, he was perfect for that college-required experience. He was a nice enough guy. He was pretty smart. He showered somewhat

regularly. These things must have meant something, right? And then my mind wandered, and making its way to the top of the list was the fact that Skylar's forehead was too big—something that I had just happened to notice a minute before. His nose was too straight too—he must have had a nose job, I decided. I couldn't be with someone who'd had a nose job.

I rushed back to the couch before I could talk myself out of anyone else.

Like he could sense my fickleness, Skylar didn't miss a beat. "It'll be hard to be away from you for four months, I'll miss you like crazy."

His blue eyes—dull blue I'd noticed just now—were unblinking.

He took my faint smile as a green light, and his lips were on mine before I could think of anything else to say to distract him with. He tasted like strawberry Starbursts. I wondered what I tasted like to him—probably like fluorescent-orange powdered cheese.

Then there were awkwardly flailing hands and arms—mostly from my end.

Skylar seemed to know what he was doing. His hands had made their way to my back and with a quick, barely discernible flutter of his fingers over my shirt, my bra became unclasped. He then unceremoniously lunged himself on top of me.

And that was when it happened, as it always did when it came down to moments like this ... I panicked. Adrenaline rushed to my bony arms, the arms pushed out, and Skylar tumbled to the carpet, hitting his blond head against the coffee table on his way down.

Skylar stayed long enough for the shock to wear off his face, long enough to tell me—a bunch of times—that he wasn't mad, that he could wait while he rubbed the bruise on his head, which was as big as his ego.

The thing that bothered me most was that I was going to remain a virgin ... even after a whole year away at college. I was now past being a minority and entering the realm of historical figure. I imagined a grade school class in the future *oohing* and *ahhing* while the teacher up front told the tale of the eternally virginal Emily.

One more year and I would become a Greek myth.

I wasn't dumb enough to think that you had to be in love to be with someone in *that* way ... So why couldn't I bring myself to *that*, like every other normal hormonal college freshman?

The problem was that normal wasn't in my DNA. I was destined to be forever freakish.

At the end of the night, I sat on the stairs and watched Skylar leave, like the inconsequential ones before him.

Chapter Two: The Secret to My Excess

I was running so unbelievably late. I got out of the shower, slipped my sticky feet into flip-flops, and squeaked down the hall to my room. And then I just stood there for a long while, seriously considering skipping work and running back to bed to hide under the covers ... would anyone notice if I didn't show up today?

There were days when I wished my bank account would just fill itself up without any effort from me. Today was one of those days. My bagel got stuck in the toaster and burned to a crisp; I barely hit my glass on an angle against the kitchen sink, and it shattered into a million jagged gems; and the sole pair of clean socks that I could find were mismatched, and one of them had a hole that kept cutting off the circulation to my big toe.

I hadn't slept a wink—not even a little bit. I could sleep through music blaring in the room next to mine. I could even sleep through a spontaneous game of dirty underwear football erupting on the other side of my curtain, but I couldn't block out the sound of police sirens going off in the distant city night. Go figure.

I ran the four blocks to school. My kneecaps were still throbbing, and they were slowing me down—that was my excuse anyway.

You wouldn't know it was a university if you drove past it. From the road, it looked more like a detention center, except without the barbwire and the guards. But, if you made it past the windowless walls, the grounds felt less like a prison; there were real trees, real green grass, and dirt beds with real flowers here. Sometimes you could even hear the birds sing over the honking traffic outside the compound.

I followed the cobblestone path up to the school library. All of the school's buildings were in some way or another linked through underground tunnels or bridged passages; you never needed to leave, go out of the compound, unless you really wanted to. The library was still by far the

biggest and nicest building, though I couldn't understand why they would spend the most money on something they were trying to get rid of.

The campus was usually bustling with students and teachers and staff. Now it was more like a black hole had sucked out all signs of human life overnight. It would be a long, empty summer.

I tried to catch my breath before pushing through the library's revolving doors. Inside, it was cool—air conditioning was a luxury. I went through the metal detectors and grabbed my backpack off the conveyer belt. A long counter flanked one side of the library's main floor and rows of vacant computer stations and metal chairs of burgundy plastic-leather took up the rest of the space. But there were no books—and I was a conspirator to this tragedy. My job was to scan all the literary works of art, sections 341 to 471, fourth floor of the library archives. What happened to the books after that ... the horror of the digital age was too much to bear. I was selling my soul for minimum wage.

The lady at the reserve counter looked at the big clock on the wall and peered at me over the rim of her glasses as I rushed to the elevators. My kind, the soul-sellers, weren't exactly hailed in these parts. I hit the elevator button to go down while perspiration was building on my forehead.

There were five elevators that took students between the seven floors of the library, but only one went down to the basement archives. That one was slow and temperamental.

I knew that I should have gone back to bed when I saw Jeremy stroll through the revolving doors. I knew for sure that I should have gone back to bed when I saw him walking in with another girl. I had dated Jeremy for about a month at the beginning of the school year and for another two-week round of self-torture over the Christmas break. He had helped me get a job in the library; I needed all the help I could get—there was only so much creative writing I could bring to my resume without having to admit that I had never actually held a job in my life.

I pressed the stupid elevator button twice more—too late.

"Hi, Emily," Jeremy said, flat-toned.

I pasted a smile on my face and spun around. "Hey, Jeremy, how are you?"

"Fine," he quickly said, lancing his arm around the girl. She was everything I wasn't: cute, blonde, big-breasted, and shorter than him.

“That’s good,” I said curtly.

I pressed the button once more and the doors opened at last. We got in the elevator and let the ding of the lighted floor numbers do the talking. Jeremy and the girl got off on the second floor. He had looked back once before the doors closed, his arm never leaving her shoulders.

Jeremy was about an inch shorter than me, and he was viciously competitive—Napoleon complex, I surmised. I had beaten him at poker once, and he had accused me of cheating—I gave him his two dollars back. When we broke up, he left with the same look of frustration that Skylar had had the night before, but no bumps on his head—that I knew of. At least I got to keep the job. But I would definitely have to remember to take the creepy, but vacant, archive stairs next time.

Luckily, I had the fourth floor all to myself, which was encouraging, but nothing new. Sometimes weeks would go by before someone other than me walked through the rows of the fourth-floor book stacks. Mathematics and obsolete statistics were not the most riveting of subjects. I spent my days alone, flipping through damp pages to the hum of the dingy lights that were encased in the thick cement walls.

I set my bag down on the butcher’s block of a table that looked like it could have been an antique, but had been scratched, engraved, and panned beyond repair. Apparently, Stacey H. was here, Jessica & Naomi were BFFs 4Eva, and someone wished K.P. a gruesome death.

I yawned one of those tear-inducing yawns and picked up where I had left off a few weeks ago, before exams had taken over my life. My workstation: a computer and an oversized scanner that took up half the table.

I grabbed the next book on the shelf, opened it to the first page, and placed it face down on the scanner. I typed the book’s title, author, and publication date in the computer and pressed the green scan button. The lime green light sped from one side of the scanner to the other, and my work day had officially started.

It was a boring and mindless job, scanning each book one page at a time; but all things considered, it was a pretty sweet gig for a student. Of the few students who had been hired, one per floor to do this same job, most spent their paid hours either napping on the bottom of an empty shelf or making out behind the book carts, which Jeremy was probably doing by now. There

was no adult supervision of the almost adult students. The first week I had started working there, I got in trouble with the other students for scanning the books too quickly—apparently this not only made the rest of them look bad but meant that the electronic library project would get done faster, taking jobs away from poverty-stricken students. I certainly didn't want to be responsible for that, so I slowed down and used my free time to study and catch up on my homework. Like I said, it was a sweet gig.

But with school being out, I didn't have any homework to do, and it was way too quiet to sleep. I could have brought a book to read, but my eyes were stinging from sleeplessness. With nothing but my brain waves to distract me, I had to break the golden rule, and I started feverishly scanning books.

How do you know when you're *There*, I contemplated between the 800 pages of *Algorithms: an Annotated History*. Do you just get up one morning, pour yourself a glass of juice without breaking it, come to take a bite of your nicely grilled bagel and ... boom! *There* is right there, staring you in the face—that moment when you realize you have everything that you've worked for, waited for, and you finally find yourself utterly fulfilled. What happens after that? Do you go into the new world of "What Else Is There," or do you finish your bagel and live happily ever after? My *There* was not what I thought it would be.

For some people—most people—their ultimate goal had a dollar sign attached to it. They'd work their whole lives to build their *There* money. Me, I was the oddball; the biggest secret that I had kept from everyone in my new life was the fact that I came from money, a lot of it. I came from a world of privilege and excess—of a house full of people who were paid to be nice to me, of being forced to go to stupid private schools where I had to wear the stupid uniforms and go to the stupid parties. Burt was in his sixties, Isabelle in her fifties, and they were still working on their *There* money.

I was embarrassed by the fact that my parents had money. This was only exacerbated when I listened to my roommates make fun of the kids with money, the ones that paid for parking spots, the ones that bought five-dollar coffees. Somehow I knew that normal people wouldn't understand my decision to leave it all behind. Some days, like today, I even questioned it myself.

I could normally scan up to three books a day without getting into trouble. Today, I was on a roll and did over a weeks' worth of work. Thankfully, it made the day fly by—I would have to figure out how to hide the evidence later.

When my paid workday ended, I rolled my cart filled with evidence to the furthest end of the room, behind the last bookshelf, and trudged home. Then I did what I should have done first thing that morning: I climbed under the covers and hid.

I tossed around my bed for over an hour. The house was infuriatingly quiet. Frustrated, I flung the covers off and dug some running clothes out of the dirty laundry basket. I threw on whatever passed the smell test and ran out of the house into the peopled world. It was another beautiful evening. The days were already getting longer and hotter. A summer sleeping in a windowless room without air conditioning would be ... interesting.

I noticed the absence of my Walkman as soon as I reached the sidewalk but didn't dwell on it too long. After being cooped up alone in the library basement all day, it was kind of nice to listen to the sounds of the city, of life. I made it to the cemetery in pretty good time and said a quiet hello to Bill as I passed his grave.

When I reached the clearing into the projects, I immediately noticed the boy sitting alone on top of the picnic table that was nearest to the cemetery. I recognized him by his gray hooded sweater, the same one he had been wearing the day before when his dog had mowed me down. But he wasn't wearing his ball cap this time, and his face in the lowering sun was clearly visible.

When he saw me, he got up and quickly intercepted me at the walkway. He pulled the hood of his sweater off his head, tousling his brown hair in the process.

Yes, I could definitely see him now, and my already hot flushed cheeks were turning a new shade of red. He was a handsome boy—man—I couldn't decide how old he was. Too old for me? His eyes were striking, almost black. I was immediately aware that I was sweaty and gross. I also remembered that there was a huge mustard stain on the bottom of my T-shirt.

"Hello," he said, quietly, his hands in his pockets. He seemed to be a different person today.

I was still trying to catch my breath.

His eyes scanned the grounds and stopped at me. "It's getting late. I was starting to think you weren't going to come today."

"My bruised knees were slowing me down," I said—an automatic reaction, always preparing for battle, expecting rejection or repulsion. When his cheeks picked up a shade of rose, something he had said suddenly occurred to me. "You were ... waiting for me?"

"Yes," he slowly admitted. "Does this surprise you?"

"You were really mean to me yesterday," I said. I couldn't find anything better, less unintelligent, to say.

Worry inexplicably washed over his face, like this stranger's words had impaired him somehow. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you. What I did, said ... It was totally uncalled for."

"You didn't hurt me, really. Your dog did, though."

He glanced around us again. Then a careful smile crept on his face as his eyes made their way back to mine. "Meatball was sorry too."

"Meatball?"

He paused, the smile vaporized. "Meatball is my dog's name."

His sudden change in demeanor had made me remember the beast whose massive jaw and teeth were sure signs that I could have easily become his late afternoon snack. I was scanning around us, expecting to be tackled at any moment.

"No worries, I didn't bring him," he told me, reading my mind.

I mustn't have looked convinced.

"Really, he likes you," he insisted.

"I don't think he knows me well enough to make such a crucial split-second decision." It was meant as a joke, but his eyes narrowed.

"Right," he said. "Anyway, I wanted to make sure you were okay and apologize for yesterday."

"I'm fine, and apology accepted."

I tucked an errant hair behind my ear. The minute I touched my head I realized that most of the hair from my ponytail had fallen out in a sweaty mess. I immediately fingered my crazed hair back into a snug ponytail.

His lips twitched, like he was suppressing a smile. "Do I make you nervous?"

“No,” I swiftly answered, with a grimace. Of course it was a lie. He chuckled lightly and this time I glanced away from him. The projects were teeming with people again today, but no one seemed to notice that we even existed, or they were still avoiding us.

“So, do you live around here?” I asked, a veiled attempt at changing the subject.

“Not really,” he answered, his gaze wandering again.

Was that a yes or a no?

“I live a couple of blocks away from here,” I offered, leading by example—this was how normal people conversed.

His eyes shot back to my face. “You shouldn’t tell people where you live. What if I was some kind of psycho?”

The features of his face had instantly darkened, and a chill ran down my bare legs.

“Well, are you?” I asked, my voice slightly shaking.

“It’s a little late to be asking me that, isn’t it?” he snapped. His brown eyes searched my face. I didn’t know what he was looking for, but I pressed my lips together, just in case he found the spinach salad that I had for lunch still stuck in my teeth. He strained a smile. “You need to be more careful is all I’m trying to say.”

I shrugged coolly. “I can run pretty fast ... and I’ve managed to keep myself out of trouble so far.”

“This isn’t a good place for you to test your courage. You shouldn’t be coming here. Find somewhere else to run,” he said, looking away.

“It’s a free country. I can go wherever I want to go, whether you like it or not,” I said, feeling something that had nothing to do with him brew inside me. “What gives you the right to tell me what to do?”

His face darkened again. We glared at each other for what seemed like an hour; in reality, it was more like five seconds—five really long seconds. A tension bubble seemed to have swallowed us.

I sucked a breath through my teeth. “It’s getting late,” I said, taking a step backward. “I better go.”

When I turned sideways to leave, his arm reached out to mine to stop me.

“Wait,” he half-shouted, “I forgot something.” He pulled his hand abruptly away. The warmth in my arm still tingled while he dug a small box out of his pocket and shoved it over to me, avoiding touching me again.

“To replace the one that I broke,” he explained.

I took it, almost dropping it in the process. I opened the clear plastic box and a rectangular silver plate fell out. It had a circle in the middle and a square screen on the top. “Umm ...” I said awkwardly, “thanks.”

His eyes widened. “It plays music,” he said like I was mentally slow.

Of course I knew what it was—anyone with money to spare had one of these. Why would I need to know how to use one if I knew I would never actually be able to afford one?

I squinted, turning the music thingy in my hands. His laugh caught me off guard. I gazed up.

He grabbed the piece of metal from my hand—more softly than I had expected—and held it up for me to see. Pressing on the circle, the square screen lit up. He moved his finger along the circle line and showed me where to click to find music lists.

“You didn’t have to do that. My Walkman was pretty worthless.”

“Yeah, it was,” he quickly agreed. “But this one is brand new and it actually fits in your pocket.” He looked a little smug as he said this. “I even downloaded Bob Marley on there for you.”

“How did you know I liked Bob Marley?” I asked, tilting my head.

He raised an eyebrow. “You gave me the broken tape, remember?” He brought his fist to his chest to remind me that I had punched the tape into him.

“Oh ... right,” was all I could say again, my cheeks afire.

He gave me back the music rectangle. “I can get you new running sneakers too, if you want. Better than the ones you’re wearing.” He smiled, but then his eyes darted around us again.

I looked down at my feet. “What’s wrong with my sneakers?”

When I heard him mumble something, I glanced back up. His face had suddenly turned ashen and he was backing away from me. He had turned back into the menacing boy I had encountered the day before.

“I gotta go,” he said. Just like that, he turned around and left.

I stood in place confused for a second longer, took a few breaths. Then I proceeded to turn around too.

“Emily,” I heard him call out. My heart jumped and I looked back to find that he had stopped in his tracks a few yards away. “I meant what I said. Don’t come back here.”

“I meant what I said too,” was what I had wanted to counter with, but he had already disappeared and I was too taken aback that he had remembered my name—nothing but quick breaths came out of my mouth.

I stuffed his gift inside my pocket—it did fit in there nicely, I noticed a little resentfully—and turned back on my heels.

I finished my run, more befuddled than ever ... and with the realization that I still had no idea what his name was. He was the strangest person I had met, so far.

When I got home, I made myself a peanut butter sandwich—the bread was stale, but at least it filled one of the holes in my stomach. I took chokingly huge bites while I cleaned the broken glass in the sink that I hadn’t had time to get to that morning. I found a pair of sweatpants that hadn’t seen the light of day since ninth grade, and I threw a box of laundry detergent on top of my dirty clothes, stuffed a roll of quarters in my pocket, lugged the overflowing basket down the stairs, and headed out the door.

The laundromat was a good block-and-a-half down our street, so carrying the heavy load of clothes was not an option. But my roommates and I had already devised a first-rate system. I unlocked the padlock that kept our permanently borrowed grocery cart chained to the front porch; the stolen cart kept getting stolen on us, so we had to keep it under lock. I heaved the basket into the cart and rolled it down the street, fitting in with the rest of the neighborhood.

It was remarkable to me how far I had come in less than a year’s time, since I had escaped to Callister. I had gone from having no idea how to do anything without hired help to being completely self-sufficient—well, most days anyway. There were signs of my abnormality, of course—like the time I had tried to make hard-boiled eggs. I found out the hard way that you needed to add water to the pot, and the house reeked of burnt eggshells for a week. I learned through observation and a lot of trial and error.

Inside, the laundromat was bright, with blue plastic chairs lined against the white walls and tumbleweeds of lint rolling on the checkered floor. I loved the smell of the laundromat—to me it smelled of fresh starts, possibilities, independence.

I started by going through all my pockets—good thing I did, or I would have washed my new pocket-sized music player—before stuffing two machines with as much clothes as they could take and threw half a roll of

quarters in. Then I sat on one of the machines, threw my feet over on the lid of the other machine, and waited. The most important rule of the laundromat: never leave your clothes unattended, not even for a second, even when the place seems to be completely deserted of people. Otherwise, you'll see some local flavor walking around the next day wearing your tweed pants as a scarf, your underwear as a hat ... another lesson I had learned the hard way.

I wasted my idle time playing with my new toy. It took me a good five minutes to remember how to turn it on, and then another half hour to navigate through the different features to find music. Bob Marley was there, along with every one of his albums that was ever made or remade. Who knew there were so many remakes of "One Love"?

I scrolled down to the next name on the list: this obscure band called Purple Faced Ragamuffins—I didn't even know they had recorded an actual album. I had seen them play once in this dingy bar in Soho when I was still totally underage. I had snuck out of school with a girl from my soccer team. She was stalking the drummer.

The music-thingy must have had over a thousand songs, most of which I recognized—surprising given my limited music knowledge. But, in the end, I settled with what was safe and familiar and finished laundry night with Bob.

When I got back from the laundromat, a red dot was blinking on my cell phone. Skylar had left me a message from an airport phone—it was rapidly worded, like he had been afraid that I might pick up the line and he would be forced to actually talk to me. I could hear his flight being called in the background—nothing like waiting to the very last minute. He said all the right things: that he wasn't mad, that he would miss me, that he would call me as soon as he got settled at home. And then the line went dead. I wondered if it was normal that I wasn't sad.

Chapter Three: Haunted

Day two of my four-month escape from civilization, and another sleepless night. Insomnia was becoming a bad habit.

My brain was cluttered with things I didn't need: the fear of boredom, of being alone with my thoughts without distraction, Skylar's effortless desertion ... the boy in the gray sweater. I spent more time thinking about the latter.

There was no question in my mind that this boy was odd and beautiful—a dangerous combination. Something about his guardedness, something about the way others in the projects had looked at him with fear, made me think that I should probably run the other way next time and concentrate on not thinking about him.

I had spent the night trying to figure out why I had been the target of his, at weird times, moments of anger. And then there was the final warning—or was it a threat? When the light of morning rose, I still didn't have an answer to my questions. He was a roller coaster of incomprehensible emotions—and I was borderline obsessed.

At midnight I had given up trying to sleep, stuck my new earphones in, and cleaned the house. By five a.m., the house was museum spotless, but I had exhausted the sole source of entertainment originally saved for the now-looming, lonely weekend.

At work, I was a speed demon with my new music blaring in my ears. By the time lunchtime came around, I looked at the cart of scanned books in horror—it was already full. I would have a hard time trying to explain that much evidence away. I decided to take an extra-long lunch to think about what I'd done.

Lunch bag in hand, I walked out of the library, careful to take the stairs and do a quick scan of the perimeter so that I wouldn't run into another awkward moment with Jeremy ... or his cute blonde.

It was humid outside. The sun was beating down on the abandoned university grounds; the smart people were hiding in the air-conditioned cafeteria. I considered doing just that myself, but that would be tempting fate with more Jeremy-awkwardness.

I settled on a table that sat under the shade of a maple tree, took my peanut butter and stale bread sandwich out, and opened the book that I had borrowed from my scanned stack. *Dummy Variables for Stata*—it turned out to be not as interesting as it sounded.

My life was marred by events of turmoil and self-mutilation. When I was five, I played hairdresser with Barbie before turning the scissors on myself. When I was done, Barbie looked like a model walking into rehab after a couple months of hard partying. I looked like the lopsided top of a carrot muffin.

In third grade, Tyler Brown convinced me that everyone had freckles but that they hid them with paper Wite-Out—it made perfect sense to an eight-year-old. So I spackled it on before I went to bed and left it overnight, to make sure that the paint was well embedded before my big reveal at school in the morning. At least I got to stay home from school for a week while my skin recovered from the paint thinner that the maid had to scrub into my skin.

It was hard being the kid who just wanted to get lost in the crowd when my head was like a flare being set off in an ocean of blondes and brunettes. People were always drawn to the girl with the fire-engine hair, in the same way that they couldn't help themselves from slowing down to stare at car accidents on the side of the road—hoping that it was as bad as it looked, wanting to witness some shocking thing that only an elite few have ever seen up close.

I also wasn't blind to the attention that I reaped from the opposite sex. It had started with the boys in grade school who would dare each other to run up to me and pull my hair; those boys would later grow up to be frat boys who were looking to do more than pull my hair. I was a rite of passage for most of the male species, at any age.

But, as an almost adult, I was getting a little better at singling out the guys who were looking for the red-headed experience. So when a man with red-rimmed glasses approached me, my red-radar was up right away.

“Excuse me,” he said, standing across the table.

I sighed through my nose, looking up. He was rail thin and tall. His spiked hair, which was sporadically present, made it ever more obvious that his hair was thinning at the crown and that he was trying very hard to hide this.

“Would you mind if I sat here?” he asked pointing to the bench across from me. “There are no other tables in the shade.”

I gave a nod and went back to my dumb variables while he sat down.

But he didn’t get my cues of indifference.

“I’m Anthony Francesco,” he started, though it had sounded more like a question.

I glanced over the edge my book. He was staring expectantly at me, obviously waiting for a response.

“Emily,” I said without emotion and tried to go back to my book; but I somehow knew that he wasn’t done. I instantly regretted my decision to not bring my earphones.

“No last name, Emily?” he said, nervously chuckling. “Are you like Madonna or something?” I flipped a page of my book, even though I hadn’t finished reading it.

“So ... do you go to school here, Emily?”

“Uh-huh,” I said.

“Are you from around here?” he asked.

I started to mow down my sandwich faster, just in case I needed a quick exit, and thought of a good vague response that I had recently heard.

“Not really,” I said, hiding my smile.

“... Yeah, I’m not really from around here either.” There was another blissful moment of silence, and then he continued, “Do you live close to school?”

“Kind of,” I answered, my eyes never leaving the page, my lips never more than an inch away from my sandwich.

“I’ve got my own place a couple of blocks from here,” he said. “Do you still live with your parents?”

“Yep,” I lied.

“Do you have any siblings?” he hurriedly asked, likely noticing that I was shoveling the food into my mouth as quickly as possible. But he was too late. I was done eating, and for the first time, gladly offered more than a few syllables.

“Sorry, my break is over. I’ve got to go before my boss freaks out.”

I picked up my stuff and rushed off before he had a chance to find something else to question me about. I would have run out of there, but that would have made it a little too obvious.

“What a freak,” I whispered to myself, as I walked back into the library—though he was probably thinking the same thing about me.

I was back at work, half an hour early from my lunch. And my fake boss didn’t freak out.

By the time I strolled out of the library at the end of my work day, the weather had changed dramatically; the sky was dark, and black clouds were rolling in like a tsunami. With all of the humidity from the past few days, I expected that I didn’t have much time to spare before the rain came crashing down, hard.

Back at the house, I spent more time than I had squinting in the mirror, fixing my devastatingly frizzed hair, trying to find something to wear.

When I reached the cemetery’s entrance, black clouds were already threatening overhead. With only two or three people idling under the shadows of the trees, the cemetery was almost desolate—the smart people were indoors again.

But when I took a quick right at the decaying catacomb, I stopped dead in my tracks.

Someone had thrown a crushed pop can and candy wrapper on top of my brother’s grave. I knew it was unfair of me to be upset that my brother Bill’s grave had been desecrated—especially when the rest of the cemetery had never been anything but disrespected—but I had no sense of justice when it came to my big brother.

I took a few steps to Bill’s tombstone and crouched down to push the garbage away. I grabbed the bottom of my T-shirt and wiped the soda that had been spewed onto the stone. And I then stopped, forgetting my purpose, tracing my hand along the engraved lines of his name.

You’re supposed to hold your breath when going past a cemetery, or, as the superstition goes, you’ll breathe in the spirit of the dead. You’re also supposed to stick your thumbs into your fists to protect your parents. I did neither and ran through the cemetery almost every day—if only that was enough to explain why I was so haunted, and why my parents were ... the way they were. I missed Bill—every second of every day.

I had little recollection of my life before things started to go so wrong in my family. Burt and Isabelle had had an affair when Burt was still married to someone else and Bill was just a baby. When Burt left Bill's mother and married my mom, Bill's mother committed suicide. And I was born in the middle of all of this, a soap opera that my big brother had tried to shield me from. Through all of this, in spite of how I came into this world, he was my biggest, my only, ally.

Most of my family memories were of the heated arguments between Burt and my brother. Bill getting into fights, Bill selling drugs, Bill getting kicked out of eight different private schools—Bill, the Shame of the Sheppard family. The last argument was on the night that Bill was brought home in a police cruiser when my parents were having a dinner party, and there were too many witnesses to the shame. Burt shipped my brother off to Callister to live with his uncle Victor, who was his birth mother's brother, and a police officer. A few months later, Victor called Burt—Bill had run away.

But Bill still came to visit me, secretly. He'd climb into my room in the middle of the night on my birthday, on Christmas, whenever he felt like it, just to check up on me and make sure that I was doing whatever he thought I should be doing—going to school, not doing drugs ... according to my brother, what was good for the goose wasn't good enough for the gander.

Then when I was thirteen, a police officer came to our front door. Bill's body had been found in an empty apartment in Callister, the needle still hanging off his arm. There was an autopsy—Bill had died of a drug overdose. Heroin, I had overheard.

I was awakened from my daze by a loud bang from the thunder roaring above the overhanging trees of the cemetery. I pressed my hand hard against the cold stone and took one last glance at the gravesite before being satisfied and speeding off, returning to my purpose. I quickly rounded the chestnut tree and by the time I reached the clearing into the projects, the sky was pitch-black and the thunder was now belching steadily.

Unlike the previous few days, the clearing was completely desolate. My shoulders sunk when I saw he wasn't there waiting for me at the picnic table, even though, logically, I knew that he wouldn't be there and that I shouldn't be looking for him.

I reluctantly kept running until I heard the bark of the dog named Meatball.

I slowed down to an almost walking pace and looked back. He was there in his gray sweater, leaning against the fence at the farthest point of where the cemetery and projects met, about two hundred feet from the entrance to the cemetery that I had just ran through.

Following his leashed dog's warning, he brought his eyes to me. But he wasn't alone this time. There was another man at his side—a man with a shaved head and too many tattoos.

While the boy in the gray sweater was pulling on the leash, struggling to keep Meatball from running off to greet—attack—me, the other man looked confusedly at his friend and his suddenly misbehaving dog, and eventually followed his friend's quick glimpses to me. He glanced from me to his friend twice more, his confusion seemed to have turned to anger. The boy in the gray sweater turned his body away from me, toward the tattooed man.

In that instant, I decided that today was not a good day to chat with my obsession. Pretending to have slowed down for a stretch, I extended my arms, bending them over my head, very quickly grabbing each elbow. And then I picked up my running pace again.

I followed the pathway through the field that surrounded the projects, and, as it slowly veered to the right, I finally felt it was safe enough for me to look back. At a far distance, I could still see him standing there with the other man. They seemed deep in conversation, possibly arguing. Another runner came through the clearing of the cemetery, and I saw Meatball feverishly tugging on his leash once again. I made my way down the hill and out of sight, and I smiled to myself, glad that I wasn't the only one that Meatball liked so much.

I was coming close to completing the first third of my run when lightning split the sky a few yards ahead of me, thunder exploded, and the rain suddenly started to pour. I took my headphones off and put them in my pocket—I was already attached to my new toy and didn't want it to get wet—and I kept soldiering on.

The drops of rain quickly turned into buckets of water, and I was getting soaked. Lightning came to light up the black sky. The grounds were soaked. Either I gave in to the weather or I was going to get zapped. I turned around and retraced my steps back through the projects.

The rain didn't bother me, but the lighting was making me very nervous. I ran faster, looking forward to the shelter of the trees in the cemetery and their momentary refuge. I ran back up the small hill into the fields of the projects, seeing through the gravel-sized drops that the boy in the gray sweater and the other scary man had left.

I finally made it through the entrance back into the cemetery. Just as I thought, the lofty trees managed to keep most of the rain out. I slowed my pace a bit to catch my breath and shake off a bit of water. My sneakers were submerged canoes.

With the sun out of sight, the cemetery was dark. I could barely make out the contours of the winding pathway. I squeezed some of the water out of the bottom of my T-shirt and sloshed forward. I had run this route so many times—I knew every curve, every bump in the road.

I picked up a jogging pace, came around to the big chestnut tree ... and heard a bone-chilling cry, as if an animal were being tortured.

I was used to Bob's voice here, not this.

I stopped immediately, wondering if my horror-movie-infected brain was playing tricks on me. Then there was another cry, even more ear piercing this time.

Too afraid to move, and beating myself up for having stupidly decided to run through a dark cemetery alone, I stood there like one of the tombstones. I could hear muffled voices, and then more cries of pain. Not knowing where the sounds were coming from or what was making that sound, I didn't know whether to run away or stay put or even which direction was a safe way.

My body decided for me, and I started to move quietly on the uneven footpath. Something, instinct or impulsivity, was leading me toward the quickest way home. I made it to the massive tree—a familiar mark. I didn't have much further to go before I was on the street again.

I took a few more steps ... and heard a scream again, but this time it was much closer—I had picked the wrong direction. When I heard the bark that I recognized, I took a peek around the tree without thinking.

That was when I saw him, standing there with his dog, the gray sweater giving him away in the shade. He had his back to me, and the tattooed man that I had seen with him earlier was next to him—I could see a spiderweb

tattooed on the back of his neck. There were two other men flanking both of them—I didn't recognize either of them.

Meatball was a different dog. He looked vicious and rabid, slobbering madly and trying to crunch into something that I could not see.

When one of the men shifted his stance slightly, I saw what all four of them were looking at and what Meatball had been trying to sink his teeth into. There, crouched on the ground, was a man; he was groaning. His pants were ripped and blood-spattered. From the bloody wounds on his arms and legs, I could tell that Meatball had already had a taste.

The boy who I had obsessed over was murmuring to the crouched man. I couldn't hear what he said, but whatever the crouched man said in response displeased the group. The tattooed man proceeded to punch and kick him.

The others stood around, silently, calmly watching him do this, while the man on the ground curled into a ball, his head hidden in his arms, wailing. With each punch and kick came a disgusting thudding sound, like meat being pulverized. My ears were drumming, and I thought I was going to be sick, but I could not move away, could not look away. I wanted to yell, beg them to stop, but even if I'd had the guts to say anything, the muscles of my mouth were numbed.

At last, the beating stopped.

The man slowly peered up from between the protection of his arms, and I was taken aback. Although he was bleeding profusely, I still recognized him—he was the runner who had come out of the cemetery shortly after I did, right before I had disappeared down the hill.

My hands came to my mouth, trying to suppress the cry that was building at the edge of my throat. And the man on the ground immediately turned his bloodied eyes to me. He must have seen my sudden movement in the shadows, I thought ... like a coward, I withdrew further into the shadows for fear that he would betray my presence and present the attackers with an alternate prey.

When he turned to his aggressors and said something that I couldn't hear, my heart dropped. I felt powerless. Was I still breathing?

Whatever the crouched man had whispered to the boy in the gray sweater, it had sent him over the edge. His arms started shaking. He brought his hand to his back, pulled a gun from the waist of his jeans and shots rang out in the dead air.

When my eyes came to refocus, the man on the ground had stopped moving. Blood spattered the ground, and the three other men who were flanking the shooter had spun around.

They looked at me with complete surprise on their face.

Without realizing it, I had been screaming and I was still screaming and shaking and I couldn't stop or move any other part of my body ... like my legs, to run away from them.

"Cameron," breathlessly yelled the tattooed man, grabbing the shooter by the shoulder and forcing him to turn around.

The boy in the gray sweater spun. Our eyes met again, and his face turned pale.

A twig snapped behind me.

The thunder roared one last time ... before everything went dark.

Chapter Four: Chow Mein

There was a flash of light and distant noises. My head felt like someone was taking an ice pick and chipping away at my skull with sadistic blows. I decided that death couldn't be this painful, so I was probably not dead ... or this was what hell was supposed to feel like.

My eyes were pried open, and a light came flashing again. This was followed by an animalistic groan, like a bear cub—was that me?

I managed to flutter my eyes open without anyone's help. Inches away from my face, someone was holding a pen-sized flashlight. I couldn't focus enough to see him, but I could definitely smell him: cigarettes, booze, dirt.

The ceiling was swimming. I thought I was going to vomit, and I had to let my eyelids drop to stop the spinning. Slowly, the muffled sounds became words.

"What's your name, sweetheart?" asked the man with the flashlight. His voice was raspy, and I could smell the nicotine off his breath.

"None of your business," I managed, my voice bouncing like a rock against the walls of my skull. I could hear snickering in the background. I tried to get up, but barely managed to get my head off the pillow before it fell back with a thump.

"Whoa there, sweetheart! Not so fast! You've got a pretty big bump on that little noggin of yours," said the raspy voice.

That would explain the blinding pain. "My name is definitely not sweetheart," I defied—and there was more snickering from the peanut gallery.

"Of course it isn't, honey. But that's all I've got to work with right now," he told me.

It's not honey, either, I thought, but was in too much pain to argue with him on his use of sexist remarks.

“She’s probably got a mild concussion,” assessed the man with the nicotine breath. “Just make sure she gets plenty of rest and wake her up every few hours overnight. Give me a call if she gets any worse.”

“She looks like she’s in pain. Can she take anything?” asked a deep voice that I instantly recognized. I forced my eyes open. The boy in the gray sweater—Cameron—was standing at the foot of the bed, and color still hadn’t returned to his face.

“Not for the next twelve hours. But I’ll leave you something for tomorrow,” replied nicotine breath, like he was in hurry. The doctor’s stink matched his appearance, as if he had just crawled out of a cardboard box in a back alley. His dress shirt, which might have once been white, was untucked and had dark yellow and brown stains, particularly under the armpits and around the collar. His dress pants were grossly wrinkled and equally stained.

“Thanks, Doc.” Cameron furtively glanced in my direction and turned to the scary tattooed man who was standing behind him, in a soldier-like stance.

There was another boy leaning against the white wall. By the grin on his face, he must have been the instigator of the earlier giggling at my expense. He was a big kid, standing at least six feet tall and built like he should be throwing bales of hay around. He reminded me of an oversized Chucky doll, except with disheveled brown hair instead of red.

With a nod from Cameron, the tattooed man dug into his pocket and pulled out a wad of rolled-up bills. Not missing a beat, the Doc grabbed the cash and rushed out of the room without taking one more look at his patient. So much for bedside manner.

The tattooed man followed the doctor out the door, shooting me a frosty glare on his way out. Cameron turned his focus to the other boy.

“Get out of here, Kid,” he ordered. I watched as the kid walked out the door without saying a word, but with the same stupid grin on his face.

And then we were alone.

I ran my fingers through my hair, hitting a bump at the crown of my head.

“Ouch,” I said in an almost whisper. But Cameron heard me and glanced back. As soon as our eyes met, he looked away. I tried to read his face, but his expression was blank.

“Get some rest,” he said harshly as he too walked out, closing the door behind him.

I lay there, circling my fingers into my temples and trying hard to remember what had happened: the last thing I remembered was Cameron’s empty stare after I had watched him kill an innocent man in cold blood. This I tried hard to forget.

I was still alive, and the name of the boy in the gray sweater was Cameron. Of these two things I was almost sure. Everything else was a blur, including where I was and how I had gotten there.

I struggled to sit up and flip my legs over the edge of the bed. My eyelids were heavy; all I wanted to do was sleep.

My feet hit the cool wooden floors—and I suddenly noticed that I didn’t have my sneakers on anymore. Slightly panicked, I looked to see if anything else was missing, or different. I didn’t know what I was expecting to find, but whatever it was, I didn’t find it. Except for the grass stains on my knees, the rubber band that was missing from my hair, and the immense throbbing against my skull, everything else on my body was the way I had last left it.

With a stiff neck, I scanned my surroundings; there wasn’t much to decipher. I was in a small room, lit only by the bedside lamp that was on the table next to the bed. There was an armchair with a rose velvet cushion in one corner. Three of the walls were of a pristine white and frameless. The other wall was made up of four floor-to-ceiling undraped windows.

After waiting for another bout of nausea to pass, I went to the window, holding on to the small table as support for my shaky frame. Outside, the sun-setting sky was of resilient palettes of orange, red, and pink, and I was peering over the shadows of endless rooftops. Wherever I was, it was high above a city, at least thirty stories high. Down below, a yellow cab was waiting at a red light on an otherwise empty street. I couldn’t decide if I was still in Callister—I thought I recognized the clock tower that stood at the center of the city square, but it was too distant and I was too tired to be sure. My hand pressed against the glass; I closed my eyes until the dizziness passed.

I slowly, painfully trudged to the door of the bedroom and placed my ear against its smooth white surface. I could hear a TV echoing in the background and hushed voices, but nothing else. I twisted the doorknob,

expecting it to be locked, but it wasn't. Without a sound, I cracked the door open. Initially I was surprised to find that no one was keeping guard at the door, and then a sound from the ground startled me. The dog, Meatball, who had apparently been keeping the guard and had suddenly just seen me, quickly got up on all fours, his tail wagging excitedly. I could tell that he was getting ready to pounce. I speedily closed the door, hearing his disappointed whine.

I dragged myself back to bed, got under the warm covers, and let my eyelids fall once again. I had expended whatever small resource of energy I had left in me.

I would have to stay there—wherever there was—until my broken brain healed and could come up with a survival plan.

Within a few minutes, I was asleep.

I heard someone clearing his throat, and I was startled awake. The room was blackened, except for the light that was pouring in from the hallway. Cameron was standing by the open door, like he was waiting for me to wake up. I looked up at him through a sleepy, confused haze. He looked tired but satisfied, and he slid out, closing the door behind him.

I fell back asleep almost immediately.

The same thing happened many more times. Cameron would walk into the room, make some small noise, wake me up. Then I'd look up and he'd quietly exit the room—his expression always blank. He had apparently taken on the task of ensuring that I didn't die in my sleep—so far, he had decided to keep me alive, for whatever reason.

In the morning, I woke up to the sound of Meatball whining at the closed bedroom door and the blinking pain localized to the top of my head. The grayish light of dawn was coming in through the wall of windows.

I sat up in bed, letting my tired head fall against the cold wall behind me. It wasn't until I saw Cameron that I remembered where I was—well, at least I recognized the room I was in. He was sleeping, uncomfortably sprawled on the too-small armchair. He was still fully dressed, but had obviously changed out of his bloody gray sweater—I couldn't remember if he still had it on when I had first woke up in this room.

His head was rolled back and resting on the wall with one hand half fallen over his eyes, an unconscious effort to block out the rising sun. His brown hair was scruffy, like he'd raked his hand through it a thousand times. The dark circles under his eyes told the story of someone who hadn't been sleeping much, probably not for many days.

I watched him like this for a while, committing his features to memory.

And then his watch beeped, and he jumped awake, momentarily disoriented. His eyes quickly found me.

"How long have you been awake?" he asked with a hoarse voice, squinting down at his watch.

"A while, I guess," I said with care, pulling the covers up to my chin.

He passed both hands over his entire face, rubbing his skin awake. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," I answered quickly without really thinking about the question.

Cameron moved to the side of the bed and stopped short, deliberating. Was he debating shooting me now or later? I looked for signs of trouble, like a dog going on the attack, like a gun being pulled out from the back of his jeans.

With a movement that was too fast for my bruised brain to analyze, Cameron sat next to me and rushed his hand to my face. In instinct, I gasped and recoiled from him. His eyes widened, and he snapped his hand away like he'd just been burned.

The features of his face washed with ... Guilt? Worry? Anger? Disappointment? I couldn't be sure.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice notably softer. "I was just going to check the bump on your head. I won't hurt you."

His concern was unreserved, which made my throat immediately squeeze shut. It was too late—the tears had sprung to my eyes.

"I'm fine ... really," I said in answer to the increased concern on his face.

"You don't look fine."

I wiped the tears as soon as they escaped my eyes. "This is stupid. I don't know why I'm crying."

"I do," he mumbled resentfully, his jaw tightening. "Can I check your head ... even if you say you're fine?"

I nodded through my sniffles and bent my head forward as a peace offering. My heart pumped hard in my chest while his fingers parted the

hairs at the crown of my head and pressed lightly on the bump. My face winced under the cover of my hair.

“Does this hurt?” he asked.

“No,” I lied, the strain in my voice betraying me.

“I didn’t think so,” he said. “I’ll get you something for the pain.”

Before I could refuse, he was out the door, and Meatball had found his way in. In an instant, he was on the bed, crawled up and laying his head on my chest. I rubbed his floppy ears; he whined. For a big beast, he could be cute, as long as he wasn’t trying to bite your head off.

“Meatball. Out. Now.” Cameron’s authoritative voice startled both Meatball and me.

Like the boy the night before, Meatball immediately obeyed, but not before slipping me a lick with his sticky tongue against my hand.

“Wow! Does everyone just jump like that when you give orders?” I blurted as I watched the dog run out.

“Not everyone,” he said dryly. He walked over to my bedside and handed me two little white pills and a large glass of water. The water was liquid gold to my eyes: my mouth tasted like I’d been licking the chalk off a blackboard all night. As for the mystery pills, I hesitated and shyly glanced up.

Cameron folded his arms. “It’s still really early and you need to get more rest. The pills will help with the pain so you can get some sleep.” He stood there, watching me like I was a mental patient, ensuring that the crazy girl took her pills.

I needed to get some answers; starting with what I thought I knew seemed like a good idea. “Your name is Cameron,” I mused, my voice echoing inside the glass.

Cameron’s body stiffened. “Uh-huh.”

We watched each other while I took two large gulps of water to make sure that my throat was open to choke down the drugs.

He deliberated again before sitting next to me.

“What else do you remember?” he asked me.

Color rushed to my face. “Is this where I tell you that I don’t remember anything?” I blurted again. As soon as the words came out of my mouth, I wished I would have spent more time thinking about the weight of his question and coming up with a response that wouldn’t get me killed.

“No,” he said without blinking, “this is where you tell me the truth.”

I took my time swallowing the first pill and my tears. “That man in the cemetery, what did he do to deserve what you did to him?” I needed him to tell me that the man hadn’t been just some random runner who was in the wrong place at the wrong time—that only bad people got killed—that girls like me didn’t get killed just because they witnessed a murder.

His face hardened. “You assume that the man was blameless.” This wasn’t a question—he had read what had been lingering in my mind. “What if I told you that justice was served?”

“He’s dead, isn’t he.”

“What does it matter?” he said. “It’s not like you knew him.”

I closed my eyes, which forced the tears to drop down my cheeks. Then the words came drooling out before I had time to process them. “His family will never know what happened to him, and they’ll spend the rest of their lives wondering what they could have done to change things. There doesn’t seem to be much justice in that.”

I fearfully braced myself for the blows that would come next. When I felt his fingers quickly brush my damp cheek, I opened my eyes. There was no anger on Cameron’s face—but his eyes were appraising.

I cleared my throat to cut through the pain in my chest, and I swallowed my second pill. My fingers tingled—the first pill was already working its magic. Whatever I was chugging down, it was potent.

“Cameron,” I said, “what am I doing here?”

“You’re resting.”

“Who were all those people in the room yesterday?” I probed again, my head falling into the pillow.

“My colleagues.” His stare was unwavering while my eyelids were getting heavy. I was fading fast.

“How long are you going to keep me here?” I drowsily continued.

Cameron pulled the glass out of my numbed hands and set it on the table next to me. “For as long as it takes.”

“And what are you going to do with me?” This came out as a whisper. My eyes were barely slit open.

Cameron paused on this question. He scanned my face, like the answer was written somewhere between the freckles.

“I don’t know,” was that last thing I heard him say before I fell comatose.

The next time I woke up, the sun was already setting.

I was feeling better, rested, though my joints and muscles ached from the lack of movement. As for the bump on my head, it was only sensitive to the touch of my fingers—there was no more throbbing. My hair on the other hand was a tangled mess; my head felt naked when my hair was down. I searched my pockets and then the barren room for anything that I could use to tie it back. The only thing I found was the glass of water that had been refilled, and that I greedily gulped down.

The bedroom door had been left open, and hollowed sounds from a TV could still be heard. As soon as the smell of food tickled my nose, my stomach grumbled. The last meal I had eaten was the stale peanut butter sandwich I'd gobbled down on my lunch break from work; how long ago was that? My brain was still too foggy to count back the hours—or the days.

Letting my stomach do the thinking, I got out of bed and shuffled to the door on my white-socked feet.

The darkening hallway had many doors, all the same as the one I had just walked through, and all closed. The only source of light came from the other end of the hall. I passed a small, white-tiled foyer ... and what looked like a front door, or a way to escape. The door had five different locks on it: I kept going while I tried to calculate how long it would take me to go through all those locks before I was discovered. A tiny knot loosened inside of me when I noticed my worn, familiar sneakers neatly placed next to the pile of large shoes that were on the floor.

In the living room, the big kid, the one that looked like a big Chucky doll, was sprawled on one of the couches, remote control in hand, looking utterly bored.

The tattooed man was sitting erect on the edge of an armchair. He shot up and stood as soon as he saw me; his venomous stare unimproved.

The kid followed his colleague's gaze and narrowed his eyes, as he scanned me head to toe.

"You look like crap," he remarked, his lethargic gaze returning to the TV. We had just met; as far as he knew, I could have looked this awful every day.

I scowled.

“Thanks.” My voice was still throaty.

“Hungry?” asked the only voice that I recognized. I turned to see Cameron strolling out of the kitchen, a cardboard box with red symbols in one hand, the other stuffing a heap of noodle-laden chopsticks into his mouth. There was something decidedly different about him. The worried creases on his forehead and around his eyes were lessened.

I couldn’t stop my heart from thudding. He was handsome ... for a kidnapper.

Meatball was at Cameron’s feet, slobbering and eyeing with anticipation every mouthful of food, hoping that some would fall his way.

Feeling the weight of the tattooed man’s stare, I tucked my hair behind my ears. Cameron’s smile almost reached his eyes. Sticking his chopsticks into the box, he took something out of his pocket and handed it to me. It was my rubber band. My face flushed while he watched me put my hair up—but I felt better, less naked, as soon as my carrot locks were pulled back.

With a nod of the head, Cameron directed me to follow him through the small kitchen to the kitchen table. He pulled a chair out and left to fix me a plate. I had hoped to get away from the tattooed man’s stare; regretfully, I sat in clear view of the living room. I kept my eyes down to the table. When I looked up again, the tattooed man had found the edge of his seat again and turned half his attention to the TV. The spiderweb on the back of his neck was all I had to contend with.

Cameron placed an overfilled plate of Chinese takeout in front of me; there was no way I would be able to finish that. But I started loading food into my mouth anyway while Cameron watched from the kitchen doorway. Every time I looked up from my plate, his eyes were on me. There was something unsettling about eating—with clumsy chopsticks no less—under someone else’s scrutiny.

“Do you feel better today?” he asked.

I swallowed.

“Yes. Thank you.”

He paused and read my face. His eyes narrowed—unsatisfied with what he found. “How’s your head?”

I doubted he knew what a loaded question that was. “My skull is fine.”

“Do you feel dizzy?” he asked quickly.

I brought the chopsticks to my mouth. “Not anymore.”

He waited, and then he continued, “Any throbbing?”

“Just a little bit,” I answered truthfully but quickly before he chose to poke and prod my head to catch me in a lie again.

He paused and watched.

“Good,” he said finally with satisfaction.

I breathed a sigh of relief; I had passed his assessment. I looked down at my plate with surprise—one more chopstick-full and it would be polished off.

“More?” Cameron asked with amusement when I took my last bite.

I thought about it, but shook my head. He took the empty plate back into the kitchen. With Cameron’s easy mood and food in my stomach—a lot of food—my shoulders were starting to unclench.

It didn’t occur to me why Cameron was so relaxed until he came out of the kitchen and announced his decision, “Kid’s going to take you for a drive.”

My full stomach dropped to my knees, and Kid’s head snapped up, at last finding interest away from the TV.

“I am?” he asked, echoing my own thought—though mine was more of a horrified gasp than a question. The tattooed man also looked surprised by this announcement; apparently Cameron hadn’t shared his plan with anyone else.

“Yep,” Cameron said with confidence, turning to Kid. “You’re taking Emily to the farm tonight.”

At this announcement, the big kid let his head fall back in annoyance, like a ten-year-old child being asked to clean his room. “Tonight? Are you kidding? It’s already getting dark! It’ll take forever!”

I still had hope: Kid—with the now noticeable strangler-sized hands—was too lazy to kill me today. But Cameron offered incentive: he grabbed a set of keys from the kitchen counter and adeptly threw them across the room to Kid, who adeptly caught them with his monster hands, which were attached to his humongous arms. His eyes lit up.

“Seriously? You’re letting me take your car?” he said, his voice squeaking with joy.

The tattooed man stared at Cameron in disapproval, but kept silent.

Not needing any further encouragement, Kid hastily got up, glanced in my general direction and headed for the door. “Let’s go, Red.”

My stomach was now down to my toes. Was taking someone “to the farm” some kind of code word along the same lines as having someone who “sleeps with the fishes”?

Tears sprung to my eyes. I couldn’t breathe.

I turned the full focus of my pleadings to Cameron. “Cameron, please don’t do this. I won’t talk ... I’ll do whatever you want. It doesn’t have to be like this.”

But my beautiful kidnapper’s easy mood turned to ice, and his lips spread thin. “Your shoes are at the door,” he said sharply.

I looked down, my teeth biting into my quivering bottom lip. I went to the front door and slid into my still soaked sneakers—not bothering to lace them up.

By the time I made it out of the apartment, Kid was already down the hallway at the elevator, impatiently pressing the button over and over. I looked back once—Cameron’s back was turned, and his arms were tight to his side—and I closed the door.

The hallway was bright, with brick walls painted white and plush carpets—not the kind of carpet I expected to find in the hallway of an apartment building but the expensive kind that your feet sink into and leave footprints behind when you walk on it barefoot. There were only two doors on this floor, the one I had just exited, and the door to the elevator I was about to enter. The apartment, I noted, must have been the penthouse.

Going down the elevator, Kid was silent, squirmy, eagerly spinning the key ring around his index finger, clearly indifferent that I would be joining him, even if it would only be for a little while—until I was dead. The elevator doors opened, and we stepped out into a closed-in garage, with a garage door at the front and a laneway only big enough for cars to tightly enter and exit. There were four vehicles in the garage: one was a newer model black pickup truck, and two were beaten-up, rusty cars. The fourth car was an Audi, sleek black with tinted windows.

The Audi beeped as we came closer. Kid jumped right in and started it up. I hesitated, casting my eyes in search of an exit that I might have missed.

He rolled down the window and stuck his head out. “Are you coming or not?”

I wasn’t dumb enough to assume that he was really giving me the choice.

My heart pumping through my ears, I climbed into the passenger side, the Audi's locks clicking shut as soon as I closed the door.

The kid excitedly gripped the steering wheel and side-glanced me. "Put your seatbelt on—this is going to be fun."

I did as I was told, and he hit the red button on the rearview mirror, which caused the garage door to slide open.

We drove out onto the gloomy street. Kid didn't let go of the gas pedal until we were driving well above the speed limit. Darkened street signs flashed by. He sped through a red light, swerving around a car that was patiently waiting its turn. What was the point of making me wear my seatbelt if he was planning on killing us both by crashing the car?

With an extended grin, he weaved us in and out of traffic.

Eventually we moved away from the city streets and onto a country road. We picked up more speed, but at least there were no other cars to play chicken with. I was able to unclench my teeth and my stranglehold on the security bar against the door, using my free hand to wipe my newly dampened cheeks.

With little distraction and the car's novelty having worn off, Kid remembered that I was sitting next to him.

"Sorry about hitting you on the head like that yesterday," he said, his eyes still on the road. "I didn't think that I had hit you that hard."

Unprepared for this discovery, I kept quiet. What was I supposed to say? Getting hit on the head seemed insignificant compared to what was coming.

"How did you manage to sneak right by me?" he asked, like he was nervous with my silence.

"I didn't sneak by anyone," I hissed, my eyes shooting daggers at him. "I was just trying to get home."

"Who runs alone, in a dark cemetery, toward danger? It's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

I had to look away to keep my temper under control long enough to come up with a plan.

When I was in eighth grade, our teacher fell ill after consuming the glue that had mysteriously found its way into her morning coffee. We spent the rest of the day sitting in front of the TV while the principal scurried to find a substitute teacher at the last minute. Of the multitude of educational videos we were forced to watch that day, one had been a bad reenactment of

an attempted kidnapping. I didn't have to rack my brain too long to remember the first rule: never get in the car with a stranger who offers you candy.

I started to panic when I noticed the yellow road signs with pictures of crumbling rocks flashing by us. We were heading into the mountains ... the largely uninhabited mountains. And then my panic triggered something—a hazy survival tip from one of those crime shows: make the attacker see that you're a real person, not just a nameless witness to a murder, or something like that.

"My name is Emily," I announced.

He looked at me like I was crazy.

Right. I'd forgotten that Cameron had already mentioned my name.

"What's your name?" I asked, my full stomach lurching as the Audi sped into a curve.

He considered this while I gulped the takeout back down my throat. "You can call me Sexy Bull."

My head was buzzing, and a bead of sweat lined my forehead. We were going to bond whether or not he wanted to.

"My mom's name is Isabelle and my dad's name is Burt; it's short for Bernard. And I had a teddy bear called Booger when I was a kid—he lost an eye after I tried to flat-iron his fur. And my middle toe on my left foot is longer than my big toe. And when I was four—"

"Jesus, what's wrong with you? Are you still high?" There was incredulity mixed with an edge of worry in his voice.

"And when I was four—" I continued, but the Audi was rushing through curves and up and down hills. The shadowed landscape was flashing by. Suddenly, as the car aggressively looped around a cliff, I felt a knot in my throat; my heart started racing, and my body temperature went up a thousand degrees.

"Oh God!" I yelled.

"What now?" he sighed, annoyed.

"You need to stop! I'm going to be sick!"

"Stop? We're in the middle of the mountains! There's nowhere to stop!"

I started heaving, my hand in front of my mouth.

"Hold on! Keep it in!" He swore and, in flailing panic, blindly fiddled in the backseat with his free hand, his eyes never leaving the road. He pulled

out a plastic bag, emptying its contents before throwing it at me.

I pulled the bag open and I threw up immediately, repeatedly.

“That’s so gross!” he gasped, opening his window and sticking his head out. “It still smells like chow mein.”

The fresh air rushing in from his opened window made me feel better—and I had nothing left in my stomach to puke up anyway. After a few minutes, I pulled my face away from the bag and glanced up.

He was glaring at me, holding his nose and wincing. His face had gone from rosy-cheeked to pale and sickly.

“Throw the bag out the window,” he ordered.

“I can’t do that!” I said. “It’s a plastic bag. It will take over a hundred years to disintegrate. I don’t want to pollute.”

“Emily,” he said, carefully enunciating every syllable, “if you don’t throw that bag out the window in the next second, I’m going to be sick too.”

I sighed and reluctantly threw the bag out my window. But I didn’t feel the slightest bit guilty as I watched him breathe through his nausea.

“Sorry,” I said, trying to not mock him, “I guess my bruised head’s still not quite right.”

He looked at me with revulsion. “That’s the grossest thing I’ve ever seen. Now I’m kinda glad we didn’t take my car. Who knew one girl could be such a pain ...” His voice trailed back into his head.

“Ugh!” he groaned dramatically a few seconds later, “It really stinks in here.” And he stuck his head out his window again.

I’ve never had an iron stomach. Once a guy on his bike crashed next to me, and a broken bone in his right calf pierced through his skin. As any Good Samaritan would do, I insisted on waiting with him until the paramedics showed up. He spent the next twenty minutes holding my hair back while I puked on the side of the road. I couldn’t remember if he ever thanked me for waiting with him.

I thought about telling Kid about this life event to further solidify our kidnapper-hostage bond, but I was worn out. I let my head fall back into the seat and closed my eyes.

Chapter Five: The Farm

I was awakened by the sound of gravel crushing against the Audi's tires.

Kid glimpsed at me from behind the steering wheel.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," he muttered.

We had turned off the country road onto a narrow, gravel, side road where the blackened branches of trees hovered too close, trying to grab hold of the Audi, trying to consume us. Kid was absentmindedly drumming his fingers against the wheel to a Britney Spears tune that was cracking through the radio in broken waves. The darkness beyond the headlights ... it besieged us.

He was wrong. This wasn't the land of the living. It was a dead zone.

"Where are we?" I croaked.

Kid stretched his arms, pushing against the steering wheel, and sighed, "Almost there, thank God. Cam totally owes me for this."

My throat was raw, and my body emotionally exhausted. I could feel the dark isolation seeping into the car like a deep depression. I just wanted this to be over, but he seemed to be going through great lengths to drag out the inevitable. Maybe breaking my spirit first was part of the preparation.

After a while of the tires bouncing us around on the road, the trees moved away, and Kid slowed down. My eyes were beyond tired; I was even starting to see man-sized shadows stirring in the woods. I focused on the speck of light that shone ahead. I couldn't have imagined that—it grew bigger as we drove closer.

The car came to a stop. Kid turned off the ignition and was out in a flash, breathing in the fresh air repeatedly, overdramatically. I waited, rubbing my eyes, forcing them to adjust to the refrigerator-sized light that had come on inside the Audi.

Kid eventually came to rest his hand against the frame of his opened car door. "I don't know how you can stand being one more second in that car. It

really reeks in here.”

I glanced up through weary eyes. “Am I supposed to get out of the car?”

His face scrunched. “You’re so ... weird,” he mumbled, shaking his head and walking away. His kidnapping methods were confusing to me; or possibly, most people would already know what to do in these types of situations. I took his obscure response as a yes and climbed out of the vehicle.

The air outside the car was crisp and clean—too clean; I wasn’t sure my city-infected lungs could handle the pure stuff. The night sky was unbelievably clear, which I guessed was how it must always look when the city lights weren’t there to distort it. Of course I had seen stars before, but not like this. It was like every imaginable constellation was shining above. It took me a while to find the dippers—big and little were the only ones I knew; but in this perfect sky, they weren’t the only superstars.

The sound of a door creaking open and the flood of light that followed knocked me out of my reverie. A man walked through the earlier guiding light that, as it turned out, was a door with a window of carved glass.

My legs went numb when I noticed that he was carrying a long-barreled shotgun over his shoulder.

Kid greeted this armed man nonchalantly as they met in the middle.

“Why are you back so early?” demanded the gunman.

Kid shrugged his head in my direction and explained, “Pain-in-the-butt delivery.”

The gunman did a once-over in my direction. Then he parted ways with Kid to make his way toward me.

I held my breath and closed my eyes, listening to the shuffling of his feet against the loose gravel—I didn’t want to see the bullet coming. The footsteps approached and shuffled on, past me. I opened one eye in time to see him disappear into the darkness of the surrounding woods. I heard his footsteps crush against the grass, until I couldn’t hear anything else but the wind rushing through the darkened trees.

I turned my eyes to the sky again. I was looking for them—my lucky stars—but it was early still and there were just too many stars to find mine.

Kid had been watching me go through my rush of emotions from the opened doorway. With the same look of mystification on his face, he

hollered, “Hey, freak, are you just going to stand there all night—or do you plan on ever coming in?”

The doorway where he was standing was attached to a large building that, from the darkness, looked like a barn. There were tall cedar shrubs that lined the face of the edifice, with the door being the only shrub-free space. The moon’s shine reflected off the tin roof, and I couldn’t tell if the building had any windows because of the cedars that hid its exterior walls.

Inside the barn was a foyer with a vaulted ceiling. The beige, tiled floor of the foyer merged with dark, ancient-looking hardwood floor. Half-mooned stairs led to a second-level hallway with an unencumbered white wall and wood rail. Through a side doorway, another set of stairs led down to a floor below. I could see the flickering of images from an unseen downstairs TV bouncing off the plain stair walls.

Kid kicked off his shoes onto the pile of huge man shoes that were strewn by the front door and disappeared through an arched doorway that was at the far end of the foyer, next to the curved staircase. Getting used to his unspoken commands, I did the same and followed him through the archway. By the time I made it down the two steps that led to a living area, he was already sprawled in front of the TV on one of the two couches, remote control in hand—it was like we had never left the apartment in the city.

I sat on the edge of the other couch and waited, carefully examining my surroundings.

It was one big open space that connected a living room to a kitchen to a large, pine-colored dining table. I could see now that the barn was a home. The living room had brown leather furniture—the soft kind that seemed to form around your body as you sunk into it. There was a fireplace made of stones stacked to the high ceiling, with an oversized flat screen television that hung above its mantel, which Kid hadn’t taken his eyes off of.

A humungous kitchen separated the living room from the dining table—it had two of almost every appliance: two restaurant-sized refrigerators, two microwaves, two toasters, two dishwashers, but only one oven. And the dining table looked big enough to seat twenty people. To the other side of the living room was a small hallway.

While Kid settled on cartoons, I nervously kept my eyes on him. I was trying to decide which one was worse: not knowing how I was going to die, or not knowing when it was going to happen. I was weary, impatient.

After a few minutes of my stare, Kid diverted his attention from the TV and sighed loudly, "Are you always this uptight, or are you just like that with me?"

"No, I'm usually a lot more fun when I get kidnapped and brought in the middle of nowhere against my will," I snapped. His indifference to my plight was maddening to me.

His eyebrows furrowed. "Hey, don't get upset with me. I'm just following orders."

"What are your orders, exactly?" I took the chance of asking, just in case he obliged me with an actual answer.

"Weren't you right there when I got them?" he questioned in answer to my question.

"All I heard was that you were taking me for a drive to the farm. I don't know what that means, but this place doesn't look much like a farm to me."

"It does when you know the animals who live here," he said, laughing.

My eyes swept the room again and rested back on his face. "This place is what Cameron meant by taking me to the farm?" I had noticed his face flinch when I said Cameron's name, but he didn't say anything about it.

"What else could it mean?"

I gulped. "Death," I admitted. And then I clarified, "My death."

Kid seemed to consider this. "You mean you thought that Cameron would send *me* to kill *you*?"

I nodded, though I thought that I had already made this clear enough to him.

"Really?" he insisted, his voice pitching on the last syllable.

I nodded again, but with less certainty this time.

"Wow!" He grinned from ear to ear. "Thanks!"

"So you're not going to kill me?"

He shook his head. "Not that I know of."

"Why am I here then?"

Kid shrugged with dispassion. "Beats me. Nobody ever tells me anything around here." He leaned his body forward, his grin picking up again. "Were you scared of me when you thought I was going to kill you?" he continued.

I let my shoulders relax and roll back into the comfy couch. "I guess."

He was watching me excitedly.

“What scared you the most? Was it my voice?” he asked, his tone noticeably lowering as he said this.

“Your driving skills,” I answered. My mouth still had the aftertaste to remind me of this.

His smile turned to disappointment. “I guess it explains why you were acting like such a freak. I was beginning to think Cameron was bringing home mental patients.” His eyes veered back to the TV screen.

Now that I had opened my eyes to see that this kid was called Kid because he was, indeed, just a kid, I felt a little braver. He was no doubt a big boy who could probably crush me with one hand, but he was not going to be the one to kill me.

Yet, with the knowledge that there was some man walking outside with a very large gun, I didn’t take more than a little comfort in that. At least, for now, we were alone, and as far as the kid and I were concerned, there were—currently—no plans to kill me.

When I snapped out of my daze, Kid was snoring on the couch. With the threat of imminent death temporarily off my mind, the rest of my senses had kicked in—like the taste of regurgitated takeout in my mouth and the feel of the crusted tears that had dried on my face. All of a sudden, finding a washroom was bumped up to first place on my mental survival list.

My feet treading lightly on the wide-planked floor, I made my way down the hall that was off of the living room and immediately found the bathroom—and it felt like home as soon as I walked in. Was it the dried soap splatters across the mirror, or the remnants of beard shavings in the sink, or the piles of dirty clothes and towels that littered every surface of the bathroom and the adjacent laundry room, which also had two washers and two dryers? Whatever it was, it made me feel a bit less out of place.

I took my time gargling mouthwash that I found under the sink and splashing water on my colorless face. My hair looked like I had stuck a finger in an electrical outlet; I watered it down as best I could to keep the frizzed locks flat against my head, but the baby spirals that framed my forehead corkscrewed as soon as they dried.

After a while, I walked out of the washroom and was startled when I walked right into a slight girl in red flannel pajamas.

The girl stood for a long second, her hazelnut eyes refusing to release my face. Then with a swift move, she grasped my bony arm and pulled hard,

dragging me back toward the living room, her dark hair flying wildly around her shoulders. She was definitely stronger than she looked.

“Rocco!” she shouted, her eyes ablaze. “What is she doing here?” She dragged me to front stage and released my arm. Kid was forced out of slumber and looked up.

“Hey! You’re not supposed to be using my real name around other people—Carly!”

“I don’t care—Rocco!” the one called Carly huffed and asked again, “What is she doing here?”

“Oh, right.” The Kid, Rocco, sat up and scratched his head. “That’s Emily,” he said, listlessly waving in my direction.

“I didn’t ask you *who* she was, I asked you what she’s doing—here,” she shrilly corrected, her diminutive finger pointing down to the floor for further amplification.

“Right now, I bet she’s wishing she hadn’t gone wandering off and met up with you.”

He was very right.

“Stop fooling around, Rocco, and answer my question. What—is she—doing—here,” she slowly spelled out for him.

Rocco glowered. “Why does everybody keep asking me that?” he whined. “I don’t know what she’s doing here.”

“Where’s Cameron?” she asked, glancing around. “Does he know you did this?”

“Cameron’s the one who sent her here,” he smugly replied.

Her face lost color. “What?”

“He’s the one who—” Rocco repeated, but Carly cut him off.

“I heard you, but I don’t believe you.”

She took another breath, and then she lifted an eyebrow. “What happened out there?”

“Someone,” he explained, pointing accusingly at me, “thought it would be a good idea to run toward the angry guys with the guns.”

Not one of my greatest moments, I mentally conceded.

“And where were you when this happened?” she asked, her eyes further narrowing at him. “Weren’t you supposed to be keeping watch?”

Rocco immediately went on the defensive.

“I was there but I didn’t see her! She’s like a mouse. It was so dark in there. She snuck right by me.”

I was going to interject, defend myself, but thought it might be safer to keep quiet on this one.

“Anyway,” he sulked, “I’m sick of being the stupid lookout. It’s not even a real ranking position.”

“It’s a real position when you actually do the looking, like you were supposed to,” she said, her voice picking up speed again. “You think Cam’s gonna let you move up the ranks if you can’t concentrate on one simple job for longer than three seconds?”

“Cam wants me to move up!” he said, his voice squeaking. “Spider’s the one who’s keeping me back and won’t let me do anything important!”

She stood there for a few seconds, shaking her head. “Your brother’s the boss, Rocco. If he had wanted you to move up, believe me, it would’ve happened.”

And then she glanced at me, and winced.

“Still though, he must be losing his mind ...” As swiftly as she had come, Carly turned on her heels and stomped away, shaking her head and urgently digging something out of the frilly front pocket of her flannel pajamas.

After she had disappeared through the archway, Rocco fell back into his conclave in the couch, dejected and sulking.

I plunked back down on the other couch.

In this short encounter, I had gained more information than I had in the last few days, since I had first met the boy in the gray sweater. For one, Cameron and Rocco were brothers, and the sourpuss tattooed man was likely called Spider, which would explain the spiderweb tattooed on his neck. I also understood that Cameron was the boss; of what or of whom, I didn’t know. And Carly was likely Cameron’s girlfriend—his very angry, very scary girlfriend.

I forced myself to file away the tinge of jealousy that leapt against the wall of my chest when I considered the latter. Instead I focused on the facts that should terrify me: I had witnessed a murder; I had been taken against my will; I was being held in this farm with some gunman walking around; and, until a few minutes ago, I believed that Cameron was sending me to my death. These were the things that I had to remember to survive.

I heard car doors slamming. I must have fallen asleep, because the darkness outside was replaced by sunlight that was pouring through the large living room windows. Rocco was still fast asleep on the couch across from me.

The front door banged open, and the house rapidly became alive with people. Frighteningly large men were coming in with bags and boxes, laying items on the kitchen counter, and dispersing everywhere around the house. They were stomping, chortling, and giving each other orders. A few of them quickly eyed me as they walked by, but no one said anything. Rocco's sleep wasn't bothered at all by the ruckus they were making. He was making his own ruckus through his nostrils.

When Meatball flew in to find me on the couch, I readied myself for what would surely come next: Cameron's entrance.

While I rubbed Meatball's big head, the tattooed man, Spider, marched in, whispering orders to an obese man who towered over him. When they glanced in my direction at the exact same time, I guessed that they weren't discussing football scores; and the subsequent bitter look on Spider's face told me that he still hadn't warmed up to me.

"Kid!" he yelled with authority. "Get up and put the food away!"

Rocco opened his eyes, momentarily lifted his head, and then rolled over putting a pillow over his face.

When Cameron finally came strolling in, his eyes found me right away. To my defeat, he was wearing blue jeans and a red T-shirt that must have only served to accentuate the dark features of his face. To add insult to injury, he ran his hand through his perfectly untidy hair. He was unfortunately striking. It took every inch of my being to keep my heart from doing somersaults; in the end I resigned to—at least—reprimand myself after failing miserably.

I glanced away to calm my breath while he waited until the line of men had passed by before approaching me. I sat up so that he could sit next to me; but he simply remained standing.

"How are you feeling today?" He cleared his throat. "Are you okay?"

We hadn't exactly parted on the best of terms, I remembered. I smiled shamefacedly while I tried to find the right words to respond, to make things less awkward. He didn't give me the chance to collect my thoughts. His eyes darted from me to the couch and back to me; his half-smile turned to a frown.

“Did you sleep here—on the couch?” he demanded.

I nodded, but he had already turned to Rocco.

“Kid!” he yelled as he grabbed a cushion from the couch and threw it over at his brother, hitting him in the head.

Rocco abruptly sat up. “Yep, I’m up.” He looked around, running his hand through his crazed hair—much like his brother had done a few seconds before him.

“You made her sleep on the couch?” Cameron accused.

“What!” Rocco answered on the defensive. “I didn’t know what to do with her.”

Cameron took a long breath. “Fine. Do what Spider told you to do and put the groceries away.”

Rocco immediately followed his brother’s orders and made his way to the massive kitchen that was now swarming with an incredible amount of grocery bags, and, to Rocco’s dismay, more bags and boxes were being walked in by the men. Meatball was busily investigating the contents of the bags that had been left on the floor.

Cameron brought his attention back to me and offered his hand to help me up.

I quickly took it.

Realizing that I was breaking my promise to myself about not letting him have power over me, I told him, “Just so you know, I can manage to get myself up without any help.” My cheeks flushed as soon as I said this—the words had come out all wrong, as usual.

He cocked his head and then turned his face away. “Understood. I’ll try to remember that next time.”

While we headed through the foyer and up the spiral staircase, I could still feel my skin pulsating where his hand had touched mine—it was extremely frustrating that my body was refusing to respect my brain’s orders.

We got to the top of the stairs and turned down the hall to reach two heavy wooden doors. Cameron held me back at the door, and we leaned against the wall while men walked in and out. I kept my eyes on my feet, for fear of betraying myself again. I peeked through my eyelashes. He was watching the to-and-fro ahead.

I laced my fingers behind my back. “Um, do you live in this house?”

His face turned to me. “Sometimes.”

There was an awkward silence.

“So, do you like this house?” he then asked me, his question oddly edged with apprehension.

With so much on my mind, I hadn’t really considered whether I liked the house. After spending a few moments to think about it, I decided that I did like it, very much.

“It’s really nice. I like ... the floors,” I mumbled. I thought I spied a curve of his lips as I said this, but my eyes were still on the ground so I couldn’t be sure.

Cameron took a step forward.

“Is that the rest of it?” he asked. His voice was different—cold, commanding.

When I looked up, a beefy man had come through the doors.

“Yes, sir. That’s all of it,” the man answered with an even tone, avoiding looking my way before he scurried away.

With a graze of my shoulder, Cameron led me ahead. We walked into a space that was either a really large bedroom or a small apartment. There was a king-sized four-poster bed against the wall nearest to the door and a small living room on the other side of the room. With its floor-to-ceiling windows, it had that same openness as the main floor, but the walls here were much darker, with mahogany-stained wood panels up to my shoulders and dark gray paint up to the high ceiling. This room definitely had a masculine touch.

“You can stay in here,” Cameron said, glancing over the features of my face.

“This is your room?” I asked wide-eyed.

He nodded almost nervously, but then I thought maybe his cheeks had flushed, though his expression remained unreadable. “But I won’t be here, with you, of course. You can have this room to yourself.”

He watched me while I took a few steps in to assess my new prison. It was nice, cozy—no metal bars.

The familiar sight of the blue Rubbermaid bins stacked against the wall immediately caught my eye. When I turned back to Cameron, I realized that he was waiting for me to notice them.

He stuck his hands in his pockets. “I picked up your stuff so that you’d be more comfortable while you stay here.”

I wasn’t crazy after all. They were my bins—the ones that should have still been tucked under my bed, in my windowless room, in my locked house, back in Callister.

I blinked. “How did you—”

He was prepared for my question and pulled out a plastic card—my driver’s license. “I went to the address listed on your ID.”

He handed me my ID, with the horrific picture that looked like I had just gotten arrested after a bar brawl.

“Where did you get this from?”

“You had it in your pocket when ... I found you,” he said with reluctance.

“No, I didn’t,” I quickly challenged.

His face shadowed. “Yes, you did.”

I was racking my brain, trying to remember the last time I had left the house. I knew that the safe thing to do was to keep my ID on me when I ran alone—so that police could more easily identify the dead body in the ditch—but I usually forgot to bring it. I couldn’t remember if I had brought it the last time.

“How did you get into my house? It was locked,” I probed.

He rolled his eyes. “Key under the front mat—real original.”

“You broke into my house?!”

“No, I used your key,” he corrected. His features narrowed, “You should never leave your key anywhere near the front door. That’s the first place robbers will look.”

I crossed my arms defiantly. “That’s an interesting safety tip coming from the guy who already broke into my house. Maybe next time you break in, you can leave me a list of everything else I do wrong.”

He sighed. “Okay, I broke into your house—but I brought your things here for you. Can’t we just call it even?” He smiled, but his face was tight. “Besides, it wouldn’t have mattered even if you hadn’t left the key under the mat. The front door was practically falling off its hinges. Anyone could have gotten into that house without a key.”

Strangely, this didn’t make me feel any better.

His eyes held my gaze, but his face was indecipherable. I twisted an errant hair back behind my ear and looked away.

“What’s wrong?” he quickly asked.

I tried to glue a smile on my face before I turned my eyes back to him. “Nothing.”

He assessed my attempt. “Do I make you nervous?”

I thought about this for a moment. There were no knots in my shoulders—just in my stomach.

“No, I’m not nervous around you,” I answered truthfully.

“Then you’re still afraid of me, aren’t you?” he asked resentfully. “It probably didn’t help that I confessed to breaking into your house.”

“That didn’t help,” I agreed.

I took a long breath, took a step away from him, and looked down at my fingers before responding. “I’m afraid of what you could do. I mean, I’ve seen what you could do—but, to answer your question, no, I’m not afraid of you.” This was also the truth—strange, completely ridiculous, totally dangerous, but true.

He came closer to me and lifted my chin with his finger, forcing me to look up at him. I didn’t flinch or recoil from him this time, but my heart rate rocketed while he judged my expression. I kept his eyes but held my breath, which was probably a good thing, considering that I hadn’t brushed my teeth in a few days.

After a half-second, he was content with what he saw on my face and released me.

“Then what is it?”

I forced myself to walk away from him again before I passed out. “It’s nothing.”

“Tell me,” he pleaded.

I leaned against the bedpost and swallowed hard.

“Please?” he added.

“I can’t read you. It’s ... unsettling.”

His eyes questioned. “I don’t understand.”

My cheeks were getting hot. “Your face never changes. I don’t know when you’re angry, or happy, or—”

“Or if I’m going to kill you,” he finished, his voice gloomy.

“Or have me killed,” I added. “Why didn’t you just tell me that you weren’t going to kill me when I freaked out in the apartment?”

“Would you have believed me?” he asked bitterly.

I bit the inside of my lip and nodded.

His face darkened and I heard him draw a breath. “You had no reason to believe me. In fact, you shouldn’t believe me. You said yourself that you’ve seen what I’m capable of.”

It took all my strength to keep the tears from escaping my eyes; it was painful to replay that moment when I thought I had been sentenced to my death. “But wouldn’t it have been a better than the alternative? Better that having me sit in a car for how many hours, with the guy who I thought was going to kill me and bury the body in the middle of nowhere ...”

“I’m sorry about that,” he said with sincerity. “You caught me by surprise; I didn’t know what to do, I’m not used to that. The crying stuff I mean.”

He paused. A sheepish smile crossed his face. “Though I thought for sure you would have had everything figured out as soon as the kid opened his mouth.”

“Well, I didn’t,” I sniffed. “It’s not like I get kidnapped every day.”

His face soured. A wall had closed the features of his face again, and he looked away.

“I’ll make some room in my dresser so that you can put your stuff away,” he said, his voice robotic.

“Okay ... Thank you.”

He pointed to a door that was at the other end of the room. “The washroom’s in there. I’m sure you’re going to want to shower and change and all that other stuff.”

I nodded. Later I would savor the notion of having my own bathroom again, even if it was in a prison.

“Shower up and come back downstairs when you’re done,” he said.

We stood for a minute, looking around in uncomfortable silence, not looking at each other. Then without saying anything else, he turned around, closing the door behind him.

Chapter Six: Cool Kids

It was an ocean of green beyond Cameron's bedroom windows—one of those views that you find ensnared in the pages of a calendar, images that people wallpaper onto the desktop of their computer at work, like they need to be reminded of something—perhaps a primeval memory.

My nose was nearly pressed against the patio doors that led to a small balcony outside Cameron's bedroom. I was two floors up from the ground, overlooking an egg-shaped, in-ground pool and a yard of thick, golf-course-grade grass. At the end of the pool area, where the terracotta interlock stones touched the lawn, there was a pink pool house with crimson flowers bunched within the windowsills. Fifty feet from the house, the grass stopped and was overcome by an infinite forest of evergreens and maples and jade hills in the horizon that divided the treetops from the expanse of blue sky.

As far as I could tell, we were somewhere within a densely forested valley. The view from the second floor was breathtakingly beautiful and terrifying all at once. I had no idea where I was, and the fact that I couldn't see any roads or signs of human life beyond the border of trees hadn't escaped me. The problem: this didn't really scare me. There was a part of me—a big part—that wanted to breathe it all in, take a mental picture, and frame it in my mind so that I would never forget it; the other part was mutely terrorized by the first part.

I eventually peeled myself away from the glass and went through my Rubbermaid bins. Everything was there—clothes, school books, bathroom necessities ... down to the indigo ballerina lamp that had been next to my bed and the ragged copy of *Rumble Fish* that I kept under my pillow. Opening the rubber lids—one after another—was like Christmas morning; my worldly possessions made exciting again in this surreal place. I tried to imagine my bedroom back in Callister, what it would look like stripped to

its bare bones, but thwarted the eerie feeling of knowing that someone had had to meticulously go through my stuff to bring it to me.

I was incredibly grateful to have it all with me; this was what I focused on.

I found something quick to wear—after wearing my running clothes for however many days, even a potato sack would have done the trick—and went to the bathroom to shower and brush my teeth. Like the rest of the house, the bathroom was a showpiece that could have easily graced the cover of one of those snooty home architectural magazines. It was cleaner than the main-floor bathroom; in fact, it was pristine.

I emerged from Cameron's bedroom looking, feeling and smelling like myself again. But when I heard roaring laughter coming from the kitchen downstairs, I came to an abrupt halt at the top of the stairs, my paranoid instincts flickering ... only to be confirmed by Rocco's excited pitched voice that echoed through the house.

"It smelled like chow mein!" was what I heard him say. This was quickly followed by another wave of laughter.

There was an audience.

I stood, deliberating whether to go back into the hidden comfort of Cameron's bedroom or face the music, now knowing that I would have to face it all eventually. My grumbling belly answered my dilemma—food before pride.

I took a full-lunged breath before slowly walking through the archway into the common room. With all the hefty men that sat, shoulder to tight shoulder, around it, the extra-large dining table looked like a child's craft table. Rocco was standing at the head, emceeing for the breakfast crowd, while Carly and Spider had their heads bent together at the other end, entranced in a whispered conversation and feigning interest in the papers that were stacked in front of them.

Cameron wasn't there. I told myself that this was a good thing: at least I wouldn't have to be in the same room as him, trying to hide my neurotic stares, while his angry girlfriend sat a few measly feet away from me, and with a tattooed man who glared at me like I was the fly that flew under his flyswatter—it would only take one small motion of the hand to annihilate me.

“The girl thought that the boss had sent me to take care of her,” Rocco proudly recounted for the crowd. Another roar ensued. Rocco looked fleetingly insulted this time.

Cameron was also missing his kid brother’s great tale—an added bonus, I thought.

Annoyed and horrifically embarrassed, I pursued with my brave face to the table. Rocco was the first to see me and took it upon himself to announce my arrival.

“Hey puke-breath, your ears must have been burning.” All massive heads followed Rocco’s gaze. Spider and Carly’s communal head shot up too: Carly grimaced when she saw me; Spider resigned himself to his usual nasty glare. The whole room had gone tensely quiet.

My ears were burning, like I was wearing hot coals for earmuffs.

In an instant, Carly and Spider were out of their seats. With an added faint whistle and nod of the head from Spider, all of the men rose with them, rushing to grab last morsels from their breakfast plates.

Everyone except Rocco and me trudged out of the common room with Carly and Spider. I was officially back to my first day in high school when I had mistakenly sat at the seniors’ table in the cafeteria.

Rocco whistled. “That was fast. You sure know how to clear out a room. Do you have rabies or some other kind of contagious disease that I don’t know about?”

I shrugged and chewed on the corner of my lip while he started stacking dirty plates.

“I wouldn’t worry about it too much,” he said, his head bent over his task. “They’re a tough crowd to break. It took them a while to get used to me too.”

I clasped a few of the dirty cups and glasses between my fingers and followed him into the kitchen. “How long have you been here?”

“I got here over a year ago, I think. I’m not really sure. Time seems to stand still around here.”

“Where are your parents?” I wondered.

His eyes shot up. “My parents? I don’t know. They’re somewhere out in the world, I guess. Who cares?”

“Isn’t this your parents’ house?”

“That’s funny,” he said, shaking his head. He grabbed a frying pan from the stove filled with what looked like canned beans fried in ketchup. “Are you gonna want any of this?”

I shook my head.

“Suit yourself.” He scraped the remnants into the garbage and flung the pan into the dishwasher without rinsing it first.

“Help yourself to some food if you’re hungry. That’s the way it works around here. You grab what you want,” he said. “But just don’t expect to be served. I may have to clean up after these guys, but I don’t serve anyone.”

For whatever reason, he was trying to make a point.

I grabbed a bowl from the opened cupboard and poured cereal from the box that was lingering on the counter. I got the milk jug from the table and poured it over my Captain Crunch.

“Where’s Cameron?” I tried to keep my voice indifferent.

“I don’t know.” Rocco’s hand quieted over the dishwasher. “Why?”

“He’s your brother, isn’t he?”

“Doesn’t mean I keep a leash on him,” he said, taking his frustrations out on the plates that refused to fit into the fully loaded dishwasher.

In the meantime, I was pulling at invisible straws. “You left your parents and came here—on ... purpose?”

“I left my mom; never knew my dad. There wasn’t much to leave behind. My mom got a new boyfriend,” he said, like this explained it all.

“So ... you came to live with your brother?”

“No,” he corrected indignantly, “I came to work for my brother.”

We were getting somewhere. “What kind of work do you do for your brother?”

“Right now, I look after the administration of the house,” he said as he looked over at me, like he guessed what I was going to ask next. “Meaning I do whatever Spider tells me to do, like cleaning the stupid kitchen.”

“And putting all the groceries away,” I added.

“And driving Miss Daisy.”

I remembered the argument between him and Carly the night before. “This isn’t the work that you want to do?”

“Do you know anyone who wants to spend his time cleaning up after a bunch of jerks? It’s not work a man should be doing ... No offense.”

“None taken.” I closed the dishwasher door and searched for the start button, letting him vent.

“I mean, this was supposed to be temporary so that I could prove myself,” he continued without my encouragement. “I’ve proven myself and should be working for Cam now.”

He pushed me aside and started the dishwasher.

“What kind of work does Cameron do?” I asked him, but the one called Spider had come to the kitchen to interrupt us.

“Kid, if you’re done in here, go air out the boss’s car. It smells like death in there,” Spider ordered.

Rocco winked at me, and with a salute and an “aye-aye, sir” to Spider, marched out of the kitchen.

Spider ignored the fly in the kitchen and walked out too.

When I’d finished my second bowl of cereal, I rinsed out the bowl and tucked my dishes away in the second dishwasher. I’d forgotten how great it was to have a dishwasher instead of a sink full of dishes. I then went outside to the warm May sun, looking for more answers.

Cameron’s car was parked at the top of the circular driveway. All four doors of the Audi were opened and Rocco was crouched over the passenger side seat with a spray bottle.

There was so much happening outside and big people walking around that it took a while for my brain to fully consider what my eyes were seeing. Four white, cubed passenger minivans with darkened windows were lined up at the far end of the driveway. Men were buzzing around the property, some leaning against the vans, basking in the sunshine, and others walking about, intent on some mysterious task. Then there were the men that were away from the driveway, past the grass clearing, all the way down to the edge of the woods; these men stood in a row along the property line, about twenty feet from each other, and watched the scene from the shadows of the trees—their long barreled guns either in hand or holstered over their large shoulders.

I sped to Rocco who was muttering and shaking his head, absorbed intensely in a discussion with himself.

“Need any help?” I offered keenly, withholding the alarm in my throat.

He glanced up and chewed on my proposal for a minute.

“Better not,” he said, sighing. “I don’t want to get in trouble again for talking to the inmate.”

“Is that what I am?” I wondered, keeping a corner of my eye on the gun-wielders.

Rocco shrugged. “Apparently.”

While he sprayed some kind of deodorizer on the front passenger seat, I sat on the backseat, with my legs swinging out the side. I leaned my face forward in the outside air—because it was really stinky inside the car.

“Who are all those people?” I asked him.

He didn’t look up. “What people?”

I pointed my thumb in the direction of the gunners. “The men with the guns,” I said, to start with.

“Guards,” Cameron answered as he approached the car with Meatball at his heels. I noticed that he had showered. His hair was still dripping, and he had changed from jeans and red T-shirt—to jeans and gray T-shirt.

“What are they guarding?” I managed to ask.

“Precious cargo,” he replied quickly before changing the subject, starting with a cruelly charming smile. “I heard you got my kid brother back for putting that bump on your head.”

“Whatever,” Rocco mumbled without lifting his head to acknowledge his brother.

Still smiling, Cameron glanced at me, motioning his head toward Rocco, silently asking me what Rocco’s problem was.

I shrugged in response; though my guess was that Rocco had probably been berated by the one called Spider for chitchatting with me—the prisoner—earlier.

Cameron wasn’t fazed by his brother’s crankiness. “Come on. I’ll show you around.” By the time I realized that his hand had grazed the small of my back to lead me back to the house, he had already pulled it away. Meatball happily followed us.

“Where are we ... exactly?” I probed.

“Vermont.”

“Were not in New York State anymore?” I said before I had time to take the shock out of my voice.

He peered from the corner of his eye. “Vermont is a different state, yes.”

“Okay,” I said slowly and took a breath while he kept his eye on my expression. “And what is this place?”

He pointed to the house. “It used to be a shelter for forest firefighters back in the day. I bought it a couple of years ago.”

I was stunned. “This is your house?”

He nodded. “It was basically just a barn, but I had it fixed up. I kept the tin roof and restored the façade. Everything else is new.”

He led me through the front door, past the archway and through the now familiar kitchen, toward the hallway where I had been accosted by Carly the night before. We stopped in front of the washroom.

“I never realized how filthy it was until I actually had to shower in it,” he said, his lips curled in disgust. He quickly closed the door and we kept moving.

“Spider ... Tiny ... Rocco,” he pointed out as we passed each of the three doors on the left. Spider’s room looked untouched. The bed was made up so tight you could bounce a dime off it. Rocco’s room was a pigsty: the bed unmade, clothes piled on the floor.

“Who’s Tiny?”

“You can’t miss him,” he chuckled, “He’s the fat guy who usually hangs around Spider or me.”

My eyebrows drew together. “That doesn’t make any sense. Why call him Tiny ... if he obviously isn’t?”

“That’s what makes it so funny,” he said, but I caught him slightly rolling his eyes as he said this.

“Besides,” he added as he opened one of the double doors at the end of the hall, “would you be willing to call that guy fat to his face?”

Cameron had a point.

When we walked through the double-doors, Cameron watched as my chin dropped. It was a room of tall bookshelves and pale suede chairs and couch. The high ceiling had exposed dark wood beams that ran across it. There was a fireplace between the two long windows that faced the back of the property, and the opposite wall was layered of soft gray and rose stones.

“It’s gorgeous,” I whispered, instinctively letting my hand slide over the stones as I strolled deeper into the room.

“Nobody ever uses this room,” he said after a barely audible clearing of his throat.

I folded my arms and investigated the book titles on the shelves, rising up and down on my tiptoes, while Cameron stood by.

“There’s a piano in the corner. You can come here and play whenever you want,” he told me.

“I wouldn’t put anyone through that kind of torture.”

“Don’t you play?”

There was accusation in his tone and I could feel myself reddening.

“I’ve been subjected to piano lessons my whole life,” I explained dully. “My last piano teacher ran off crying after accusing me of purposefully being tone-deaf. She had a nervous breakdown.”

Cameron’s eyes widened, and suddenly a full bellowed laugh escaped him. It was so unexpected, that I took a step back.

I noticed something different about Cameron—something that had been there since he had arrived that morning, something that had only intensified since he had come to meet Rocco and me by his car. His cheeks were slightly flushed. The tired and anxious creases around his eyes were almost gone. He looked decidedly younger.

It was like a mask had been taken off ... or put on—I couldn’t be sure ... but I liked it more than I ought to. We headed back through the foyer and down the stairs to the lower level.

“How old are you, Cameron?” I wondered aloud as we walked into a den.

“This is where the guys hang out when they’re not working,” he explained. The space had everything to keep overgrown children entertained: a stocked kitchen, ping-pong and pool table, a big screen TV, and a wall of movies and video games. It also had patio doors that opened up onto the pool outside.

“Are you avoiding my question on purpose?” I put to him.

“What? Oh, I’m twenty-six,” he answered, distracted.

While my thoughts were trying to process how my twenty-six-year-old tour guide slash kidnapper could afford the mansion I was sightseeing, we were making our way down another hallway.

“Some of the night guards sleep in here,” he whispered, pointing at the bedroom doors that were closed. I could hear off-tempo snoring and wheezing through the door.

At the end of the hall was a pumpkin orange, fully equipped gym with windows that looked out onto the pool.

There were also two men in the middle of the room and a large opened box next to them.

“It’s a high-speed treadmill,” Cameron proudly announced. “You know, so that you can still do the same stuff you normally do.”

We paused to watch the confused men arguing over the instructions manual, surrounded by pieces of something.

“Well,” he added, “it will eventually be a treadmill.”

When I had figured out that this gift was meant for me to use while I served my indefinite sentence, I said thank you, put an unadulterated smile on my face, and followed him out to the pool.

By that point, I had so many questions for Cameron that I didn’t even know where to start. My jumbled thoughts were only worsened by the luminous smiles he kept throwing my way. I didn’t understand any of it and it was hardly a fair fight.

We rolled up our jeans, and plunged our feet into the cool water. Cameron peered over my knees with a huge grin on his face.

“What?” I stuttered.

“I’m looking for that weird toe you were telling my brother about,” he chuckled and glanced back at my face.

“News sure travels fast around here,” I mumbled, red spots speckling my cheeks.

“Rocco thought it was pretty funny,” he said with a shrug. “Why did you name your teddy bear Booger?”

“It’s not a very good story,” I stalled.

“Try me,” he pressed.

I sighed, “Booger was my brother Bill’s bear before it was mine. Bill had already named him Booger before he gave him to me.”

Without blinking, Cameron moved on from my boring story to another one. “And your favorite book is *Rumble Fish*. Isn’t it a bit childish for you?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never read it.”

“It looked used,” he challenged.

I glared up. “You mean the copy that you found hidden under my pillow in my room?”

He nodded and shamelessly grinned.

"I keep trying to read it, but never get past the front cover," I explained. When I peered up, I saw the confused look on his face.

I sighed again. "I had just finished reading the first chapter when my brother died. Now I can't seem to pick up where I left off and move on to the next chapter." I could feel the golf ball rolling around in my throat as I said this.

The look of discomfort on Cameron's face was one of the reasons I avoided talking about Bill. There was always that point when people hesitated, trying to find the right thing to say, only to realize that there was nothing that they could say to make it better.

Cameron simply moved back to the safe, but boring story. "Did Booger ever recover from the ironing incident?"

I mirrored his sly smile. "My nanny Maria sewed a button on top of the melted eye, but it was too big and the wrong color. Booger never looked at me in the same way again."

I realized my mistake as soon as it was out of my mouth. I never used the word *nanny*; people automatically associated it with the words *trust fund*.

But Cameron thankfully didn't seem to notice—though I still couldn't fathom why he'd want to hear about a bear called Booger.

"Where's Booger now?" he asked, enjoying himself.

"On my bed, in my parents' house."

His brow furrowed. "Why didn't you take Booger with you to college?"

"I didn't want to be the weird girl who still sleeps with teddy bears," I quickly replied. Then something occurred to me, "How'd you know I'm in college?"

"Some of your bins were stacked with thick school books. I assumed that you were a college girl," he quickly answered.

"You seem to assume a lot."

He looked me in the eyes. "Was I wrong?"

"No." I sulked.

"Explain to me one more thing," he said, his eyes unyielding. "Why did you tell Rocco all that stuff about yourself?"

"I was trying to form a bond between us so that he wouldn't want to kill me anymore," I admitted with embarrassment.

He laughed. "Where did you get that from?"

"TV—I think."

A moment of quiet came, and we dangled our feet into the warm water. He smelled like shaving cream—I took a long breath, and I carefully started to gawk at him from my peripheral. When his hand pressed against the ground to slightly readjust his seating, the muscles of his forearm tightly shifted with him. I also noticed a marking peeking out below the sleeve of his T-shirt.

Without warning, he turned his head and caught me staring. “What?”

Words briefly escaped me.

Like an idiot, I reached past his chest and touched the skin of his arm. This seemed to have caught him off guard. He didn’t pull away, but he didn’t move an inch either.

“Is that a tattoo?” I asked shyly.

He finally understood and lifted up his sleeve. There was a cross tattooed on his bicep.

“You have a scar in the middle of the cross,” I remarked.

He watched my expression before he explained, “Bullet wound.”

I tried to hide my shock. “Did the tattoo come before or after the ... bullet?”

“After,” he replied, never taking his eyes off my face. He seemed to debate something before pulling down on the collar of his shirt. On the middle of his upper chest, was another cross, with another mark—bullet wound—in the middle.

“This one came close,” he explained, his voice guarded.

I took my time with this new information.

“You mark the spots where you’ve been shot,” I quietly surmised and glanced up to read his face. “Why?”

His lips thinned. “Reminds me to be thankful that I’m alive.”

“You need to be reminded?”

“Some days are easier than others,” he said darkly.

“Does it happen a lot ... you getting shot at?” I struggled. I was trying to collect rational thoughts and push out the horrifying images that were crowding my brain.

“On occasion,” he answered with caution. “But the bullets rarely reach their target.”

I kept his eyes. “By *target* you mean you?”

He forced a smile. "Do you want to know how many of these crosses I have?"

"There are more?" My voice was shaking.

"Three more." He lifted up his shirt and showed me the cross tattooed on his stomach. "I have another one on my leg and on my back."

The door to the pool house opened all of a sudden, and I jumped. Carly walked out, carrying a stack of papers. She was wearing a cute sundress, her silky black hair falling down her back. With her olive skin and her petite frame, she looked like a porcelain doll, almost breakable.

She threw a disapproving glance in our direction as she pursued her path on the other side of the pool and went into the house without a word, banging the door behind her.

I was suddenly conscious that I was leaning into Cameron and that Cameron's girlfriend had caught me staring at her boyfriend's stomach. My cheeks burned up.

"You're blushing," Cameron said, laughing.

"I don't think your girlfriend likes me very much," I said, trying to mentally tone down the color that was rising up my cheeks.

His eyes widened. "My what?"

"Your girlfriend, Carly," I clarified.

"Oh! Right! Carly, my ... girlfriend!"

He burst out laughing.

"I can't wait to tell her that. It might actually make her feel better, or at least make her laugh a bit."

He finally settled down and shook his head in amazement.

"Carly's not my girlfriend," he explained. "Actually, you should probably not tell anyone else about your theory, or I'll need another cross to hide the new bullet wound."

I tried to stay indifferent about this stirring news.

While I pulled myself together, Cameron told me that Carly lived in the pool house. As the only girl, he explained, she needed her privacy.

"Well, she used to be the only girl here," he added with a wink.

"Does she work for you then?" I blurted.

"Where did you get that from?"

I recounted for him my first meeting with Carly and her argument with Rocco about working for Cameron, the boss.

He sighed, clearly displeased.

“Yes, Carly works for me,” he answered dejectedly.

“What does she do?”

“She’s a whiz with numbers. She keeps track of all the money, coming in and going out.”

“So ... she’s your accountant?” I gathered.

He looked at me, smiling. “Yeah, I guess she’s my accountant.”

I could hear the pulsation of car stereo systems resonating in the distance. The sound was becoming louder and louder. I tried to ignore it.

“And Spider works for you too?” I continued.

He nodded his head in affirmation and, anticipating my next question, added, “Spider deals with all of the security issues.”

“And the ... guards?”

“Yes, Emily, they all work for me,” he answered with slight impatience. “Everyone here works for me.”

“Rocco doesn’t work for you,” I noted.

“No, I guess you’re right. Rocco is the exception. He’s my brother. He can live here as long as he wants, but he doesn’t need to work for me.”

“But he wants to work for you.”

Cameron’s smile disappeared.

“Rocco is young and has the chance to do anything he wants. Anything,” he emphasized and looked me in the eyes. “I won’t let him make the same mistakes I made.”

The desperation on his face reminded me of that day, in the cemetery ... when he had turned around to find me as his witness to his crime.

“Cameron,” I said and took a breath, “I don’t know what happened in the cemetery or why you killed that man ... but I’m sure you had your reasons.” His brown eyes were still locked on mine. I was feeling my nerves fading. “You have to know that I would never tell anyone what I saw. You don’t need to keep me here to keep me quiet because I’m not going to talk.”

“Things are a lot more complicated than that. It’s not just up to me. There are other people who have an interest in this.”

“Spider?” I asked, remembering his furious glances at my expense.

He smiled. “No, it’s not Spider.”

I mustn't have looked convinced because he added, "I know that Spider comes off a bit ... intimidating, but he's a good guy who's just trying to do his job of keeping us safe. And believe me, sometimes I make his job very difficult."

Like his ears were burning, Spider came through the doors of the main floor and walked to the edge of the balcony, peering down at us.

"We gotta go," he directed Cameron, tossing a harsh glance in my direction.

"I'll be right there," Cameron replied, waving Spider away. Spider reluctantly turned around and went back into the house.

Cameron got up, rolled the legs of his jeans back down, stuck his feet back into his sandals and looked down at me. "I know that this is hard for you to understand, but I promise you that this house is the safest place for you to be right now."

"I don't know what that means Cameron."

"I know," he said, softly. "You'll just have to trust me on that."

"How long am I going to stay here for?" I had finally asked the question—one of the questions—that I really needed the answer to.

"A while," he admitted and a sly smile crossed his lips. "At least you'll finally have room to unpack your stuff and won't have to live out of those rubber bins anymore."

He took a few steps, before looking back. "I need to ask you a favor."

I peered up.

"Don't use my real name when there are other people around ... I mean when there are people other than Rocco, Carly and Spider around."

This then brought a smile to my lips. "What am I supposed to call you then?"

"Anything you want—just not the real thing."

"Sure thing, boss," I said.

He rolled his eyes. "You can't call me that either. It's too freaky ... We'll have to think of something good later."

The boss walked away and, with Meatball at his heels, followed the cobblestone pathway that led around the house. They both disappeared as they turned to make their way to the front of the house.

Chapter Seven: Sand Castles

What I remembered was that Bill's sand castles were always bigger and better than mine. I was six years old, and my brother and I were sitting on a beach in Martha's Vineyard. Our nanny Maria was standing on her tiptoes, batting her eyelashes at the bronzed lifeguard who sat in his high chair, savoring the attention. Bill had already stacked three buckets of sand perfectly, one over the other, and stuck a leafed branch on top as a flagpole.

There was no competition: my first attempt had crumbled as soon as I had overturned the bucket; the second less-crumbled attempt was washed away by a pestering wave.

Bill had a knack for showing up just as I was ready to give up, or throw a tantrum. Leaving his castle unguarded, he rushed to my rescue and built a princess palace, according to his baby sister's specs. In the end, my sand castle had roads, bridges over a circling sea-salt river and a princess made of candy wrappers waiting in the tower.

His castle had long disappeared, crushed by the waves.

A gray-haired couple strolling by had dared to compliment him on his flair for castle building. My brother's eyes immediately darted to Maria. The last thing he needed was to get in trouble—again—for doing everything for me; he had already missed two consecutive nights of TV time because of that.

"It's not mine, it's my sister's. She made it—all by herself," he huffed at the couple.

Maria didn't catch him ... not that day.

When Bill died, my whole life fell apart in a flash. It was like my crutches had suddenly been ripped from me and I had to run a marathon, without first having even learned how to walk on my own. Thanks to my big brother, who I loved more than anyone, I had no idea how to do anything for myself. Nothing could fill the overwhelming space that my

overbearing brother had left in my life, and just the thought of letting anyone else do anything for me was, to me, an out-and-out betrayal to Bill.

My crutch-less legs eventually grew muscle mass, and I figured out how to take care of myself. But I never did figure out how to build my own sand castle.

While my feet dangled in the crystal water of the pool, I wondered, as I often did, what my life would have been like if Bill hadn't died. Would I have left my parents, their money, their big plans, and moved to Callister?

Would I have found myself in this armed-guard mansion that was owned by a tattooed, bullet-holed, twenty-something boy who made me feel ... different?

Only over Bill's dead body could this have happened. Of this, I was positive.

I did eventually get up and walk back into the house. Cameron had long since disappeared around the corner.

In the kitchen, Rocco was making himself some lunch: baloney and a puddle of mustard slapped between two pieces of white bread, ten times over, stacked on a plate. He was bantering with a guy who was sitting at the table.

I kept my head down and pulled a can of pop out of one of the fridges. The carbon bubbles exploding in my throat made my eyes water. When I looked up, I saw bright blue eyes—and a shot of carrot orange hair spiked into a short cropped Mohawk—eagerly waiting for me. He was built like a linebacker and had a sleeve of tattoos and a metal rod pierced through his lower lip.

He slid out the solid wood chair that was next to him. "Why don't you come sit by me for a bit so that I can take a better look at you?" He was English; the thick accent gave him away. I glanced at Rocco, but he was too preoccupied with choking down bear-sized bites to be of any assistance.

I held my pop can in both hands, sat down, and leaned my elbows on the table. The guy's tree-trunk arm was around my shoulder as soon as my bum hit the seat—I only flinched a little bit. For the most part, it was, oddly ... nice—he was extremely warm, and I was always cold.

What I was uncomfortable with, however, was his eyeing me inches away from my face. Nobody should ever be scrutinized from such close proximity.

“Well!” he finally boomed with satisfaction, “You are a real ginger! Just like me.” He tapped his speared red hair and turned to Rocco. “This was meant to be. Letting this one in was the best mistake you ever made, Kid.”

Rocco had amazingly already hit the bottom of his sandwich stack.

“I didn’t make any mistakes,” he countered with a mouthful. “Emily’s just really sneaky.”

I was thinking of interjecting Rocco’s subjective account, but was beaten to the punch by my human blanket.

“Aye,” he agreed with Rocco and winked at me. “You definitely have to watch us gingers. We’ll get you every time.”

Rocco grumbled and strolled back to the kitchen.

“Emily,” the human blanket rolled off his tongue. “That’s your name?”

I smiled dimly.

He extended his free hand across and shook mine. “I’m Griff.”

After a good squeeze, he took his hand back and glimpsed at his watch. “Geez! I gotta get back to work.”

He pushed away from the table; everything on the main floor shook with him. He walked around me, placed his large hand on the back of my chair, and extended the other to me. “Come keep me company?”

Rocco had brought back a new loaf of bread, a butter knife, and an unopened jar of peanut butter ... dessert. I took Griff’s hand while he pulled my chair out. He was beaming.

When we got to the front door, Griff shouldered the shotgun that was leaned against the wall waiting for him.

“Is it loaded?” I croaked.

He raised one eyebrow. “What do you think?”

We crossed the lawn and reached the tree line—Griff swaggering as we neared the armed guard who was standing next to a tree. I recognized this guard; he had been sitting, and then leaving en masse, with the rest of the cool crowd that morning. By the look of disdain on his face, he recognized me too.

Griff switched spots with the bothered guard and dragged a tree stump out of the woods for me to sit on. The other guard glanced at Griff and looked like he was about to say something; deciding against it, he shook his head and walked away.

Griff lit a cigarette and huffed a few puffs, still beaming. We were a foot inside the tree line, half-hidden by dense green stuff. Deeper in, the forest was quiet, dark, and I couldn't see more than a few feet in before the brush blocked any further view. There were other guards lined in the trees; I saw heads popping through the brush every once in a while.

"Is this what you do all day? Stand here?" I asked swatting mosquitoes away and rubbing my arms. It was getting a bit chilly and buggy in the shade. I looked at the warm, bug-free house with longing.

"Oh, no!" he exclaimed and pointed at a head that popped out about thirty feet away. "Sometimes I get to stand over there too."

In my head, I was trying to do long division: the approximate size of the property divided by the thirty feet that separated each guard would equal the number of big men with guns that I had to worry about—and then I remembered that my math skills were fictional. "How many of you are there?"

"There's just one of me, love," he told me, wiggling his eyebrows. "But if you mean other guards, I don't know. It varies from day to day, from week to week. Since this morning, probably thirty or forty, maybe more. This is the most that I've seen here so far."

"Wouldn't it be ... better to stand in the sun?" I suggested, casually, after another chill or bug tickled the hair on the back of my neck.

He shrugged. "Sure it would, but we're not supposed to." He pointed at the sky. "Too many guys, too many guns, attracts too much attention if someone were to fly above us. You never know who might be watching. These blokes are real paranoid about stuff like that."

"What exactly are the guns for?"

"Keep people out, keep things in. Not really sure. I just know to point and shoot when I'm ordered to." Griff took another puff of his cigarette.

"You don't know what you're guarding?"

He glanced down the line of trees. "Nope. And I don't want to know."

I had a hard time believing this.

"Aren't you curious to know why you have to stand here all day with a very big gun over your shoulder?" I asked him.

Griff was starting to look uneasy.

"Love," he said as he bent closer to me, "don't ask any questions about what goes on around here. I've gotten some pretty nasty stares for doing

just that. Whatever these guys are up to, it isn't kosher, and they don't react well when people meddle in their business."

He leaned further in, his chilling voice becoming barely audible. "Listen, from what the kid told me, you're very lucky to still be alive. They could've just finished you off when they realized what you saw. Count your blessings and do what you need to do to stay alive—play the game, keep quiet, and pretend you don't see anything."

I gulped.

He took a second and finally forced his lips into a smile. "Just stick by me, and you'll be all right."

"Thanks," I replied in a whisper. In a small way, I was relieved—because of Griff, but more so because, at last, I had the reaction that a normal person should have had: fear.

I was taking prolonged breaths to calm the drumming pulsation in my veins. Griff finished his cigarette with an eventually relaxed smile.

"How did you come to be here?" I asked carefully, keeping my voice low.

"I knew a guy, who knew a guy," he replied, winking at me.

"And now you work for Cameron," I mused.

A puzzled look came over him. "Cameron? Who's Cameron?"

"Uhh ... sorry ... I thought I heard someone mention that name. I must have been wrong." I really hated lying to Griff, but disappointing Cameron seemed like an even worse alternative.

Griff shrugged and didn't seem to notice my blunder. "Nah, I work for Tiny."

"Do you actually get paid for standing around all day?" I joked, trying to keep away from topics I couldn't talk about and that I didn't want hear about.

He chuckled. "I wouldn't do this unless I got paid. I've never been without booze or women for this long. Hanging with these idiots all day only makes this job worse, and I thought I was going to go crazy until I saw your face this morning." He smiled warmly.

"Have you been doing this ... job for very long?" I asked him.

"Couple months."

"What were you doing before this?"

He grinned from ear to ear. “I was ... I am ... a mixed martial arts fighter.”

Griff and I spent the rest of the afternoon shooting the breeze, staying away from the taboo topics. I found out that he grew up in London, fought his way into professional cage fighting. He made money by getting locked in a cage and pulverizing the guy they put in front of him until one of them—usually the other guy from what he told me—called uncle or passed out or worse.

The best thing about Griff was that he talked enough for both of us. It was great to listen to him and block all the other stuff out. I didn’t notice how cold and hungry I was until the sun lowered and we were approached by another guard who had come to switch spots with Griff and ignore me.

“Wow!” Griff bellowed as we walked back to the house, “That was the fastest shift I’ve put in yet. You should keep me company more often.” I hadn’t done much else but sit there while he talked.

We kicked off our shoes at the door.

“Supper?” I offered, signaling my head toward the kitchen. But Griff hesitated.

“Nah ... I’m going to hang with the boys downstairs. They’ll get jealous if I don’t spend time with them.”

He stood by the basement staircase, his eyes hopeful. “See you tomorrow?”

I gave him a devious smile. “Maybe.”

More guards started filtering in through the front door, shoes quickly piling up on the tiled floor and guns amassing against the wall. The incoming guards wouldn’t allow more than a furtive glimpse in my general direction. Griff had already disappeared downstairs.

I went to the living area. No one was there. Cameron wasn’t there.

I explored the kitchen. What I found were cupboards stacked with easy fixes: canned goods, frozen dinners, fluorescent orange pasta—it was like being back in student housing. I took out a can of peas and a can of whole tomatoes. I discovered a fully stocked spice rack hidden behind a George Foreman Grill in the bottom cupboard and placed it on the counter. Though the fridges were mostly filled with juice and pop, I was able to find some onions and green and red peppers. I also found a package of frozen chicken thighs, only slightly freezer-burnt.

Within minutes, I had a pot of rice boiling and quick chicken paella steaming in a pan.

Carly appeared, quietly, like a pixie, around the corner. While I stirred, she opened and closed the cupboards doors, rummaged in the fridges, coming up empty-handed. Keeping my eyes on the hot stove, I sensed her stop and look over my shoulder.

“It smells great, Emily,” she said in an almost whisper.

I looked up and smiled—a peace flag. She smiled back, raising her own white flag. She was really pretty when she wasn’t yelling or glaring at me.

“My mom used to make paella all the time,” she told me.

“My mom doesn’t know where the kitchen is.”

She smiled again, and I was relieved.

Carly then started pulling miscellaneous spices out of the spice rack.

“May I?” she asked. I gladly stepped aside. When she was done, the paella was extra spicy and tasted absolutely amazing.

With a little reluctance, Carly turned on her heels and started going back toward the way she had come in.

“Um ... there’s more than I can eat ... do you want to share?” I offered.

A large smile crossed her face and she quickly grabbed two plates.

Before we had even set our filled plates on the table, Rocco came sniffing in.

“Hey, what’s that?” he asked as he followed his nose into the kitchen. Not waiting for a response, he had helped himself to the rest of the paella and came to the table with a salad-sized bowlful.

Carly threw him a nasty glare.

“You guys weren’t planning on eating all of that were you?” he asked as he stuffed a huge mouthful and sat down.

“We’re not used to eating *real* food around here,” Carly said to me.

Eventually, the rest of the crew I had briefly encountered that morning made their way in, with the exception of Spider. Cameron didn’t come back either. I noticed Carly nod at Tiny when he had caught me sitting there and had momentarily halted the incoming guards at the kitchen threshold.

Satisfied with Carly’s signal, Tiny trudged to the table, and the rest of the guards followed him in. No one left because of me, and there were no nasty glares thrown my way. I was comfortable with the being ignored part.

After their self-prepared suppers, the men dissipated outside or downstairs. Carly and I helped Rocco clean up the mess. And then, with a hushed goodnight, Carly left as quietly as she had arrived, and Rocco commenced his endless demonstration of channel surfing.

I looked at the clock every two minutes. I twisted a strand of hair around my finger until it turned blue. I fidgeted in my seat and jumped every time the front door opened, only to disappointingly hear one of the troops come in or out.

“Cameron’s not going to be back till late,” Rocco groaned, never taking his finger off the remote trigger. “So stop moving around, it’s annoying.”

He had caught me off guard.

“I wasn’t ...” I started to object, but the quick look that he shot me told me that he wouldn’t buy any excuse that I came up with anyway.

I scampered upstairs before he could observe anything else.

Cameron had a long, hip-level dresser in his room. It was against the wall near the doorway. Only two of the drawers had clothes in them. The first drawer contained his socks and underwear—boxer briefs, I mentally noted, simultaneously blushing. The second was filled with T-shirts and jeans. Then, rolled in between the two folded stacks was an extra-small, pink T-shirt, too small, too pink to be Cameron’s.

One by one, I dragged my bins over, neatly placing clothes in the drawers that were empty. Then I made one trip to the bathroom and put away the rest of my toiletries. I put my tattered *Rumble Fish* copy back under my pillow and left my tacky ballerina lamp lying on its side on top of the emptied bins.

I later picked a video from Cameron’s selection—*The Godfather* seemed fitting somehow. I tucked myself under the fleece blanket that had been thrown over the couch and settled in.

By the time Vito Corleone saw the Statue of Liberty for the first time, I was asleep.

When I awoke in the morning, I was in Cameron’s bed, with Meatball snoring at my feet. My ballerina lamp was on the table next to me—it looked even tackier in Cameron’s room. I opened the drawers to pick my clothes for the day; Cameron’s clothes were gone.

It was barely seven o'clock, and I was bursting with energy. I got dressed, grabbed my portable player and crept out of my cell. Meatball went back to sleep, I went to the basement.

The house echoed the heavy breathing and snoring of all the boys who filled the rooms. I tiptoed down the basement hallway to the gym.

And there was Cameron, lifting dumbbells—my heart fluttered and hopped. He smiled, but looked tired.

"You're up early," he said.

"I could say the same for you," I replied as I nervously walked in.

"I don't sleep much," he admitted. His eyes glanced over my face. "Did you sleep well?"

I shrugged. "I slept for almost ten hours straight." I amended, "I don't sleep much either."

The treadmill was now all in one piece and faced the windows toward the pool. Cameron and I opened all the windows, and a warm wind filled the room. Then we each went into our separate corners.

Outside, the sun was shining. I ran and watched as the night guards stood or marched about the tree line at the back of the property. I could feel Cameron spying my running reflection through the mirror. But I kept my eyes forward; the last thing I needed was to trip and go flying into the wall behind me.

In many ways, running on a treadmill was a lot easier than the streets of Callister—I didn't have to worry about catching my feet on the cracked sidewalk, or diverting garbage, or keeping an eye on the weirdo in the trench coat who liked to linger in the bushes. In other ways, running on a treadmill was a lot harder—I had no cracks, garbage, or weirdoes to distract me from myself.

Eventually we were done our workouts and sweaty. He walked to me as I was stretching.

"Swim?" he suggested.

"Sure," I enthusiastically concurred ... before I had fully considered what I had just agreed to. It wasn't until I got to my room and opened the drawer that horror set in: swimming meant bathing suit. The thought of being seen by him, by anyone, half-clad petrified me—because the skin under my clothes was just as freckled and ghostly as my face, because bones tended

to protrude around my clavicle and my shoulder blades, because I had barely graduated from a trainer bra.

Solution: the oversized T-shirt that I threw over my bathing suit.

I met him in the pool, quickly jumping in. Meatball had followed me and was lying at the side.

Cameron was bare-chested. He was skinnier than I'd imagined, than I thought he might be, and he had a farmer's tan—his tan-lines ended where his T-shirt would begin. I avoided glancing in his direction as much as possible while we swam around.

"Where did you go yesterday?" I asked, bringing Cameron out of his daze.

"Just work stuff," he replied with firm vagueness.

"Boss stuff?"

A smile reached his eyes. "Boss stuff."

"You looked pretty tired this morning," I observed, mentally noting that he was starting to look less tired.

"It was a long day," he distantly admitted.

"You should get more sleep. You can have your room back if you want, I can sleep on the couch."

"If only that was all it took to make a difference. You'll make more use of that room than I ever did."

He paused. "How was *your* day yesterday?"

"Kind of boring," I blurted.

His brow worriedly furrowed. "You don't like it here?"

"It was just a bit lonely, that's all," I said. "This place is a palace compared to where I came from."

"You mean your place. In Callister."

I rolled my eyes. "Where else."

"Why do you live in that dump?" He was swimming on his back looking up at the sky.

"I don't know," I struggled, shrugging my shoulders. "It's cheap and close to school. The house has tons of character, and my roommates are decent, for the most part. It's a really great place."

He didn't look convinced.

It wasn't the first time that someone had criticized my choice of housing. I smiled to myself, remembering the day Isabelle was in Callister for a

charity benefit and decided to stop in for a surprise visit. She stayed less than a minute, long enough to get gum on the heels of her Manolo Blahniks.

"I guess I just like to keep my parents guessing," I said aloud.

"Your parents don't approve," he summed up.

"Oh! They hate it!"

"You don't get along with your parents." I noticed that his questions had become statements of fact.

"No, it's not that I don't get along with them, not really anyway. It's more that they don't know me ... or maybe it's that I don't know them, or that I don't understand them. I'm not sure ... we're very different."

He looked perplexed.

I racked my brain, trying to find a way to explain something that I still hadn't figured out. "My parents like to focus on what I do or don't do, like live in a bad neighborhood or go to a bad school. Things like that are what they draw on to decide if I'm the daughter they can be proud of. My brother Bill and I never seemed to make their cut."

"When I was a kid," I rambled on because he was staring at me, "I was in the car with my mom, my dad, and my brother." I left out that our nanny Maria was also in the car. "My dad stopped at a gas station, and I begged my mom to let me get a soda, but she wouldn't. Bill went inside and stole one for me, but he got caught and the store clerk started going around from car to car, dragging him by the shirt, asking if anyone knew him. My dad just drove away and left Bill in the middle of nowhere. They didn't send anyone for him for three days, after Bill had spent a night in a jail cell, and been put in a group home by the police." I left out that my parents had sent one of the maids to get him. "Bill never even cried or said a word about it after he got home."

Cameron remained silent, looking at me.

Standing next to each other, half-clad in the shallow end of the pool, our bodies shimmering with water, I suddenly felt that I needed to tell him something that I had never said out loud, or to anyone else but myself.

"Bill died of a drug overdose when I was thirteen. I blamed my parents for this," I blurted. That was the whole truth—and a revelation to me as I said it.

Cameron hadn't moved a muscle while I gabbed away.

I tried to wrap up my endless sob story. “Bill is buried in the same cemetery where ...” I glanced up through my eyelashes, “Well, you know which one. I guess that’s the real reason I live in that dump, as you call it—it was the best place I could find, that I could afford, that was close to school and Bill.”

Cameron stared at me so gravely that it was like he was staring right through me. I had given him a whole lot more information than he’d probably wanted to hear. I didn’t know why I had just told him all that, though I wished that I would have just stuck with “I don’t know” when he had first asked me why I lived in a dump.

Cameron took his time. “I can see that your brother’s death was ... difficult for you.”

“He was my best friend. Toward the end, I only saw him a few times a year. He changed so quickly. Then he was gone.” I ducked my head underwater to hide any salty evidence that may have been lining my cheeks and I swam away.

I could feel Cameron’s stare boring into the back of my neck while I swam around.

“Hey!” said a voice from above. Rocco was standing on the balcony of the main floor. From the pillow indents still on his face, he had clearly just rolled out of bed. “Don’t move! I’m going to grab my trunks!”

After he had dashed back into the house, I turned to Cameron.

“How old is your brother?”

“I think about sixteen. I don’t really know, he won’t tell me,” he said, smiling at last, shaking his head in wonder. “Rocco and I didn’t grow up together. Hell, until about a year ago when he knocked on my door, I didn’t even know that he existed ... though I think he’s forgiven me for that by now.”

Rocco came running in, cannonballing into the water and spraying a disgruntled Meatball. I got out of the pool, moving away from the line of fire, and sat on a long chair, curled up under my towel. Meatball had run off, seeking a quieter place to sleep.

I watched the two brothers splashing and wrestling in the water. When they stood next to each other, it was easy to see the similarities. Like Cameron, Rocco had shaggy dark curls that hung around his face and looked like they had never seen the pick of a comb. They both did this thing

where they would shake their hand through their hair, and then shake their heads like dogs to get the rest of the water out. The brothers also had the same full-toothed grin and an infectious laugh—something that I hadn't heard much of, but that now seemed natural. Both boys were tall and lean, though Rocco still had a bit of baby fat in his rosy cheeks and stomach. Cameron was more solid. Rocco was almost as tall as Cameron now—I supposed that within a year he would probably grow to be slightly taller than his big brother.

When Carly walked out of the pool house, balancing a stack of papers in one hand as she closed the door behind her with the other, the brothers furtively glimpsed each other. They grinned, coolly, as Carly too coolly walked too close to the battleground. Then they wound up their arms like paddles and showered her with half the water in the pool.

With a shriek followed by elongated cursing, Carly, who was completely drenched, shook herself—and her now-soaked paperwork—off. I shuddered, suddenly reminded of my first encounter with Carly's wrath. Rocco and Cameron just high-fived each other and snickered as she stomped away, still swearing under her breath. She was powerless against their lapse in maturity.

Carly had momentarily disappeared into the house. But, to my utter amazement, she walked back out after a few minutes and came to share my long chair.

I hadn't noticed until that moment that Spider had been standing on the sill of the basement doors, looking at all of us with a confused look on his face. And then he practically tiptoed over and sat next to Carly. I moved down the chair to give them some room and me some distance from Spider. As usual, he nervously sat on the edge of his seat, unable to just sit and relax. Though, after significant taunting from Rocco and Cameron, he went to join them in the pool.

It was strange to see all of them together, playing around. It was as if they were acting their own age—and I didn't feel like I was a kid among adults.

Eventually, Cameron gazed down at his water-pruned hands, climbed out of the pool and came to sit next to me, letting Rocco fend for himself in the pool.

“How is it that you and your brother only just met?” I wondered.

“Technically, he’s my half-brother—same mother, different father. My dad and mom had me when they were teens. When I was six, I was sent to live with my dad. Our mom had a bunch of kids with different guys, from what Rocco tells me. The only times I saw her was when she managed to track my dad down to get some money.”

“Why didn’t you stay with your mom?”

“She’s a drunk and had enough problems of her own without having to worry about another mouth to feed,” he said. “My dad was forced to take me in when the social worker threatened to put me in a foster home.”

“So you lived with your father.” I mulled it over. “Where did you grow up?”

“Everywhere, I guess. We moved around a lot.” He continued to watch Spider and Rocco play in the pool, but he wasn’t paying attention. His mind was elsewhere.

And then he snapped out of it and looked at me with his wide, overwhelming grin. “Any more questions?”

“At least a thousand more,” I gasped.

He warmly put his arm around my shoulder and squeezed me in a half-hug. “You’re exhausting, you know.”

Before I had time to get my breath back, I jumped. A curly blond little boy had come bounding into the pool. The person who trailed him surprised me even more.

Chapter Eight: Unclothed

She was a tanned, bouncy, blonde beauty. Like a girl from those hair removal cream commercials: long legs, cutoff shorts, strutting in heels—I was expecting her to break out into a song about her short-shorts any minute. In the few seconds it took her to glide a few steps, the climate around the pool went from warm and cozy to below freezing. I watched Carly’s smile turn tortured. I watched Spider’s eyes circle to Carly, his face turn to ice; he lunged out of the pool and met the blonde. I watched Rocco gawk dreamily at her. He was apparently in charge of keeping the pool water from turning to snow.

I watched her as she watched me; her gaze fell onto Cameron and then back to me. I noticed all of these things, but not before noticing that Cameron’s arm had shot away from me as soon as she had materialized. His jaw had clenched, snapping the beautiful, youthful features of his face shut. When I met his eyes, I was frightened by the blank man who had taken his place once again.

Spider had—somewhat gently—grabbed the girl by the arm, rerouting her back into the house. Cameron chased after them, without a word or glance back. When they had vanished, Carly was stilled. Her head was bent forward, her hair hiding her face. I shrugged out of my soaked towel and wrapped myself in the one that Cameron had left behind. I sat on the edge of my long chair with my back straight up and took a moment to get my voice back.

“Who was that?” I managed. There was panic in my voice, and I didn’t know why.

“That,” Rocco told me, “was Frances.” He said this with admiration. He said this as if it were enough to satiate all the questions that were running through my head.

Rocco squinted while the little boy splashed water at him. “Superman,” his tiny voice commanded, spread-eagle arms out. Rocco picked him up by the torso and flew him over his head with a whoosh. The curly blond kid looked more like a cherub or a clip-winged Gabriel than a Clark Kent. There was something familiar in his triumphant, devilish grin.

“And who’s this?” I tried to sound non-creepy and directed my forced smile in the child’s general direction. But I was always awkward around kids, especially when I had been one of them. The only kid I had ever known was my brother, who was seven when I was born and was already more of a grown-up than anyone else I knew. I tended to ostracize myself from other kids when I was forced to assimilate, positive that they could smell fear. They pounced on carrot-haired oddballs like me all the time.

“This little guy is Danny,” Rocco said to me. He fell backward, letting Superman plunge into the water. Daniel’s head popped back out, and he giggled while Rocco remained submerged.

“How old are you, Daniel?” There was that awkwardness again.

The kid did the other thing that kids tended to do around me: he completely ignored me. He busied himself with dog-paddling around the pool, trying to sink Rocco’s submarine body. I readjusted my towel and peeked at Carly. She hadn’t moved a muscle.

“He’s six,” she conveyed flatly. She then stood and walked into the pool house. A few seconds later, Spider emerged from the patio doors, snuck a quick look around the pool, and kept going into the pool house, banging the door so violently that one of the flower boxes on the windowsill tumbled to the stone ground—petals, earth, and roots spilling over.

Rocco was heavily engaged in a new game of water wrestling, having finally found a partner he could beat.

I waited two long seconds for Cameron to reappear too. He didn’t.

Curiosity edged my impatience, but jealousy made it boil over. Cameron was in the empty house with the blonde mannequin, sans his arachnid chaperone. It was silly to be jealous. I barely knew the girl. I barely knew Cameron. I had no claim or cause to hope. I was being silly. I was being silly and completely ridiculous. So I snuck back into the house when Rocco was sunk, armed with an excuse of needing a fresh towel if I was discovered.

Inside, the house was hushed. I could hear the wheezing of the night guards who were sleeping in one of the basement rooms. Floorboards were slightly creaking upstairs, and voices were moving about. Through the kitchen, down the upstairs hallway, the strained voices became strained words. The door to the library was ajar. I crept toward it, the bottom of my naked feet sticking to the hardwood floor.

“How much is it this time?” I heard Cameron coldly ask. I peeked in and saw him facing the high shelves against the wall. Books were stacked at his feet. He was crouched in front of the emptied third shelf and fiddled with the black wheel of a small metal door.

The unhidden safe opened, revealing a heap of paper bills inside. The woman—Frances—was waiting behind him.

“Um, five thousand should do it.” Frances’s voice was seductive and unaffected. “Rent is due next week.”

Cameron grabbed a stack of cash and very swiftly leafed through the bills. He stopped midway through the stack, split it, and put the uncounted bills back in the safe. He slammed the metal door shut and abruptly turned around with the remaining bills in hand. I threw myself—Indiana Jones style—into Rocco’s room, landing on a pile of dirty clothes. I ducked behind his door and sat on a mass of socks, underwear, shirts, a plate, a Victoria’s Secret magazine.

“Seems like the amounts get bigger every time I see you,” Cameron pointed out to Frances.

“I have a growing child to raise. Or have you forgotten that?”

There was a deep sigh. “Are you going to tell me why you’re really here?”

“What-do-you-mean,” Frances put on. “Money. Like I said. Like always.”

“You could have just called Spider. He would have made arrangements to have it delivered to you. It would have been more convenient.”

“More convenient for who?” she shot back. “I couldn’t wait for Spider to make his arrangements. I need the money now.”

“You don’t look like you need money,” Cameron noted. I wondered if he was referring to the designer purse that had been hanging off her arm.

“How dare you!”

“Keep your voice down,” Cameron hissed.

And Frances's voice was shushed. "Daniel has and will always be my priority. You, of all people, are in no position to judge me."

"This isn't a place for kids. You shouldn't be bringing him here."

"I wouldn't say that," she snickered. "You seem to be surrounding yourself with children these days."

"You have your money. Take the boy and leave immediately." Cameron's voice was calm and businesslike.

"What's the hurry!" she cackled. "Are Daniel and I getting in the way of your latest sexual exploit?"

"It's time to go, Frances."

"I saw the way you were looking at that girl. For God's sake, Cameron, she looks barely fourteen years old."

"Frances—"

Frances ignored the warning in his voice. "Then again, pure breeds like her tend to be well-preserved. I guess that's what happens when you spend your life being kept away from the likes of you. She's a little out of your league, don't you think?"

"I'll have Tiny escort you out." Cameron was unchanged.

"Don't you touch me!"

"You have what you came for. The rest is none of your business."

"This has everything to do with me!" she yelled. "You will damage that poor girl. Good girls like Emily aren't equipped to deal with guys like you."

Severe silence swept into the library and the room next to it. A slight whimper escaped my lips. I had just been thrown in a roller coaster, mid-plunge.

"Do you really think that I wouldn't recognize the red hair?" Frances pushed. "How old is she now? Seventeen, eighteen?"

"You can leave, or I can make you leave. It's your choice." Cameron's voice was tight now.

"You don't scare me, Cameron—even though I know what you're capable of. Question is ... does she know what you're capable of? Does little Emily know the monster that you are?"

Cameron had finally been shaken. "Enough, Frances!"

"Yes, it is enough, isn't it?" she spat. "Bill would've had you by the throat if he saw her here, saw you looking at her like that."

I had already heard enough by this point. My ears had swelled shut, as if my body had turned the autopilot on to stop the crash-landing that would have come if I had kept listening. My knees tucked themselves into my chest. My hand clasped the chain that was around my neck so tightly that the angel pendant was leaving a bloody indent into the palm of my hand. I felt like I had been caught in the tornado that had hit Rocco's room, had sucked the air out and left a trail of teenage essence behind.

Frances knew Bill. Cameron knew Bill. After years of yearning for answers, searching for any glimpses of that whole other life, the one that my brother had led away from me; after desperately sitting by as traces of my brother slowly disappeared with every moment, day, month, year that passed until it was starting to feel like he had never really existed; someone other than me had known Bill—and knew who I was.

How could I have missed this? I tried to go back through all of the events of the past few days, but all I could remember was my conversation with Cameron that morning. He had listened to me while I had told him about my big brother's premature death, something that I had never told anyone else because it was too painful. Yet—and yet, he had never said a word.

I wasn't sure how long I had been parked in Rocco's room like that. Frances and Danny were long gone.

I peeled off the front cover of the magazine that had stuck to my half-clad behind and let my limbs carry me back toward the front hallway. But Cameron intercepted me as he was running down the steps.

His eyes canvassed my face, and he halted on the second last step. My face was hot and drenched.

"What's up ..." he asked slowly, carefully.

I considered side-stepping him and continuing to make my way up to his room. He was blocking my passage. Something in his expression told me that he wasn't going to let me through without an explanation. There was a baseball rising up in my throat. I couldn't tell if it was tears or words. It turned out to be both.

"Bill ..." was how I started. Cameron's face went white. "... you knew me too ... I needed a clean towel ... how could you?" In my head, these were fully structured sentences with nouns, conjugated verbs, and all that stuff that made sense to other people.

Cameron and I just stared at each other. I looked at him through a veil of gathering tears. Cameron blinked, but his face remained otherwise expressionless. This made me furious.

“You knew Bill,” I started again, my thoughts clearer now. “All this time, you knew exactly who I was. You never said anything.” My voice was shrill, and I was already out of breath. Cameron was breathing perfectly normal.

“Yes,” he admitted, slowly again.

“Yes, you knew Bill, or yes, you lied to me?”

“I didn’t lie to you.”

“You omitted vital information.”

“That’s not the same as lying.”

“Spare me the grammar lesson,” I growled.

He sat on the stairs and clasped his hands. “This isn’t what you think.”

“Oh? Tell me—what am I thinking?” Because I had no idea—jumbled words were all I could manage to think about. “You seem to have all the answers.”

“Em—” he started, but I wasn’t finished.

“Were you ever going to tell me?”

“No,” he admitted. There was no pause, and he looked straight at me. “There are some things that you’re better off not knowing.”

“Do not make decisions for me! You might know who I am, but you don’t know me well enough to know what’s good for me.”

He exhaled and rubbed his temples. “Listen, Emmy, I know that you’re mad at me—”

“Mad isn’t the word.” I was furious, enraged, incensed, going on crazy.

“Fine,” he interrupted. “You’re beyond mad, but I swear to you that I’m just trying to keep you safe.”

“No, thank you,” I quickly but politely rebuffed. “I’ve seen what you do with the people you should be keeping safe. Throwing money at me won’t make this any better or keep anyone any safer. Besides, I can’t be bought.”

Cameron opened his mouth like he was going to say something, and then stopped. Then his forehead scrunched. I could see him trying to digest what I was saying. “Wait ... what?”

“Throwing money at your children, at your son, won’t make him safer. It’ll just make him resent you more.” I had intimate experience with this.

He stared at me and nodded once. “Ah. I understand what you are saying now. You’re talking about Daniel.” I noticed a barely audible tremble in his voice. I had obviously hit a nerve there and decided to chase it.

“What kind of man would leave a child to be raised without a father? Paying off your son’s mother doesn’t make you less of a deadbeat.”

Cameron flinched faintly. He then got up, sliding his hand down the banister as he stepped down, and calmly, too calmly, walked out the front door.

I had meant for my words to hurt him.

Cameron gently clicked the door behind him, and I heard someone clamoring up the stairs. When I turned around, Carly and Spider were standing at the top of the basement stairs, and Rocco was rushing up behind them. The grim look on Carly and Spider’s faces told me that they had seen enough of the show.

“Did you know all along too?” I accused.

“Know what?” Rocco replied, popping his head between Carly and Spider while dripping pool water everywhere. Carly and Spider simply stared back in response. That was enough for me to understand how deeply the treachery had run. I did what I knew best: I dashed to hide.

“What’s going on?” I heard Rocco ask in a botched whisper as I reached the second floor. This was followed by the sound of a hand hitting wet skin.

“Ow! Carly! That hurt! What was that for?” Rocco complained. I slammed Cameron’s bedroom door, blocked out the rest and immediately fell into a routine—anything habitual—that I desperately needed. I showered, brushed my teeth with force, roughly combed through the knots in my hair—considered chopping it all off, but figured that looking like a fourteen-year-old boy wouldn’t solve anything. I got dressed, sweatpants and sweatshirt—unseasonal for the hot weather, but necessary for the drama. I made the oversized bed and vigorously fluffed the pillows. I yanked the heavy curtains shut and plopped myself on the small couch, hiding in my cave. Then I decided to put a movie on.

During all of this, I wasn’t thinking about how much I missed Bill, missed talking about him with someone outside of myself. I wasn’t thinking about how betrayed I felt or how angry I was. I was especially not thinking about the ache on Cameron’s face when he had walked out on me.

When my thoughts would start veering from the movie's plotline, I turned the television's volume up. When I heard Meatball whine at the door, begging to be let in for the night, I turned the volume up higher. When my stomach growled and grumbled in protest of my protest, I turned it up even higher.

By the time I was on the fifth movie—a really bad disaster movie with lots of explosions and earthquakes and people screaming for their lives—it was as dark outside as it was inside the room, and my ears were ringing from the deafening detonations. But during a lull of action scenes, there was a crash next to me and an “ouch!” A lamp was turned on. Cameron was standing on one foot, holding on to the other.

“Sorry,” he yelled over the revitalized explosions, “I knocked, but you didn't answer.” He hobbled to the couch, grabbed the remote control with the hand that wasn't rubbing his big toe, and turned down the volume.

Chapter Nine: Misery

Cameron was in the kitchen; pots, cupboard doors, kitchen drawers were clanking in his path. I was sitting at the kitchen table where he had bidden me to park myself after shooining Rocco away from the television into his room. I was trying to blink through the pain that was streaming into the back of my eyes from the very bright overhanging lights.

“How much did your brother tell you—about what he was up to when he was gone, away from you?” Cameron asked me.

“He didn’t need to say much,” I replied, rubbing my temples with two fingers. “The police reports and school records spoke for themselves.” There were also all the rumors that were floating around, things that were being whispered, things that I had heard my father scream at my brother behind the closed mahogany door of his study. I didn’t feel the need to tell Cameron this.

“What about when the police reports stopped after he left school? Did he ever talk to you about what he was doing?”

“Not much,” I admitted. “I didn’t see him very much after he ran away. He would sneak back into the house mostly to just boss me around, tell me what not to do.” I exhaled. “We argued a lot toward the end.” This I regretted more than anything.

“Hmmm,” Cameron mused over the sizzle of the frying pan.

He brought two large glasses of chocolate milk and came back with grilled cheese sandwiches and—bless his heart—a bottle of ketchup.

“Earlier, you called me Emmy, you know,” I mentioned while I squeezed the red stuff on the side of my plate.

He sat down, facing me and raised his eyebrows. “I did?”

I nodded and handed him the ketchup bottle, which he refused.

“Your brother used to call you that,” he said, watching me carefully.

“You knew him well enough to know that,” I surmised. He took a bite of his unsoiled but boring grilled cheese. Though my stomach grumbled, I left the sandwich there and waited.

“Well?”

He shifted in his seat. “I’m not sure where to start.”

“Starting from the beginning seems to work for most people.”

“Starting from the beginning would take a very long time.”

This made me almost giddy, but I tried to keep it cool and shrugged, “Apparently I’m not going anywhere for a while, so talk as long as you need.”

His lips curved up at the corners. “I don’t need to talk. I’m doing this for you,” he stalled.

I crossed my arms over my chest, not giving him any other opportunity to delay what I needed to hear.

“Fine,” he said, shaking his head. “If you eat, I’ll talk.”

I picked up a half of the grilled cheese and dunked it in my pond of ketchup. I brought it to my mouth and waited to see if he was going to keep his end of the bargain.

“Let’s see,” he said with his eyes turned to the ceiling. His gaze then came back to me, attached to a crooked smile. “The first time I met Bill Sheppard, he beat the crap out of me.”

I took a bite of my sandwich and almost choked.

“Your brother had just been transferred to my school—”

“Which school?” I tested with a mouthful.

“Saint Emmanuel.”

Saint Emmanuel was the last private school my brother had attended before being shipped off to live with his uncle. “That’s one of the most expensive schools in the eastern United States.”

Cameron’s stare bore into me. “What shocks you more—the fact that I went to a private school, or that I went to school at all?”

“Neither,” I told him. “I just didn’t peg you for the snooty type.”

His smile returned. “I’m not. What’s your problem with rich people anyway?”

This was obviously another stall tactic—even if it wasn’t, I wasn’t going there. “So you met my brother at Saint Emmanuel’s, and he beat you up. Why?”

“Bill had decided that he was going start selling to the kids at school. One day, he caught me selling on what he thought was his turf, so he beat me up to teach me a lesson. I was just a kid back then,” he clarified, “and I thought for sure that Spider was going to kill him for giving me a black eye —”

“How long have you known Spider?” I interrupted.

“A long time,” he replied. He hesitated before he added, “We were roommates in juvi ... Spider had come up with the same plan as your brother a couple of years before.”

“You were in juvenile detention?”

“Yeah, for a little while.” His face slightly flushed, and he hurriedly continued, “By the time your brother came along, Spider and I already had the school as our turf and had spent a lot of time building business with the rich kids—”

“What were you selling, exactly?” I asked.

Cameron sighed. “Emmy, the only way I’m going to tell you this is if it’s is a one-way conversation. That means no more questions.” He waited for my acknowledgement, so I nodded and bolted the imaginary lock on my lips. It hadn’t escaped me that he had called me Emmy, or that I really liked it when he had.

“Bill’s customers were actually my customers. And my customers were a paranoid bunch of kids who were always looking over their shoulder, afraid that people would know their dirty little secrets, embarrass their families. They never bought from anyone they didn’t know, or didn’t trust, even a persuasive young blood like your brother.” I smiled, picturing my big-headed brother. This was the world Bill and I knew too well—the hiding, the lying, the sham.

“When Bill finally figured out why he wasn’t getting any business, he decided that he was going to become my partner. At first, I told him to get lost.” Cameron grinned wider. “But, when he told me about his new plan, it made a lot of sense. So, I finally convinced Spider—which wasn’t easy—and your brother, Spider, and I became business partners. Spider kept the product coming in, I kept the school kids well supplied, Bill expanded the business to the parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, et cetera.” He paused to take another bite. “You know, Bill had a way of making people feel like they were untouchable. Spider said it was the smell of money that was ingrained

in his skin. Whatever it was, your brother was a great salesman, and, for a while, with our customers' deep pockets, we had so much business that we had a hard time keeping up."

"But your brother had one major weakness: women—the kind that came with a lot of baggage. He always had to come to some girl's rescue." Cameron smiled mischievously at me, and I took great care in red-coating the second half of my sandwich, willing my face to stay its normal pallor.

"Seemed like he had a different girl hanging off his arm every other week. But once the excitement was over and he decided that he was done saving them, he'd move on to the next train wreck, leaving a bigger wreck behind. He got caught up with this one chick ... girl ..." He corrected himself for my benefit. "... whose boyfriend liked to use her as a punching bag. Bill came to her rescue and beat up the boyfriend."

"Turned out that the boyfriend wasn't just one of my regular customers, he was also the dean's nephew. Just a string of bad luck," he said, shaking his head. "Bill's dorm room was searched, and they found the stash that was hidden under the floorboards. Bill got arrested and kicked out of school." I remembered this. Bill had been sent home in a police cruiser. Of course, no charges were ever laid—the Sheppards were too well connected for something like that to ever happen. But not even the Sheppard name could stop the gossiping. Bill had to be sent to live with a distant relative, cut off from the family, for the family name's sake.

Cameron held my gaze. "You know, I had bigger stashes in my room, so Bill could have used me as a scapegoat to save himself. But he never did.

"Spider and I kept the business going after your brother got kicked out. We kept it lower key though, selling only to the students I knew. When I finished high school, your brother came to find me. He had whopping plans to expand the business, beyond rich kids and their families, and needed a partner. I brought Spider in, and we spent the next couple of years getting new suppliers and building more contacts. Your brother had big dreams, and the business kept growing, so much so that we had trouble keeping track of all the money that came in. So Spider brought Carly in, and soon we had the competition working for us. No one made a move unless your brother approved it."

Cameron paused. The smile left his face, replaced by darkness. "When you're on top like that, things get a lot more ... complicated," he told me

carefully. “Everywhere you look, there’s someone who wants to take you down so that he can get a piece of your action. You start having to look over your shoulder all the time because your friends can become your enemies overnight. Just trying to keep yourself ...” He looked away. “... trying to keep the people you love alive becomes a twenty-four hour job. It’s exhausting.

“And your brother had started to ... change. He became ...” He was trying to find the right word and settled on, “... jittery. He started keeping secrets, disappearing from Spider, Carly, and me.” Cameron took a breath here. “Things started to really fall apart when our clients and the other partners noticed the change and second-guessed his decisions. Before we knew what was really going on, Bill was dead.”

We took our last few bites in silence.

Cameron then pulled his eyes back up and surveyed my face. “To answer your question, yes, I knew your brother very well, and yes, I knew him well enough to know who you are, Emmy. Your brother was my best friend, and he talked about you all the time.” He stopped and waited anxiously.

“Why didn’t you tell me before now? Why did you say that you were never going to tell me about my brother?”

He pressed his lips together. “Because your brother wouldn’t have wanted you to know.”

“How would you know what was going through his mind?”

“He would have told you, wouldn’t he?” he pointed out.

“Maybe he just ran out of time.”

“Believe me, Emmy,” he insisted darkly, “Bill wouldn’t want you to know this much about his life.” Cameron picked up our empty plates and glasses and walked them back to the kitchen.

“Okay ...” I decided to let it go and moved on. “Why are you telling me this now?”

He came back from the kitchen and leaned against the counter, searching my face again. “I had no other choice. I know how close you and Bill were and that it was difficult for you when he died.” He forced a smile. “I also know that you wouldn’t let up until you heard the truth. I wanted you to hear it from me ... and to stop harassing my kid brother for information that he doesn’t have. He had no idea who Bill was or who you were. You’re making it very hard on me to keep the kid away from all that stuff.”

“Rocco wants to be part of all that stuff,” I reminded him.

“That’s not up to him.” He was adamant about this. I wouldn’t press him on that.

“Spider and Carly—they knew who I was, though.”

“Yes. They did,” he confessed quickly. He came to take the seat next to me. I could feel the heat off his arm. I wondered if he did this on purpose, to confound me.

“I have to leave for a little while,” he told me quietly. “I know that you have a lot of questions, but I meant what I said: the less you know, the safer you are.” He smiled his crooked smile. “Please don’t start any more hunger strikes while I’m gone. Rocco will not feed you, and from the smells that come out of his room I don’t think that he would even notice the smell of a decomposing body.”

His brown eyes were fixed on mine. I wanted to touch him, just a little bit to see if he was real, but I just yawned a long, boorish yawn. He chuckled and he reached out to gently squeeze my shoulder. My heart thudded—he was very real. “It’s late. You need to go to bed.”

I squinted toward the clock in the living room. Though my eyes were burning and my neck felt like it was holding up a bowling ball, I didn’t want to go to bed.

“When will you be back?” I asked, stupidly yawning again.

“I don’t know,” he told me. “Could be a couple days, could be a week. It depends on how things progress. I have a lot of catching up to do.” He winked at me, “I have to finish the business that was interrupted last time I was in the city.”

This time my yawn hit my eyes and made them tear up. This made him chuckle. “Go to bed, Emmy. I promise we’ll talk when I get back.”

He got up and hesitated before extending his hand to help me up. I took it—without comment this time. His hand was warm and it awakened something.

After he had led me to his bedroom door and after there was an awkward pause between us, he turned on his heels and started to walk away.

“What made you think that Daniel was my son?” he asked as I was grabbing the door handle.

I shrugged shyly. “Why else would you be paying Frances?”

Cameron considered this for a moment. “He’s not mine,” he told me, and with my heart still hotly pounding, I closed the bedroom door and pushed Meatball over before crashing into bed, still fully clothed.

There was overwhelming desolation. I had sensed it as soon as my eyes had fluttered open; even before I had noticed the string of light that was poking through the curtain borders and before Meatball started whining at the door to be let out of our cave. Whatever place Cameron had come to occupy inside of me was now being wrenched by distance. Weirdly, I felt him far away, and the only way I could explain this to myself was that he had quickly become the only true tie I had left to my brother. It was the closest I had ever come to knowing about my brother’s other life and I was starved for more. The fact that Bill had been involved in something most likely highly illegal wasn’t all that surprising to me—I was even a little proud of this. How entrenched he had been in these extracurricular activities and what part Cameron had played and might still have been playing in these endeavors, I didn’t know. Part of me wondered if the whole truth—and I was starting to have an idea what that truth might look like—would even perturb me, change how I felt.

My sixth sense was validated when I went outside to let Meatball get to his business and saw that Cameron’s car was gone.

Rocco and Griff were on the front stoop, so I held back the deep sigh that was inflating my chest and resigned to pinching my lips together.

“Ginger!” Griff exclaimed through a cloud of his cigarette smoke. “Where have you been hiding, love?”

The place looked abandoned. The vans and cars were all gone, and there were just a few guards left marching about the property line.

I smiled meekly at Griff while Rocco watched poor Meatball dash for the first patch of green he could find. “What’s Meatball doing here? He should be with the chief.”

I could feel my cheeks picking up color. “I guess he forgot to bring him,” I said, feeling guilty for having forgotten to let him out at a decent time.

“Doubt it,” Rocco muttered. He coughed out smoke signals, his lungs refusing to inhale the toxins from the cigarette he was trying to smoke. He quickly gave up the habit and put it out with barely a puff’s worth gone

from it. Griff had already finished his and snuffed it out with his sneaker. He kept his twinkling eyes on me.

“Is everyone gone?” I asked, changing the subject and holding on to a miniscule glimmer of hope that my intuition was flawed.

“Yep,” Rocco confirmed gloomily. “Everyone is gone.”

The sun was blazing. I was cold still. The melancholy had followed me outside and engulfed Rocco too. Griff, who was cheery enough for the both of us, put his hand on Rocco’s head and shook it about to mess up Rocco’s already messy hair. “Aw, cheer up, buddy. You’ll get your chance to run with the big boys soon enough.”

Rocco shoved Griff’s hand away and stared dejectedly ahead.

Griff chuckled. “I don’t know why you want to leave so bad, Kid. This place is great when they’re not here to boss us around.”

“It’s boring here, and I’m not a damn babysitter,” Rocco sulked.

I imagined that he was referring to me as the baby he had to sit for. I didn’t take it personally.

“I can do a lot more than this, but they won’t let me,” Rocco said.

“Tell you what, Kid,” Griff offered, his eyes narrowing, “I’ll teach you how to fight, toughen you up a bit. And I’ll talk to Tiny when he gets back. Maybe he’ll let you tag along with them next time they go out.”

Rocco’s face lit up. “Really? You’ll teach me some stuff? You think they’ll let me go with them?”

“Sure thing.” Griff got up, using his rifle as a stretch bar over his head. He then swung the gun strap over his shoulder and sighed. “I better get back to my spot before another fly escapes through the tree line.” There was a wink at my expense and he walked away.

Rocco went into the house, and I sat on the stoop to soak in some warmth. Griff hadn’t taken two steps before I heard the crush of the gravel stop. “What are you up to today?” he asked me.

I opened my eyes and shrugged in response. My options were looking pretty bleak.

Griff had a mischievous smile. “Wanna help me play hooky?”

I couldn’t help but smile back.

He strolled back and grabbed my hand, pulling me up like a string puppet.

“Won’t you get in trouble if you don’t go back to work?” I asked as we made our way down the driveway.

Griff exaggeratingly scanned the landscape around us. “Tiny’s gone. Spider’s gone. There’s no one here to tell me what to do.”

This made me laugh. “Couldn’t they just call Tiny to get you in trouble?” I observed, my eyes on the other guards who were glowering in our direction.

“Have you seen any phones around here? Because I haven’t. All of our stuff like our cell phones were confiscated before we got here.”

“What if something happens, like someone gets hurt, or there’s some kind of emergency?” I was also assuming that 911 was an option in the middle of nowhere.

“Look at the guys with the big guns,” he said, pointing at one of the guards. “Do you think anyone else can just waltz in here? If someone gets hurt here, they stay hurt ... or they disappear.”

I could feel the blood draining from my face.

“Don’t worry,” he said forcing a smile. “I won’t let anything happen to you.” Griff put his arm around my shoulders and squeezed me in a one-armed crushing hug.

We kept walking down the driveway until we reached the tree line where the driveway became the gravel road that continued into the forest—the same road that Rocco and I had driven through when we first got to the farm. There were two burly men with machine guns standing on each side of the perimeter. They looked like twins, wearing identical black T-shirts and jeans and mirrored sunglasses.

As we attempted to walk past them, both men swiftly approached us and blocked our way.

“The girl doesn’t leave the property,” said the bigger of the two men.

“C’mon, man! We’re not going far. I won’t let anything happen to her. I’ve got my gun if something happens,” said Griff.

“Sorry, Griff. Chief’s orders. The girl stays here.”

“No one’s around. I won’t tell anyone if you don’t.” Griff was thickly laying down the charm.

The man’s tone became harsh. “Listen, man, if you don’t want to follow rules and mess with the girl after you were told not to, that’s your funeral. But I ain’t gonna get shot for you. Now, you can turn around and we’ll

forget all about this, or you can keep going and I will make this your funeral.”

I held my breath as Griff stood facing the two men in a standoff while he considered his next move. I felt like a dwarf among giants.

He turned back to me, slightly smiling. “I guess we’re not gonna get anywhere here.” He hooked my arm around his and led me away.

We walked along the property line, passing armed guards every once in a while. None spoke to either Griff or me. Griff remained silent, sulking. When I was sure we were out of earshot from any of the guards, I asked, “Who ordered you to not mess with me?”

“Spider, who else?” he said.

I couldn’t imagine why Spider would care who I hung out with. “Why?”

“Who knows why these thugs do anything. I don’t think they know themselves half the time.”

I glanced around. “What’s out there? I mean, we’re in the middle of nowhere. What could be so dangerous out on the road that we can’t take a walk?”

Griff cackled. “You’re right, there’s nothing out there. It’s not so much them wanting to prevent you from getting hurt out there. It’s more about them wanting to keep you in here.”

“Why?” I asked again.

“Beats me,” Griff shrugged. “One thing I do know though, eventually everything leads to money for them. So whatever their reasons for keeping you here alive it probably has something to do with money.”

A shiver went down the back of my legs.

“Look around you, Ginger,” he said. “The big house in the middle of nowhere, the brutes with the guns. This isn’t a vacation, and these guys are definitely not tour guides. They’re crooks. All of them. Except for the kid, maybe—I think that Kid’s too young to understand, but he’ll eventually become like the rest of them. He has no chance of ever getting out.” A light seemed to go off in Griff’s head. “C’mon. I have to show you something.”

We quickened our walk to an almost jog and made our way back up the driveway. We passed the front of the house and followed the driveway down, going the opposite direction to where the driveway bent to the right. As we neared a bunch of bushes, I found that the driveway kept going

through the trees and down a small hill. At the bottom, there was a large garage with another guard pacing back and forth by the tree line.

“What’s this?” I asked as we approached.

“This is where the no-rankers sleep.” He was proud of this.

We walked through the side door and into the garage.

The garage was more like a showroom. Parked side by side was an array of cars. I had no idea what kind of cars they were, but they looked really shiny. As we walked past each car, Griff rhymed off with passion the various car brands and explained in great detail each car’s particularities; make, model, horsepower, torque, engine. It was all beyond my understanding, but it sounded good.

I was told that the car parked nearest to the door was a silver Ferrari; it gleamed under the fluorescent lights that hung above it. Next to it was a lime green Lamborghini, followed by a red Porsche, a burgundy Rolls-Royce, a black Aston Martin and a canary yellow Maserati—a rainbow of expensive cars.

In some ways, Griff reminded me of my brother. Bill had also been a car aficionado. As a teenager, the walls of his bedroom had been plastered with pictures of cars that he had ripped from magazines. Of course, he also had pictures of half-naked women—though these women were usually straddling a car.

We reached the end of the showroom and walked through a doorway. Hanging off nails on the wall were masses of vanity plates from all states and even a few from Canada and Mexico.

“This is what I mean. These guys are real good at hiding, and I’d venture a bet that none of those cars were bought off a car lot,” Griff said.

Something hanging off the wall caught my attention. I moved in closer.

Stuffed in a clear plastic bag that hung off one of the nails were hundreds of driver identity cards. I was staggered. I immediately recognized the grinning face that was on the ID that was on top of the stack. It was Bill’s face, though the ID indicated that the man in the picture was ‘Buzz Killington’ from Arkansas. I pulled the bag off the nail and unzipped it. There were more drivers’ licenses that had my brother’s face. I also found cards from other states and countries with Cameron, Spider, and Carly’s pictures on them. Like my brother’s cards, they had different names attached to the faces.

I pulled one of Bill's cards out of the bag and struggled to swallow.

There were few photos of my brother. The last picture I had seen was one taken when he was fourteen years old; one of those fake school pictures—awkward smile, neatly gelled hair, green and yellow cardigan worn only once for five seconds. This picture was stacked with the rest of the family stuff that my father strategically kept on one shelf in his office behind his desk—the clients could see the pretense of a family man, but my father's back was turned away from the shelf.

The worst thing about this was that I couldn't remember what Bill looked like as a grownup. In my mind he had been forever fourteen. Now I had a picture of my brother ... as a man. He looked more tired as an adult, but at least he hadn't lost his curly blond locks.

Griff looked over my shoulder at the ID in my hands. "I wonder who that is? I haven't seen him around here." He stepped away and added in passing, "A thug like the rest of them, I'm sure."

I should have, could have, defended my brother, but there was a water balloon in my throat threatening to explode at any second. And deep down, I knew that Griff was probably right.

Griff made his way to the back of the room and disappeared behind another wall where a stairwell led to a second story. I stuffed Bill's—or rather Buzz Killington's—driver's license in my pocket, put the plastic bag back on the nail, and hurried after Griff, who had already climbed up the stairs and waited for me at the top on the second story. As I climbed up to meet him, he smiled and, with a finger to his lips, motioned me to be quiet.

The second story was one big open space, covering the whole length of the garage. The space was dim, with curtains of black garbage bags and bedsheets covering up the six-foot windows that flanked both of the elongated sides of the floor space. About a dozen cots were lined up in rows, one row on each side of the room. Four of the cots were occupied by sleeping men, one of whom I recognized as a night guard. The sound of snoring and heavy breathing eerily echoed off the walls.

We tiptoed over to one of the cots in the middle of the room.

"This one is mine," he whispered, color appearing on his cheeks.

Griff had things strewn everywhere under and around his cot. I sat on the empty cot that was next to Griff's bed while he rummaged under his bed, and I noticed a box of magazines on the floor. The one at the top was called

Cage Fighters Weekly with a caption in large red letters that read, “Griffin ‘the Grappler’ Conan: Best Pound-for-Pound Fighter in the World?” Under the caption was a picture of a black-eyed, bruise-faced, threatening-looking Griff, shot from the waist up. He had his gloved fists up and muscles seemed to bulge out of every part of his body, including his neck, which looked like it was the size of parking meter. One by one I picked up the other magazines that were stacked under it, most of which had Griff pictured on the front, in similar stances as the first magazine, or with him holding golden belts.

Griff finally reappeared from under his bed, pulling out fighting gloves similar to the ones that he had been pictured with on the covers.

“This is you,” I murmured, holding one of the magazines up. Griff sat next to me on the bed and peered at the magazine in my hands.

“Yeah. It was me,” he said somberly. “It’ll be me again once I get back on my feet.”

“Don’t you need to be out there if you want to get back on your feet?”

Griff pressed his lips together. “There are a bunch of dodgy people who are waiting for me to pay them. I have to pay off all the bad debt before I can do anything else—otherwise I’ll turn up dead before I ever get a chance to hit the gym.”

“Don’t fighters make a lot of money, especially those who win?” I asked, tapping on the cover of the magazine where he was holding up a title belt.

“They do and I definitely did,” he told me. “But I also made a lot of stupid mistakes while I was on top. I got too used to people serving me wherever I went. You should have seen it, Ginger. I could walk into any hotel, and they’d put me and my buddies up in the executive suite right away. Gambling. Unlimited booze. Chicks. Whatever I asked for. I thought that I could get away with anything and that the money would never run out. That was true, for a while,” he said, his eyes distant. “I was spending more time partying and forgot all about fighting ... especially training for fights. I started showing up in the ring unfit and hung over. Then I started borrowing money to keep up with the lifestyle. I lost all of it.”

He took the magazine from my hands, throwing it on top of the others and kicking the box back under the bed. He lifted his head and strained a smile. “Working for these crooks will get me the money I need to pay off

what I owe. At least no one can come find me here, and I can stay alive long enough to get the dough.”

We got up and tiptoed past the sleeping guards, making our way back downstairs and outside in the bright sunlight. We walked up to the house and into the kitchen. Rocco was sitting at the table, halfway through a loaf of bread and jar of peanut butter. I fixed some lunch for Griff and me while Griff handed the black gloves that he had dug out from under his bed over to a thrilled Rocco. Rocco tried the gloves on, but they were one size too big.

“You’ll grow into them,” reassured Griff.

It wasn’t so bad at first. I spent my time with Rocco and Griff. We moved from the gym to the pool to the kitchen to the TV. I watched from the sidelines while Griff taught Rocco how to fight and wrestle. Griff would even let Rocco practice his punches on Griff’s face. Griff chuckled every time Rocco’s fist connected with his face, and I hid my face in my hands.

“Iron jaw,” he told Rocco and me, slapping his own cheek. “That’s how I was able to keep my title so long. I let ’em hit me till they get too tired or cocky. When they start making mistakes, I attack and finish them off.”

Rocco was a captive audience to Griff’s fighting tales.

One afternoon, we even started up a game of football with some of the other guards. Griff found ways to play on the position opposite from mine so that he could tackle me; though I was able to outrun him and most of the other guys. Rocco found this hilarious.

“You don’t run like a girl,” he praised. It was one of the nicest things anyone had ever told me.

I was being well entertained, and it worked ... for a short while. But I wasn’t sleeping. I spent my nights rolling around in bed, annoying Meatball or wandering aimlessly in Cameron’s room, looking out the windows at the dark nights or looking over my brother’s fake ID, which I had leaned against my ballerina lamp.

Every day I waited, anxiously, and the more time that passed, the more I started withdrawing from Griff and Rocco and everyone else. I didn’t want to be entertained anymore. I started to go off by myself, trying to find a small space where I could be alone; that was what I was doing when Rocco found me in the library curled up with a book. He lumbered in with a bag of Cheetos and plopped himself on the opposite couch. We sat in silence while

he crinkled the bag and crunched away. He got up, picked up a book, and leafed through it, leaving orange fingerprints behind. He threw it next to him, put his feet on the coffee table, sighed, took them back down, repeatedly threw a pillow up in the air and caught it—more orange fingerprints.

Then all the noise stopped. When I glanced over my book, he was looking at me. “What’s going on between you and my brother?” he asked me.

Heat rose up my neck. “Nothing,” I stammered, caught off guard. “Why do you ask?”

“I have my reasons ... and you look like you’re about to slit your wrists,” he observed.

“Where’s Griff?” I asked, looking for a change of subject.

He shrugged. “Dunno. Still sleeping I guess.”

I wasn’t surprised. Griff had become a man of leisure, taking well to life at the farm without the bosses.

“He’s too old for you,” Rocco opined.

“Who? Griff?” Griff had also taken to following me around, which made my quest to be alone very difficult.

“No. My brother.”

“Cameron’s not too old for me!” I half-shouted, too quickly. I tried to recover by adding, “Isn’t he only twenty-six?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, and how old are you?”

Eighteen. No, nineteen. When was my birthday again? I had to trace back a few months to the day I had gotten a birthday card in the mail, the exact day of my birthday—someone had planned it well. The card was signed “Love, Mom and Dad,” in Maria’s handwriting, and had a check stuffed in it. The check had been endorsed by my father—that was something, right? Except that the numbers were in Maria’s handwriting again—the hearts over the *i*’s gave her away. Maria had been far too generous with the zeros after the double digits. It didn’t matter in the end. I tore the check up and threw it away. “Nineteen,” I settled.

“Oh.” Rocco looked deflated.

“How old are you?”

He seemed to think about this. “Eighteen.”

“What year were you born?”

He was stalled and when he couldn't respond fast enough, "Fine. I'm sixteen."

I couldn't tell if this was true or not. It didn't really matter. "Shouldn't you be in school right now?" I sounded like someone's mother. Not like mine, though.

Rocco shrugged. "I can't go back."

"Why not?"

"I got in a fight because of a girl."

This was starting to sound familiar. "I thought you couldn't fight?"

"I didn't win," he told me. "I won't go back until I know I can beat the other guy, one way or another."

I suddenly understood why Rocco was bent on growing up so fast. "What happened to the girl?"

He chuckled slightly. "She felt sorry for me, so she stuck around for a while."

"That was nice of her."

He shook his head. "Not really—she hooked up with my mom's boyfriend. They stole our TV before they left."

I couldn't hide my shock. He chuckled again. "I couldn't wait to get rid of my mom's boyfriend. I just didn't think I would lose the TV too."

We slipped back into silence. I tried to go back to my book. There was another long exhalation. "What'chu reading?"

I put my book down. "Philosophy." I had found a whole shelf dedicated to ancient philosophers—worn books, many of which I had already read in my first-year philosophy class.

"What's that?"

"Philosophy? Aristotle. Plato. Descartes. Rousseau. Ethics. I think, therefore I am."

There was a blank look on his face.

"It's the rational investigation of existence, truth, beliefs, all that stuff."

He looked even more confused.

"It's supposed to help you understand why we are the way we are ... why we do the things we do ... why we think the way we think."

"Who's we?"

"Humans."

"Oh," he said and went back to his bag of Cheetos.

More days passed. Some days it seemed like tending to Meatball's needs was the only reason I ever left Cameron's room. Other days, I would just lounge around the house in my pajamas all day. The insomnia was getting to me.

In the middle of the night, I heard my door squeak open, and then it proceeded to slowly squeak shut again. I opened my eyes to see a tall figure in the moonlight that was leaving the room and closing the door behind him.

Chapter Ten: About Taking Risks

“Cameron?” I was so confused, and I was so tired. I was sure my eyes were playing tricks on me, making me see what I wanted to see most.

After a dazed second, I turned the switch of my ballerina and confirmed the apparition.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” he whispered.

“I wasn’t sleeping,” I confessed.

A rush of joy—and relief—filled me. I was suddenly wide awake and energized, but I kept my composure, as far as I knew.

Cameron stood on the threshold, debating. When he made up his mind, he advanced to my bedside. He looked like he had been dragged to hell and back. His clothes were crumpled and he had dark circles under his eyes; he was his other, older self.

We stared at each other for an awkward while. I gazed up, he gazed down. His lips were pressed together tightly, and his face was hard, unreadable.

It upset me to see him like that. Whatever he found in my face displeased him too.

“You haven’t been sleeping,” he accused.

I shrugged innocently and wiped my hair away from my face. A speckle of warmth reached his eyes.

He brought his hands to his face and rubbed it with exhaustion. When he reappeared, the warmth had spread to the top of his cheeks, and his shoulders had seemed to relax a bit, like he was slowly defrosting. I exhaled.

“Is everyone back?” I asked him, listening for the shuffles and banging of doors.

The house was dead quiet.

“No. I came back early,” he admitted. “It’s just me.” He gave me a tired smile. The square of his jaw and his dark eyes stood out under the shaded light of my ballerina.

A radiant smile escaped me before I had time to measure it and scale it down to normal, then I took a gamble ... and scooted over so that he could sit down.

Fatigued, he took me up on my offer without hesitation. Embarrassed silence fell upon us.

My head was propped up on my elbow, my eyes watching him; Cameron sat with his back to me, his head veering from one side of the room to the next, resting with interest on the bedside table. When he reached over, I followed his movement. My gaze reached my brother’s ID card before his hand did.

It was too late to try to hide it, so I had to anxiously await his reaction. I was expecting to get in trouble for snooping around.

He glanced over the picture, chuckled, and shook his head as if he remembered some private joke. I exhaled again.

“I see you kept yourself busy while I was gone.” His voice was calm. He put the card back where he had found it and turned to me.

“You were gone a long time,” I reminded him.

“Yeah. Things took longer than I thought they would.”

My arm was too tired to hold up my head. I grabbed the pillow from the other side of the bed and folded it under my head. “What kind of things?”

“Just business stuff,” he said with a yawn.

“Like what?”

“Inventory, orders, negotiating prices ...” He sighed. “You know ... normal business stuff.”

“I know that whatever stuff you’re involved in, there’s nothing normal about it,” I blurted. “I mean, I know that your *business*,” I amended with emphasis, “involves some or maybe a lot of illegal stuff.” It didn’t sound any better the second time around.

“Oh?” He arched his eyebrows and took interest. “How do you know this?”

In my mind, I replayed what Griff had noted to me, and tried to make it sound like it was something I would have come up with all on my own. “I’m not blind. I see the armed men walking around.”

“That just proves that I’m taking every measure possible to keep everyone safe.”

“From what? Lions? Tigers?”

“... and bears,” he finished for me.

“What about your lineup of fancy cars in the garage?” I probed. “I imagine that most of those cars were probably stolen.” Again, this was Griff talking through me.

“Actually, none of those cars are mine.” He smiled faintly but his eyes were tensed.

“Whose are they then?”

He seemed to consider this. “Well, I guess they’re your cars, now.”

“Mine?” Maybe I had misheard.

“As next of kin,” he confirmed. “They used to belong to your brother. They’re all yours now.” He smirked and added coldly, “Bill bought those cash, special order. Nothing here is stolen.”

I flushed, realizing that my insinuation had insulted him, more than he was letting on. “So, you’re saying that you’re not involved in any illegitimate business.”

His face became somber. “No, that’s not what I’m saying.”

“You deal with things like drugs, guns—” I prompted.

“Emmy,” he implored before I could get too carried away, “please don’t take offense. But I really don’t want to talk about that with you.” His eyes locked with mine, begging.

“Okay,” I agreed gently. I wasn’t offended. I was just happy that he had put a limit on that, and not everything all together. “How does one get into that ... profession?”

I was treading lightly, unclear as to what was off limits.

He closed his eyes and rolled his neck and shoulders. “You mean, why didn’t I become a lawyer, or a doctor?”

“Or an astronaut, or a philosopher,” I assisted.

His russet eyes flashed to me. “Philosopher?”

I bit my lip and looked away. “For example.”

“Is philosophy even a profession?”

I frowned and glared.

“A lot of important people have made philosophy their life’s work.”

“Yeah, like ten thousand years ago,” he chuckled, then stopped. “Aren’t you pre-law?”

I didn’t remember telling him that, though I tended to be too self-conscious around him to remember anything I told him.

“It was just an example,” I insisted.

“There isn’t much money in that,” he told me in a protective kind of way.

“Are you going to answer my question?” I fumed.

“Don’t philosophers spend their days sitting around and thinking about life while they starve to death?”

I sighed with annoyance, waiting for the prolonged rant to be over. I couldn’t expect him to understand. I was pre-law because it was the only full scholarship I could get at Callister U. I didn’t mind my law classes, my grades were good, but my father was a lawyer, and so was his father before him, and his father’s father before that. One way or another, I would be forced to follow in the Sheppard path of rectitude. That didn’t mean I had to like it.

Cameron kicked off his shoes, lifted his legs on the bed and slid next to me. He laid his head on the pillow, laced his hands behind his head and gazed at the ceiling. “Philosopher,” he mused to himself with a chuckle.

His closeness was enough for me to forget my aggravation. I took a deep breath, his scent becoming familiar to me. “Did you pick your profession solely based on money?”

This brought him back to reality. “Yeah. I did.” His face was bleak.

Oh. I blushed.

“Do you like what you do?”

“What do you think?”

I wasn’t sure what I was thinking but I was thrilled that he was taking part in the interrogation. “Well, I suppose you make a lot of money doing it.”

“Money isn’t everything.”

He was full of contradictions—I was confused. “I thought you said you chose to do this for the money?”

“I said I did,” he repeated. “I think you and I both know that I have more money than I know what to do with. If it were still only about money, I would have quit a long time ago.”

“So why don’t you just stop doing it then? Take your money and get out?”

He hesitated and looked at me with worry.

I took a breath.

“I’m just curious,” I whispered.

“I know.”

He sighed and stared at the ceiling. “I can’t just run away from it. Once you’re in, you’re in it for life. If you try to leave, people become suspicious. They think that you’re either talking to the cops or you’re changing your affiliation.”

“Who cares what people think?”

“People who talk, who leave, get hunted down and killed.”

I tried as best I could to hide the shudder that was fermenting at the nape of my neck.

Cameron yawned and swept his hand over his face again. I wondered if his weariness made him more tolerant of my questions, made him answer them without editing or sugar-coating. I felt like I was taking advantage of him—a small tinge of guilt lingered—but my thirst for information overpowered.

“Why don’t you just run away? You have enough money to hide yourself, protect yourself, don’t you?”

“Because they won’t just kill you. They’ll kill your family, your friends, everyone you know ... then they’ll kill you. There’s no such thing as running away.”

I gulped. “Who are *they*?”

“The people I work with.” He turned his head and looked at me pleadingly. “Change of subject?”

I let it go out of guilt but also out of relief to leave this line of questioning. Even I had to admit that it was too much information—more than I could swallow.

I took a second and continued the interview, “Tell me about your family.”

He smiled but his eyes were cautious. “What do you want to know?”

Everything. “For starters, what does your mother do for a living?”

“She drinks,” he answered promptly.

Okay. “What about your dad?”

He cringed and stalled. “I don’t like to talk about my father.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s ... not a very nice person,” he said, struggling.

“Neither are my parents,” I said.

“It’s not the same thing. My father’s a con artist.”

“Can you tell me about him?” I murmured. “Please?”

He closed his eyes. “When I lived with my mom, my dad would come strolling in every couple months with his expensive suits and big cars, while my mom and I lived in dumps. The small amount of cash my dad did give to my mom she drank away. When I went to live with my dad, I thought that things were finally going to get better. But my dad was ... he wasn’t who I thought he was. His money was not his own. He hung out with rich people, pretended he had money so that he could swindle old ladies out of their money ...”

His tired voice had started trailing.

“He must have had some money to put you through private school,” I pressed for more.

“When I first came to live with him, he didn’t know what to do with me. Eventually though, he figured out that he could use me too. He put me in that private school and showed up once in a while with some woman who’d have money but no husband. Then he’d put on the rich, father-of-the-year act. It worked like a charm; they trusted him ... he stole all their lifesavings and disappeared. The payments to the school would stop after that.”

His voice was so faded, I could barely hear him. “What happened then?”

“The school sent me to live in a group home.”

“Wow.” This made me angry.

Cameron plunged his head deeper into the pillow. “He always came back sooner or later, usually when he was getting low on cash. He’d put me back in school so that he could start the show all over again. When I got older, the cops assumed that I was his partner in crime, ’cause he kept coming back to find me, and I was the only one the women could identify. I turned fourteen, my dad disappeared again, and I got thrown in juvi when I couldn’t tell the cops where he was hiding. That’s when I met Spider, and we cooked up a plan to sell drugs to the rich kids I went to school with. Within a month of getting back from juvi, I was making my own payments to the school and never had to depend on my dad’s stolen money again.”

“What happened to your dad?”

“I don’t know. He came back once with some woman. I didn’t want to be associated with him and get thrown back into juvi. I told him to stay away; I never saw him again after that.”

His breathing had become slower, deeper. I took another second.

“Cameron?” I called out softly.

“Hmm ... ?”

“Was my brother happy?”

He considered this. “Most days ...”

I held my breath.

“Do you think he knew he was going to die?”

There was a long pause.

“Cameron?”

“ ... I really wish I knew, Emmy ...” he said with a long sigh.

After a minute, he was asleep.

He snored, just a little bit, like a subdued Darth Vader.

I carefully reached over him, feeling the heat that radiated from his skin, and clicked off the lamp. I lay there for a while, next to him, listening to his calm, even breaths, watching his chest rise and fall in the shadows. I was exhausted. Having him there, so close, was strangely peaceful, but it didn’t help me relax. I could feel every muscle in my body tiredly tingle. When half an hour had gone by, I started to wrestle with the sheets again. I was afraid of waking him.

I considered ... decided, listened vigilantly. When I was sure he was in a deep sleep, I extended my hand ... and very slowly slid it under his. I clasped our fingers. In an unconscious reflex, his hand squeezed mine. I inhaled and I exhaled, and finally, finally I fell asleep.

We were woken up in the morning by the commotion of incoming guards downstairs. I had awoken a few seconds before Cameron, carefully peeling my hand away from his before he realized what I had done. My hand suddenly felt cold, unnatural, like it was missing a finger.

The front door slammed shut.

Cameron shot out of bed like a bullet and stood, disoriented, panting, every muscle of his body tightly clenched, like body armor.

“It’s okay, Cameron,” I gasped. I was scared of him, for him.

He turned abruptly toward my voice. His face was ominous.

I smiled softly and waited for him to come back.

He kept his eyes on me. He blinked. His fists loosened. Then he sat on the edge of the bed, ran his fingers through his hair, and scratched his head, breathing with purpose. After a long second, he turned. A forced smile had crept across his face.

“Good morning.” My voice croaked a little. I swallowed the sadness of him away.

“Mornin’,” he answered gruffly. His cheeks flushed, and his hair went every which way. He was beautiful again.

I sighed with gratitude.

“I thought you said that you don’t sleep?”

“I don’t ... usually,” he replied with a sheepish smile.

The bedroom door was still ajar, the way Cameron had left it during the night. Meatball was already downstairs, likely taking on the routine of his food inspection duties.

Cameron and I stepped down the stairs together. Spider and Carly were walking in through the front door. Spider grimaced as soon as he saw us. Carly turned to him. “Told you he’d be here,” she muttered loud enough for us to hear.

Spider wasn’t laughing when he turned to Cameron. “Is there a reason why you weren’t answering your phone? You could’ve at least left us a note, man. We had no idea where you went.”

Cameron cleared his throat, looked like he was about to respond, peeked at me, and flushed a little more. Guards carrying boxes were lining up at the doorway, and being halted behind Spider and Carly, who were blocking their procession. Carly moved ahead to let them through. Spider followed her, ensuring to throw a glare at me before he disappeared through the kitchen.

Some of the guards’ gaze flashed toward the stairs in our direction as they walked through.

Cameron sparked a small discreet smile my way and ran down the rest of the stairs. He walked out the door, passing Griff on his way out.

“Hey, Ginger,” greeted a chipper Griff. He peered at me over the box of frozen dinners he was carrying. He paused at the door to take off his shoes, balancing the box at the same time. Cameron was walking off the front

stoop. His head momentarily spun toward Griff, but he kept walking to the awaiting vans.

Griff eyed me top to bottom. “Did you just get up?” he asked in passing and continued into the kitchen. I realized with mortification that I was still wearing my pajamas—my uncool Mickey Mouse flannel pajamas.

Back in Cameron’s room, I was walking on air, setting a new record for my morning routine. Then I bounced back down the stairs and into the kitchen where Rocco was busy putting the groceries away. Cameron, Carly, and Spider were sitting at the kitchen table, murmuring over paperwork. Cameron, who was also freshly showered and dressed, snuck a look as I walked into the kitchen. He grinned very quickly, and bent his head back over the documents in front of him before Spider and Carly ever noticed the momentary lapse of attention. I smiled to myself and helped Rocco put the groceries away, tucking them in whatever free space we could find.

I fixed myself a bowl of cereal, even if it was already past lunchtime. Not wanting to disturb the business meeting and feel Spider’s resentment, I strolled to the back deck, where I sat to eat breakfast alone.

The sky was gray. The air was still and muggy. A storm was brewing.

I watched the dark clouds billowing above, threatening rain for the day. Under them, the far-reaching forest was harshly calm, and a thin layer of fog draped the treetops. I closed my eyes and took a long-winded inhalation; the smell of the mossy dampness of the woods that surrounded me was a newfound reassurance, as if the blanket of greenery was keeping the storm from ever really reaching me. An uncanny reaction for a city girl, I thought.

When Cameron came to sit next to me, he put his feet on the table, and we watched the dark sky, while the clouds debated whether to burst or keep moving.

He was next to me, but he was far away.

I turned to glimpse him just as a drop splashed against his forehead.

“Why didn’t you listen to me?” he asked, his voice distant. He rolled his head and kept my eyes. “When I told you to stay away from the projects, why did you still come back?”

If his eyes hadn’t been locked with mine, if my brain worked when he was near me, if I was able to lie to him, I could have come up with a million plausible excuses. Except that I couldn’t lie to him, but I couldn’t tell him

the truth either. Was I even sure what the truth was, exactly? I broke the dazzle and practiced pulling on the thread that was unraveling from my shorts while my cheeks turned a deep shade of red.

When I looked up, Cameron had turned his attention back to the sky. He was far away again. My lack of response had been enough of an answer for him?

After a short while, steady droplets of rain started coming down.

Chapter Eleven: Fun and Games

Cameron had announced to me that he wanted to do something fun. We headed down the driveway, with Tiny straggling. Rain pelted down on us, and we had to pick up speed.

When we came to the bend in the driveway, something at the back of the property had caught my eye. Griff and Spider were standing near the tree line at Griff's usual spot. Spider's face and his shaking finger were very close to Griff's face. His chest was pumped, his face was beet red. His lips were moving rapidly, angrily. Griff had his back to me, with his head bent in submission.

While I was quickly taking all of these things into account, I hadn't noticed that my pace had slowed. Cameron had come back to get me.

"You don't have to wait for Tiny," he told me, grinning.

Tiny had caught up to us, panting. He glanced knowingly to the back of the property before catching my eye, but remained silent.

When we got to the garage, Cameron stood by with an even larger grin on his face.

Naïvely, I smiled back. "What?"

"Which one?" he asked, waving his hand back and forth along the lineup of cars like a game-show host.

The smile was washed from my face. I shook my head in disbelief. Was this Cameron's idea of "fun"?

Cameron nodded as if he heard my thoughts. "They're your cars. You should know how to drive them."

I'd only had my driver's license for a few months. Getting a driver's license was one of those Real World things that I had wanted to achieve. I celebrated my feat by buying a car from our landlord for a little less than two hundred dollars. It was a baby blue 1991 Buick Roadmaster station wagon, with wood-grained panel sides and a sunroof that was covered with

a garbage bag because it leaked when it rained. Sometimes I could even afford to put a little bit of gas in it. The car was made of real steel, which was crucial. The bent stop signs, the crushed garbage cans on my street testified to my driving abilities.

I remembered the recently added dents on my Buick and looked at the shiny, frail cars lined next to me. I imagined the kind of damage someone like me could do to them ... I lost my breath and leaned against one of the colored toys to steady myself.

“Ah!” Cameron said waking me from my nightmarish trance. “The Maserati! A bold choice.”

He smiled with approval and went to grab the keys from the back wall.

“Cameron, I can’t ... I have no idea how to drive ... this ... thing ...”

“It’s amazingly easy,” he reassured. “I’ll show you.”

Not even Cameron could reassure me at this point.

Cameron climbed into the driver’s seat. Tiny squeezed into the backseat, setting his handgun next to him. I grudgingly got into the passenger side. Cameron spent the next few minutes amused with my frustrated attempts at closing the trick door. When I gave up, crossing my arms and huffing like a five-year-old, he got back out of the car and closed the door for me.

My mood was darkening with the impending doom. This seemed to amuse Cameron even more. Tiny was in on it too. I was sure they were making faces when my head was turned to struggle with the stupid seatbelt. Cameron ended up leaning over me to help me with this too. While he pulled the strap over to my lap and our eyes locked briefly, I let my smile reach my eyes. His cheeks colored a bit; he looked down and then away and fumbled to get the strap secured as quickly as possible.

Driving out of the garage, Cameron looked at everything and anything that wasn’t in my general direction. At the end of the driveway, he decelerated just long enough for the soaking-wet armed guard to peer in and quickly step away. Within seconds, the car was racing at an incredible speed down the gravel road. I held on to the door handle and the middle console for dear life while Cameron explained over the rev of the motor how the gears worked. But I heard nothing. The trees on the side of the road were a big emerald blur, and I was seated so close to the ground, it was like sliding on a bobsled.

The rain was hitting the windshield hard. We raced through sharp curves, never slowing down.

Cameron was completely, frustratingly calm. And then he happened to look over at me. He slowed down a bit, and I was able to swallow again.

We had been driving for quite a while, at least fifteen miles, I thought. Though I wasn't sure, I didn't think that I had seen any other exits off the pebble road. I definitely had not seen any other houses. We were in the middle of nowhere.

When the gravel driveway turned onto the paved highway, Cameron spun the car around and stopped.

"Ready?"

"No," I mumbled, but he was already out of the car, making his way around to the passenger side. He opened the door and stood in the pouring rain. I scooted over to the driver's side, catching a glimpse of Tiny's reflection as I adjusted the rearview mirror. He was terrified ... so was I.

Even though Cameron coached me through, the car kept jerking forward, and then it would stall. Tiny's head also slammed into the seat in front of him every time the car came to a jolting stop. After a lengthy while, I was able to make the car move more than a few inches at a time, and before long, we were coasting along the muddied road.

The car did corner curves effortlessly. It was—almost—exhilarating. Tiny's knuckles had gone white, never loosening their grip on the door handle. Cameron seemed to be looking on proudly, enjoying the ride.

And then it all went very wrong.

I came to a deceptively deep puddle and got to a curve faster than I expected.

I turned the wheel, but nothing happened.

I braked hard, the car fishtailed.

Cameron was looking ahead, one hand on the dashboard, the other pushing me against my seat.

"Hold on ... we're gonna crash," he said evenly.

We all held our breath.

I touched the brake again as a reflex. The car did a full circle in the mud and slid, picking up speed in the process.

The last thing I remembered was Cameron ordering me to cover my face, which I did without thinking. Next came a loud bang, swiftly followed by

the screeching of wood against metal and shattering glass. The engine ticked. And then all was silent—just the sound of the rain against the hood, that sounded like our breathing in tandem.

“Em ... Are you hurt?” Cameron’s voice was hurried, finally.

“No,” I answered from behind my hands.

“Let’s see.” He tugged my hands away and turned my face to him. When my eyes flicked open, he was laughing. “You just crashed a three-hundred-thousand-dollar car!”

In the back, Tiny was giggling too, his large belly hoisting up and down. He was covered with shards of broken glass from the small back window that had been pierced by the branch of an evergreen. The car was on its side, half in the thread of a ditch, half in the woods. Outside my window, I saw a lot of mud. Nothing about this was funny, or “fun” to me.

After trying to push the car out, we all stood in the rain and watched the Maserati sink deeper into the mud. When realization set in, Tiny took out a short-wave radio and called for someone to come dig the car out. I recognized Spider’s sharp voice on the other end of the radio.

My mood had improved after the rain had ceased and Cameron and I were walking the rest of the way home. The road was flooded in parts, and my revered sneakers were gorged with mud.

At Cameron’s command, Tiny had stayed behind, watching uneasily as the boss left without armed defense.

Help had driven by us in the form of a black pickup truck, with Spider and four sodden guards who were grimly holding onto shovels in the back cab. After our bit of fun, Cameron was in an excellent mood. So when Spider’s passing glower hit me again, I decided to seize the moment.

“Spider doesn’t ... like me much,” I mused.

“He’s just being overprotective.”

I slightly raised my chin and scrunched my forehead. Next to Cameron, I looked like a munchkin. “Am I that much of a threat to you?”

He grimaced and looked at the road ahead. “More than you know,” he mumbled as he hopped over a puddle.

“I meant Carly, not me. Spider is trying to protect Carly.” He turned around, extending his hand to help me jump over the large puddle. I still missed, badly, and splashed both of us simultaneously.

“Why would I want to hurt Carly?”

“It’s not a matter of you wanting to hurt her. It’s who you remind her of every time she sees you.” Cameron had an intent look on his face, egging me to make the connection.

“My brother?”

“Bill and Carly used to date,” he explained.

“But I don’t look anything like him.” Another unfair twist of fate.

“Your head might not be blond,” he said, “but you’re very much like Bill.”

This made me smile, despite the hair comment. “How long did they date for?”

“A while ... longer than any of the girls he dated.” He waited until our eyes met. “Before Carly, Bill never let any girl stick around long enough for her to get to know him.”

Part of me wondered if this had been added for my benefit, or if Cameron was referring to himself ... or if I was reading more into it than there was. The other part of me was trying not to ogle: Cameron’s soaked T-shirt clung to him ... it was very hard not to ogle. I looked away and concentrated on getting out of the bog alive.

“When it came to Carly, Bill was different,” he said with difficulty. “He told her everything ... no matter how bad ... and there was lots of bad stuff ...”

I quickly frowned. “I’m sure it’s not as bad as you make it out to be, Cameron.”

He forced a smile. “You mean as bad as Bill made it out to be.”

I shrugged.

“He must have loved her very much,” I said, turning to him. “To feel like he could tell her everything without being afraid of what she might think. Takes a lot of guts and trust.”

He seemed to consider this while he surveyed my face. “Carly’s a tough cookie. She can handle a lot more than most girls.”

“How would he know if he never tried?”

“Before Carly came around, your brother had been with lots of girls, and he left a path of destruction behind him. Spider tried to warn Carly about his ... bad habits. She didn’t listen.” Cameron’s voice turned sharp. “Spider was right.”

The next thing that came out of my mouth I hoped with every fiber of my being that he would negate. “He cheated on her, didn’t he?”

“Yeah,” he confirmed solemnly. “Except that it was much worse than that.”

I couldn’t imagine what was worse than cheating on someone you loved and who loved you ... until Cameron told me, “He got the other girl pregnant.”

He was right: this was much worse.

“Who was she?” I demanded.

“The other woman?”

I nodded.

He gazed ahead. “You’ve already met her and her son. The kid is Bill’s spitting image.”

From a corner of my mind, I dredged up the picture I had of my brother as a child: blond, curly hair, sun-kissed skin, gray eyes. He had kept these traits as an adult ... and I had seen these same traits very recently.

“Daniel,” I gasped. “Bill fathered a child with Frances.”

“Spider confronted him once,” he told me. “When your brother was acting ... weird, Spider accused him of cheating in front of Carly and me. Bill denied it, and Carly believed him. Hell, I even believed him—not that it had anything to do with me.” He smirked darkly. “Bill could be pretty convincing when he needed to be.”

It started drizzling again, but we kept a very slow pace. “After he died, we found out about Frances when she came looking for money.”

“Did Bill know she was pregnant?” I wondered.

“He must’ve. Her belly was already out to here when he died,” he said, rolling his arms in front of his stomach.

“Spider must have felt vindicated,” I guessed, unable to keep the irritation out of my voice.

“Not really—he was too busy bringing Carly back to worry about being right,” he answered and his voice became grave. “When Bill died, Carly was devastated. Then when Frances came around, she still wouldn’t believe that Bill cheated on her. But when the baby was born and he looked so much like Bill, Carly was ...” He took a second and brushed his hand over his face. “We didn’t think that she could take anymore.”

While my brain took a moment to recoup, my mouth asked, “Are Spider and Carly related?”

Cameron burst out laughing. “What? God no! It would be pretty sick if they were!”

His eyes narrowed. “Why do you ask?”

“He seems very protective of her. I just thought ...”

“There’s nothing platonic about Spider’s need to protect Carly.” His laugh cooled to a chuckle, and he explained, “Spider has been in love with Carly for at least as long as I’ve known him—probably longer. They don’t like to talk about their childhood, so I don’t know a whole lot. From the bits and pieces I’ve heard, they grew up together; Carly had a creep for a father and Spider has been watching over her his whole life.”

He leaned in and lowered his voice, in case the trees heard us. “When Bill and Carly started dating and they got really serious, I thought Spider was going to snap. I figured he was either going to kill Bill or himself. Instead, he spent his time trying to prove to Carly that Bill wasn’t good enough for her.”

Something didn’t fit. “Bill has been gone a long time, and Carly seems okay with me now,” I assessed. My interactions with Carly had grown from her deathly glares and her screaming profanities at me, to civilized, almost friendly.

He grinned proudly. “Spider and I are just as surprised as you are. We both thought she would have been mad longer than that.”

My head shot up.

“You talk to Spider about me?”

His brow furrowed, and he glanced ahead.

Thunder roared, and new rows of black clouds hoarded in. The mist had dropped from the treetops to the ground, making the gravel road barely discernible beyond two feet. Cameron and I walked closely and silently for awhile. Questions still colored my thoughts. For one, my brother’s stupid and idiotic mistake had nothing to do with me. Second, if Carly wasn’t as perturbed by my being there, why did Spider still feel the need to scowl every time he saw me?

“There’s more to this than what Bill did to Carly,” I said and watched him carefully. “There’s another reason why Spider doesn’t like me.”

He slowed our already slow pace while he deliberated. When he looked up, I could see the struggle. “He doesn’t trust you, and he definitely doesn’t trust me with you.”

“Why?” I challenged.

“For the same reasons he never trusted your brother, even before Bill and Carly met.”

All of a sudden, I had this sick sense in the pit of my stomach—I somehow knew that I wouldn’t like what Cameron was about to tell me ... and he took his time telling me, prolonging the agony.

“People like you, like your brother—people who come from money like you ... will always have your family money, your family name, your family power to fall back on and protect you, cover you when things get bad.”

I tried to keep my voice normal, though the storm was raging inside me. “Bad as in getting caught, arrested.”

“Amongst other things,” he continued, refusing to look at me. “When people like Carly and Spider and me get into trouble, the only thing that people see is that we come from the streets. They’re happy when we get caught, because we deserve whatever comes to us. There aren’t any search parties when one of us goes missing. No one cares if we turn up dead—just another crime statistic. If the ship starts to sink, we go down with it. No one will be there to throw us a life raft.”

I couldn’t imagine ever going to my parents for any kind of life raft. My family was more apt to stand on the luxury cruise ship beside the sinking ship, entertaining, diverting other guests so that no one would notice that one of us was drowning.

“Do you think the same way that Spider does? Do you see me as one of those people who skips town when things get hard?” I said, my temper flaring up.

“I think that you have a lot more options than anyone else I know.”

“You’re judging me because of the amount of money my parents have in their bank account?”

Cameron finally looked at me through narrowed eyes. “I’ve been judged my whole life because of the money my parents didn’t have.”

“I am not my parents’ money, and neither was my brother. I didn’t get to choose who my parents were going to be or where I grew up.”

“Neither did I,” he snapped. “You can run away from your big house, pick the crappiest school you can find and live in the ugliest house in the worst neighborhood ... none of that changes where you come from, Emmy. To the rest of the world, you and your brother will always look like two confused rich kids who are trying to slum it because of their issues with their parents. But when you’re done slumming it, you get to go back to the big house and the bank accounts. I don’t have that comfort. This,” he said bitterly, extending his arms out, “is it for me. I have nowhere else to go. Fancy schools, rich friends didn’t change the fact that I’m just another street kid.”

The sky exploded and buckets of rain came pouring down. I hadn’t realized that Cameron and I had stopped in the middle of the road, and that was where we stood, glaring at each other, getting drenched.

“So you don’t trust me ... just because my parents have money.”

“I didn’t say that,” he said sullenly.

“What are you saying, Cameron?” I kept staring angrily at him through the water. “Why did you say that Spider doesn’t trust you with me?”

“Because he’s smarter than me,” he blurted, his voice a worthy opponent for the roaring thunder above. “He knows that I like having you around too much when you shouldn’t even be here in the first place. And, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I tend to spill my guts when I’m around you. I’m in a type of business where people who talk too much disappear. Permanently. And people like you get taken out even before they can get the chance to snitch on people like me.”

His eyes were fierce, and the muscles of his face were pulled tightly. He looked like he meant every word of what he had told me. All of this was enough for my chin to start quivering. No matter how hard I bit my lip, I couldn’t help but give myself away.

Cameron suddenly dropped his head into his hands. “Emmy ... God, I’m sorry ... I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I—” When he glanced up, he looked heartbroken. “Emmy, I didn’t mean to scare you. It’s just so confusing for me to have you here,” he resigned, shaking his head. The rain dripped from his straggly hair into his eyes. He looked dismal and beautiful, all at once. I found myself wanting nothing more than to make him happy again. This scared me more than the words that had come out of his mouth.

I smiled at him. It took him a while, but he did smile back, faintly.

I wished that I had never decided to clear the air about Spider. “Can we start over?”

“I don’t know,” he said with awareness. “Can we?”

I considered and smiled wider. “What’s your last name, Cameron?”

He smiled a little wider too. “You know, no one has dared to ask me that question in a really long time. I don’t think anyone here knows my real last name, except for Rocco and Spider.”

I waited, tapping my foot in the puddle we had been left standing in. I thought it must be odd to be surrounded by people who had no idea who you were. And then I realized that this wasn’t much different from my own life in Callister.

Cameron looked pensive, taking part in another of his private debates. He shook his head in defeat. “I can’t believe I’m telling you this ... my last name is Hillard.”

While my thoughts were engraving his name inside the walls of my head, I held my hand out in a truce. “Nice to meet you, Cameron Hillard. I’m Emily Sheppard.”

This time, Cameron took my hand and shook it hardily with a guilty smile on his face. “Nice to meet you, Emily Sheppard.”

“There,” I said with satisfaction. “Now we can officially start over.”

Cameron chuckled lightly, slowly picking up his good mood. I was relieved.

Thunder and lightning crashed, and we ran the rest of the way home. The fog was blinding, so Cameron had to shepherd our way.

I was startled by the two soaked guards who appeared out of the fog as we neared the property line. They quickly receded when they saw Cameron.

We had made it back to the house, breathless, covered in mud, and soaking wet. Puddles were rapidly forming around our feet on the marble floor.

I stood by, with great awkwardness, while Cameron stripped down to his boxer shorts.

“Wait here,” he ordered with renewed energy and ran off through the kitchen. He came back with a bath towel in his hand and another around his waist. He draped the towel around my shoulders and held it so that I could get undressed under it. “I promise I won’t look,” he told me with a devious smirk.

Shivering, I removed my clothes while Cameron looked away with a big grin on his face. I relieved Cameron of his post and draped the towel tightly around my torso. My teeth chattering, I flew upstairs and stood under the scorching hot water of the shower until I was sure I had accomplished my mission of getting a first-degree burn. Dressed and warmed, I bounded back down the stairs and walked in on five nearly naked men standing at the front entrance.

Piles of wet and dirty clothes had been thrown on the floor. It seemed that, like Cameron and me, everyone had been peeling off their clothes at the door instead of trekking water and mud everywhere in the house. The foyer floor was now a brown lake.

I waited for them to move out of the way so I could get by. Clad in their soaked underwear, the trembling men largely disregarded me and argued about whom the highest ranked were to determine first dibs on a hot shower. They kept the argument going while they made their way downstairs.

A bare-chested Griff was left behind in the foyer, still struggling to get his soaking wet socks off his feet. He had a sour look on his face, his mood matching the stormy weather.

“Hey, Griff,” I said with careful cheerfulness.

Griff lifted his head, acknowledged me with a grunt. He finally managed to pull one of his socks off and proceeded to throw it onto one of the piles of wet clothes, but slipped and almost fell on his behind.

“I saw you with Spider earlier, he looked pretty upset,” I said. “Did you get in trouble for slacking off while they were gone?”

“That and other stuff.” After tugging for a while, Griff pulled off his wet jeans and stood unabashedly in his underwear. I instantly looked away.

The uncommon smell of a home-cooked meal was coming from the kitchen. The prospect of food always cheered me up.

“Are you at least coming in for supper?” I offered, motioning toward the kitchen.

“No, thanks. I think you’ve gotten me in enough trouble as it is. I’ll be lucky if I live to see another day,” he grumbled.

“What do you mean?”

Griff’s eyes shot over my shoulder. “Never mind. I gotta go,” he said, his voice low and panicked. He rushed past me and disappeared into the

basement.

I spun on my heels. Cameron was behind me, leaning against the doorway into the kitchen, his arms casually crossed over his chest. I hopped toward him.

Carly was standing over the stove, vehemently stirring foodstuff in a large frying pan while barking orders at Spider, who was dutifully cutting vegetables. Cameron led me to the table, where mismatched candles and a table set for five waited for us. Rocco was already sitting at the table, eagerly holding his plate over his heart with both hands.

“Where’s everyone else?” I wondered.

“It’s just the family tonight,” Cameron told me.

Rocco glanced at his big brother with interest, momentarily slacking his grip on his plate while Carly and Spider filtered in with masses of food. Burritos, fajitas, guacamole, apple juice in plastic wine glasses ... it seemed to me that there was too much food for just five people.

Rocco was still picking at the crumbs on the counter when the first hand was being dealt out. After much debate between Carly and Cameron, we were playing poker—Texas Hold’em. The stakes were extremely high: a week’s worth of laundry duty.

Bill had taught me how to play poker when I was eight, and I’d always thought I was a pretty good bluffer, but after just a few hands, I was already out of chips. I didn’t feel too bad though—Carly and Rocco were in the same boat.

It was getting late. Cameron was sitting behind a fortress of chips and Spider was barely hanging on. Rocco had his head on the table, and I had mine leaning on my fist.

“Is it always like this?” I whispered to Carly.

“You mean, does Cameron always win?”

I thought about it and nodded.

She squinted in Cameron’s direction. “He wins, but he cheats.”

I heard a grumble from Cameron’s chair.

“How?” I gasped, my attention fully on Carly.

“He counts cards and he reads people.” She paused and watched my puzzled expression with enjoyment. “He knows what people are thinking just by looking at them. Cameron didn’t brag about that to you?”

I shook my head.

Carly shrugged. "That's surprising."

I turned my eyes to Cameron. "Is that true? Can you really tell what people are thinking?"

"Not exactly," he answered with a sharp glance in Carly's direction. "Carly likes to embellish."

Spider pushed the rest of his chips into the pot and mumbled, "All in." Cameron immediately called. They overturned their cards on the table and waited for the dealer's cards to unfold. The first three cards gave Cameron a flush. Spider waited for the next two, hoping something would save him.

But the game was no longer of any interest to me. "What part of it is embellished?"

"I don't know what people are thinking," he clarified. "All I can tell is, if someone is nervous, or mad, or happy, or bluffing their brains out ..." He winked at me.

The fourth card was a nine of diamonds. Spider jumped a little. Another nine or a king would give him a full house to beat Cameron.

This made me wonder. "Are some people easier to read than others?"

"Everyone has their own quirks that give them away," he said. "Though, yes, some people are definitely easier to read than others."

"Well, do you count cards too? Because *that* is cheating," I scolded.

"Poker is more about knowing your opponent than counting cards," he said, contracting his eyes toward an unaffected Carly again. "I do count the odds in my head. It's not a sure thing but ..." He smirked at Spider. "... for example, I know that Spider has almost no chance of winning this hand."

"We'll see," Spider griped quietly.

Carly turned over a queen. Spider bent his head in defeat.

Chapter Twelve: A Dark Place

It rained, for days on end. The front hall was mostly flooded—I had only observed this because I had to trudge through some of the gathering water while I skipped to meet Cameron in the kitchen in the morning. Otherwise, the rain went mostly unnoticed by me.

Early mornings were my favorite. It was the only time that I had alone with Cameron, before the rest of the house awoke, before Rocco would start following us around from room to room, from couch to kitchen.

I noticed things. Spending every waking moment with Cameron had opened my eyes. First, Cameron was timid, almost as painfully as I was. When it was just the two of us, there would be moments when we'd be sitting at the table, quietly eating our cereal, and he would all of a sudden look down, or break a small smile and his cheeks would blot red, for no reason. I was resigned to having my cheeks and neck permanently tattooed of scarlet hues.

When it wasn't just the two of us—and these moments were too numerous—he was mostly quiet and watched from the sidelines, like he was trying to fade into the wallpaper.

Then there were the other darker times, fleeting moments when he became distant. A glaze would wash his face and the premature wrinkles around his eyes resurfaced. I hated these moments. Eventually, his eyes would find me, and he would come back. I'd wonder where he'd been—what dark corner he had come out of.

The second thing I noticed was Rocco's immeasurable attachment to his older brother. Wherever Cameron went, so did Rocco, faithfully, eagerly. Cameron would secretly smile at me while his brother tried to impress with his newfound fighting skills, or tried to match whatever weights Cameron was lifting in the workout room. And we watched a lot of TV, spent our days moving food from the kitchen to the kitchen table to the couch.

Carly and Spider would join us once in a while. One was never without the other. They mostly kept to themselves. I really liked Carly. Spider was tolerable.

With the torrential weather, I had expected the house to be bustling with people trying to get out of the rain. Yet the house was quieter than usual. Guards only came in for mealtimes and sleep.

The third thing I noticed was that even the mid-rankers ate in the basement kitchen. It seemed that when Cameron was around, guards stayed away and all meals were eaten as a *family*. I loved this.

I briefly saw Griff a few times, rushing in and out of the wet weather for his meals. He'd glance at me, but ignored me otherwise, as if I weren't there at all. I felt guilty, like I had abandoned him. He was obviously upset ... I couldn't confront him without making Cameron wary or Spider unnecessarily suspicious. Although Spider had somewhat started to relax around me, which seemed to please Cameron and Carly, I didn't want to give Spider any ammunition to speak against me anymore.

The last thing I noticed was that I slept—dreamlessly and peacefully. Every night, I dreaded leaving Cameron to get some shut-eye; he would practically have to drag me off the couch. As soon as my head hit the pillow, I was out. Not even Meatball's snoring could wake me. Maybe it was the soothing way the rain pelted against the tin roof, like drops hitting a champagne glass. Maybe it was something else.

One evening, Rocco had fallen asleep on the couch with the remote control tightly clenched in his hand and the channel stuck on the weather. Cameron had disappeared. I was considering resuming the stalking when he reappeared, soaking wet.

"Holy cow! What happened to you?"

"I had to run to my car," he told me breathlessly. "I have a surprise for you."

My heart dropped. The last time he had a surprise for me, it ended up costing him, or me, three hundred thousand dollars. The Maserati was still stuck in the mud.

"Don't worry," he encouraged. "You can't crash this one."

Although Cameron had told me that he couldn't read thoughts, I had started to wonder if that was the whole truth.

He pulled a box out and handed it to me. “Coppola,” he said, like this would mean something to me.

I looked down, then up. “They made a movie about *Rumble Fish*?”

“Now you can finally find out how the story goes.”

Cameron had put his finger to his lips and led me out of the living room.

Hanging out with Rocco was great, but finding time alone had become an art.

“Don’t get too excited,” he warned as we walked upstairs to his room and he read my mind again. “The kid at the video store said it’s pretty old and filmed entirely in black and white.”

The thudding in my chest had nothing to do with the movie.

We sat down after Cameron stuck the disc in the player, throwing our feet on the coffee table. When the opening credits rolled, Cameron did something that I hadn’t been prepared for. His hand crawled over to mine. His fingers slipped between mine. He squeezed in. I looked straight ahead, feeling the demolition crane pounding against my chest.

I peeked at him from the corner of my eye, which was what he had been waiting for.

“Is this okay?” he asked shyly, lightly lifting our intertwined hands.

I imagined that my face was a bright crimson. My tongue was out of order. I conceded to a daft nod of my head and a fresh flow of blood to my face.

Holding Cameron’s hand was much more nerve-racking when he was awake to witness it.

Then my eyes were drawn to a movement over Cameron’s shoulder. Beyond the wall of windows, I saw Carly and Spider by the pool outside. They were walking together very closely but never actually touching—something else that I had noticed them do. They closed the door to the pool house behind them.

“Do you think that Carly and Spider are dating now?” I wondered aloud while I tried to persuade my heart to lighten the thrusts of blood so that my head and hand would stop pulsating like jungle fever.

“I know they are,” he said chuckling. “They try to hide it, but everyone around here knows, we just let them think that we don’t notice.”

I couldn’t understand why Spider would go through so much trouble trying to hide something that he had waited his whole life for. I knew I

couldn't. "Why do they try to hide it?"

"They don't want the fact that they're ... together to be held against them."

"I don't understand," I confessed, as I often did around him.

He took a long, ragged breath. "In our line of business, if someone sees that you care for someone else, it's a weakness—something that people will use against you, or try to control you with."

"How?" I asked him.

I looked earnestly at Cameron while he fidgeted in his seat.

"Well, think about it. What if somebody threatened to hurt someone you cared about ... like your parents or your brother for example? What would you do to keep them safe or prevent them from getting hurt?"

"Anything," I whispered with concentration. I had often lain in bed at night, asking myself what I would have done differently if I had had a second chance at saving my big brother's life. The answer was always the same—anything and everything.

"Right," he agreed reluctantly. "So somebody who knows that—"

"Somebody like who?" I interrupted.

His face hardened. "A bad person."

"How bad?"

"The worst," he muttered.

I knew I ought to be scared, but that was never the feeling I had around Cameron. "You were saying?"

He looked at me blankly.

"That the bad person who knows who you love—" I incited.

"The very bad person will use that to control you," he finished with growing reluctance.

He squinted. "Can we stop here?"

"No. We can't." I was unwavering. Cameron's world had once been my brother's world—I needed to know, however dire. I needed to know where Bill had been, where Cameron still went.

He sighed and paused the movie. He let go of my hand and rotated his body toward me, resting his elbow on the back of the couch and leaning his head against his lifted fist.

"Imagine what Spider would do if someone ever took Carly and threatened to hurt her if Spider didn't do what they wanted," he put to me.

The image of a crazed Al Pacino brandishing a machine gun in *Scarface* came to mind. “Okay ...”

“Someone ... a bad person, who knows that Spider would do anything to keep Carly safe will use it to control him by threatening to hurt Carly and force Spider to do something that he doesn’t want to do or can’t do.”

“So people use other people as leverage to get what they want.”

Cameron slightly cleared his throat. “Right.”

“People do that all the time, Cameron,” I informed him. “It’s not the end of the world. People can move past it.” I had hoped to be proof of that ... someday.

“It’s not worth hiding your love away,” I added, artfully.

“This is why I don’t want to talk about this with you,” he said with exasperation. “You’ve got this cute view of the world.”

I took a quick affronted inhalation and narrowed my eyes. His smile was warm, but his eyes were tight.

“You’re beautifully naïve, Emmy ... I don’t want to change that.”

“I’m not naïve,” I huffed. “What did I say that was so naïve?”

“In my world,” he unwillingly shared, watching my face, “when a loved one gets ... taken ... they don’t come out of it unscathed ... if they’re lucky to come out of it at all.”

“You mean people lose their lives in the process?” I tried to keep my voice professional, non-scared, non-naïve.

“Sometimes ...” he admitted with a murmur.

“How often?” I quickly questioned.

He didn’t need to answer. The look on his face was enough response.

“Why—” I had to curtail my tone again. “Why wouldn’t they just let people go once they got what they wanted? Why does anyone need to get —”

“It’s more complicated than that. Sometimes you can’t do what they want you to do without getting a whole lot of other people killed. And sometimes the person you love is killed ... just because you love them.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I said.

He leaned in, and his eyes held mine. “What would you do if the person you loved was hurt? What would you do to the person who hurt them?”

“I would hunt them down, hurt them, kill them.” I was taken aback by the violence in my own voice.

“And then you would have gang war, which was probably what they wanted in the first place.”

“Like street shootings and stuff like that?”

“That’s the stuff you see on TV—the unorganized street gang stuff. In the real organized world no one sees gang wars. You don’t hear about mass shootings ... you might hear about weird disappearances or house fires or car accidents or robberies gone bad. Normal stuff that could happen to anyone on any day.”

He paused. His face was impenetrable.

“What are you thinking about?” he questioned.

“You tell me. Can’t you just read my mind?” I mocked, though my voice cracked.

He rolled his eyes.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking, but I know that every time I open my mouth you get a little more nervous and eager all at once ... I don’t understand it.” He shook his head and waited.

I hadn’t realized that I was holding my breath. He was very observant.

I exhaled and swallowed. “Why would anyone want a gang war?”

He shrugged lightly. “For the same reasons that the rest of the world starts wars—because they want something. Territory, power, money, intimidation ... there are a lot of reasons that people start wars. But in our business, they’re usually a bad idea—eventually they attract too much attention.”

“Like when too many weird things start to happen to too many people,” I mused.

“Precisely.” His face was getting increasingly tense. “We wouldn’t start a war unless everyone agreed.”

This peaked my interest even more. “Who’s everyone?”

“Let’s just say it’s a bunch of bosses who sit down and make all the decisions for the best of the business.”

“Like a board of directors?”

He chewed on this and smiled. “Sure. Let’s call them the board of directors.”

“Are Carly and Spider on this board?”

“No, they work directly for me.”

“But you’re on the board,” I said.

He smiled wryly. "Kind of."

"What happens if the directors don't agree?" I couldn't imagine that the vote would be put to the stockholders.

"Majority rules usually," he told me. "Otherwise, there's one person who runs the board and who has the right to make the final call."

I was amazed by how it all seemed abnormally normal. "Kind of like a CEO?"

"CEO? That's a good way of putting it." His eyes lit up a bit. "You seem to know a lot about this stuff."

"Looks like I was born to do this. Maybe I could start working for you too," I jested, though part of me was serious.

Cameron's face became severe. "Don't ever joke about that, Emmy. That will never happen."

My heart was pouting. I decided to move away from the job hunt and continue the inquisition. "What happens if someone doesn't follow the rules? What if they don't follow the board's decision or just do what they want without going through the board?"

"You mean, what happens when someone goes rogue?" he clarified with intensity. "Then you have a big problem. The board has to decide what they want to do about it."

"Can they decide to kill that person?" My voice was barely audible.

Cameron had started fidgeting again.

"Yes. They can," he answered, also whispering.

"Have you ever had to make that kind of decision when you were on the board?"

Cameron eyed me and pressed his lips together. "I don't want to lie to you."

"So don't. Just tell me the truth," I pleaded.

"I can't. There are some things that I can't talk to you about."

"I need to know," I admitted. And I admitted more, "I need to understand you, Cameron."

"That's the problem, Emmy. You're trying to understand me, but what I do isn't who I am." The full power of his eyes were on me now. "The thought of you seeing me in this way, of knowing this other side of my life that is so ... it makes me feel sick." Cameron took both my hands in his. "I

trust you, and you can ask me anything you want. But please don't ask me that."

A moment of wordlessness passed between us. I looked at him, and I realized that I already knew the answer, and that I wished I didn't.

"The night I got here, Rocco said to Carly that she wasn't supposed to use real names."

"Carly's temper gets her in trouble a lot." Cameron breathed a short sigh. "Nicknames are insurance. We come into contact with a lot of people every day. Anyone of them could snitch on us, sell us out. It's a lot harder for cops to narrow their investigation down on some guy called Bubba or Tiny or Kid."

I thought about this. "What's your nickname?"

He shrugged. "I never really got the chance to get one ... but your brother used to call me Kid."

This touched one of the strings of my heart that were attached to my tear ducts. I glanced away. The sun had set behind the black clouds. Other than the eerie blue screen glow of the TV, the room was quite dark.

Cameron started the movie and, in another unexpected move, put his arm around me. In the almost darkness, it wasn't as awkward, I wasn't as nervous anymore. But I wasn't paying attention to the movie either.

He had killed someone before—I had witnessed it with my own eyes. It had never really occurred to me that the man in the cemetery hadn't been Cameron's first ... kill. I started wondering about those people—who they were, what they might have looked like ... then I stopped myself. It was too disturbing to think of Cameron in that way.

I closed my eyes and nestled my head, inhaling my favored fragrance. I could hear his heart pound, quick beats at first; after a while, the booming in his chest steadied and sounded more like a lullaby.

The next time I opened my eyes, everything was dark. I couldn't see a thing, yet I felt surrounded. Slowly, as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, the half-moon shapes of tombstones appeared around me. I was in a graveyard, and Cameron was standing in front of me with his back turned. He was looking at something on the ground. I approached, putting my hands on his shoulders and standing on the tip of my toes. I peeked over him to see what he was looking at. There was nothing there.

Cameron swiveled and faced me. He smiled. When I smiled back and reached out, his face started to change. It became deformed, monstrous. A gun materialized in the monster's hand. I could hear someone screaming behind me. *Run, Emily!* I couldn't move. My feet were stuck in the mud. I heard gunshots—and nearly fell off the couch.

I woke up, gasping for air. Cameron was holding me by the shoulders, trying to prevent me from falling face first into the coffee table. Burning tears were streaming down my cheeks.

I twisted—there were no monsters, just Cameron's panicked gaze. "Emmy ... Jesus! You were screaming."

Apparently the person screaming behind me in my dream had been me. I looked at Cameron, and, while the daze of my nightmare wore off, I could feel the flow of tears involuntarily increasing. Cameron clasped his arms around me and held me while I buried my head.

"It was just a dream," he shushed, almost abrasively.

I recovered slowly and lifted my head. Embarrassment colored my cheeks, and Cameron looked ill.

"Sorry," I sniffled. "I didn't mean to scare you like that."

Cameron's lips were pressed together in an unconvincing smile. "Well, looks like we're good at scaring each other." There was no humor in his voice. "No more talking about what I do, otherwise you'll never sleep again, and you'll give Meatball a heart attack."

Meatball was stationed by the coffee table with his ears flat to his head. I called him, drumming my knee, and he pattered over. I reassured him with a rub of the ears.

"Cameron, this had nothing to do with you ... I dreamt that I was falling out of an airplane," I lied in vain.

"Don't worry about it," he reassured while the dark veil was expanding over his face.

He fingered his watch but didn't look at it. "It's getting late."

He got up, hesitated, and listlessly grazed my shoulder. "Get some sleep," he ordered.

Without saying good night, he left the room. I heard the door gently click behind him.

I rubbed Meatball's ears until he was well recovered and sat in the darkness of Cameron's room.

Chapter Thirteen: Therapy

I saw a plane today. I happened to walk to the window and looked up, and there it was—a little white dot spearing through the clouds. It triggered something that had been buried deep inside me: a fading memory of that other world, the one that must still have existed beyond the sweeping forest, beyond the hidden farm, beyond Cameron. The house in the slums of Callister, the closet-sized bedroom, the cycles of school and work and surviving ... I wondered at which point that life had started to feel like someone else's. I wondered how long it had been since I had left that other person's life—the days, the weeks were becoming blurry to me. I wondered if anyone from the outside even noticed that I was gone.

I slowly—very slowly—climbed down the stairs, attempting to drag out the inevitable. I was still horribly, utterly mortified by my banshee screaming episode of the previous night. Foregoing sleep, I had spent a good chunk of the dark hours concocting stories that would better explain my wimpy reaction to Cameron's confessions. The rest of the night was burned up searching for ways to make myself look and sound convincing when I would have to lie to Cameron's face. All I could hope for was that Cameron had forgotten; but from the wounded expression on his face before he ran out on me—a picture that was now cruelly engrained in my brain—hope was fruitless.

I let Meatball out of the house. He raced full speed away from my misery while music pulsated in the distance. Griff, who was standing guard at his usual spot on the property, looked as miserable as I did. I considered further delaying the inevitable, going out there and merging our gloom. But I didn't. It was too hot outside, I was entangled in enough turmoil, and Griff had glowered even more the second he had noticed me standing in the doorway.

The drama boiling in the kitchen only firmed up my decision to not deal with Griff, postponing another unavoidable. I closed the door and followed Rocco's loud and agitated voice into the kitchen.

"This is stupid. I'm not doing it!" I heard Rocco yell.

"As long as you stay here, you will do what you're told." It had sounded like Cameron, except that the tone was unforgiving.

I shivered and stepped through the threshold just as Rocco was whizzing by, almost crashing into me.

He halted in front of me, his eyes slit.

"You put him up to this," he accused me.

While the list of things that I could have done to wrong Rocco ran through my head, my eyes sought silent assistance from Cameron, who was sitting at the large table, absorbed in the paperwork in front of him.

He glanced up, barely looking in my direction, and went back to his papers. "Emily had nothing to do with this, Rocco. You will do this. End of discussion."

Rocco stood affronted and huffed. I stood recovering from Cameron's use of Emily versus Emmy.

Rocco stomped down the hall, slamming his bedroom door.

I gathered the papers strewn by Rocco's recently vacated seat—forms of some sort.

"Did I miss something?" I was surprised by how quiet my voice sounded—like my vocal cords were walking on eggshells.

"I did some research while I was gone—Rocco's fifteen years old and dropped out of school a month before coming here," Cameron told me, his voice, his expression still bland.

"Yikes! You mean he's not even close to being full grown yet? He'll be a monster by the time he's eighteen. Are you sure you can afford to keep feeding him?" I tried a little harder.

I thought I had seen Cameron's lips bending up; but whatever semblance of a smile might have been coming, it was gone by the time he lifted his eyes; in its place was a cold stare.

"He's getting his GED if he's going to stay here. I won't have him spend his days rotting in front of the TV and doing nothing good with his life."

I swallowed hard while he collected his papers.

"I could help him," I offered uneasily. "With homework and stuff."

He pushed his chair back. “Whatever keeps you busy.”

I felt the sting.

“Cameron, about last night—” I started, making a split-second decision on which story I would go with, but his daggered eyes interrupted me.

I lost my voice; he looked over my shoulder. Spider and Carly were in the kitchen doorway with files in their arms.

“What is it?” Cameron snapped.

“We’re ready,” Spider said to him, completely impervious to Cameron’s mood—unlike me, and unlike Carly. Her eyes veered between Cameron and me, and she gave me a weighted smile. I couldn’t manage to give her anything back.

“I’ve got a lot of work to do. This will have to wait,” Cameron said to me in passing, never actually looking at me.

They left me standing, battered in the middle of the kitchen. After an intense session of staring down my bowl of cereal, I fiercely pushed it down the table—it tipped and spilled over. I went to the kitchen to get a dishrag. When I got there, I kept walking.

Outside, the morning sun was already steaming the waterlogged lawn, making the air stifling. No wind blew through the trees. No birds chirped. I could see Griff’s shape blinking in the waves of heat, like a mirage, and I was sweating before I had even reached the halfway point between us, soaked by the time I actually reached him. The scowl on his face hadn’t improved since I’d last seen him.

“You’re making it really difficult for me to ignore you,” he grumbled.

“Oh? Were you trying to ignore me? I hadn’t noticed,” I retorted, sarcasm heavy.

Griff rolled his eyes and scanned the scene, a valiant effort to continue to ignore me. He looked cool.

This irritated me even more.

“You know you have no right to be angry at me for getting in trouble with Spider for not doing your job while they were gone,” I told him.

“Who said I was angry at you?”

“You just admitted that you were trying to ignore me.”

“Ignore, yes. Angry, no—never with you,” he said with sincerity.

“Same difference,” I snapped.

“Huge difference. I’m just trying to protect you.” This seemed to be the common explanation for everything that aggravated me. “I’ve been told to stay away from you, or it’s lights out for me.” Griff put his hand to his throat and pretended to slice his neck from ear to ear. “I figure I can’t keep you safe if I’m dead. So I’ll stay away and keep an eye on you from here.”

“I think the only way Spider can convince you to do your job is by threatening you,” I reasoned, still amped for war. “Anyway, I can protect myself. You don’t need to protect me from anyone, and you definitely don’t need to use me as your excuse for not working. There’s no need to be overdramatic about this. Spider’s just doing his job.” Cameron’s words echoed through my voice.

“I’m being overdramatic?” he repeated incredulously. “What world do you live in? These guys have killed better people than me without even blinking. So far, they seem to like to have you around. But, believe me, once they have what they want or they get sick of you, you’ll be in big trouble too.” Griff looked around and lightly grabbed my arm, tugging himself toward me and whispering, “I won’t let them do anything to you. They’ll all die before they hurt you.”

He let go of my arm and took a step back, his eyes flicking over the grounds.

Of the few guards that I could see through the heat waves, all seemed as preoccupied as I was with keeping cool.

“So you’ll just keep ignoring me. And then what?” I asked, my irritation evaporating. Griff was genuinely scared. I couldn’t be angry with him for that—though I was slightly disappointed that I wouldn’t get the chance to air out my frustrations.

“I don’t know,” he admitted wearily. “I haven’t figured that out yet. Do you know why they’re keeping you alive?”

I wondered if Griff noticed that I didn’t flinch while we discussed my life—and death. I had no reason to be scared. I wanted to tell Griff about Cameron, but I couldn’t. I wanted to tell Griff about Bill, but I didn’t. I was suddenly afraid that he would see me differently. So I simply shook my head in response.

“Do your parents have a lot of money?” he asked me.

“What does that have to do with anything?” I said, my irritation surfacing again, for different reasons.

He shrugged. “I thought maybe these guys were trying to collect ransom in exchange for you.”

His voice trailed, suddenly distracted. A silver Mercedes had driven up the road and was stopped at the entrance. One of the guards had his arm coolly resting on top of the car and chatted through the downed window. The other guard stood closely behind him, at times standing on his tippy toes, trying to catch a glimpse of the car’s occupant.

From the stupid grins on the guards’ faces, I guessed who was in the car—a guess that was confirmed as I glimpsed a flip of the occupant’s blond hair.

Frances eventually drove through the male barriers and got out of her car.

“Looks like long-legs is back.” Griff exhaled.

“Long-legs?” Only a tinge of jealousy colored my tone.

Frances strolled toward Griff and me. She was wearing a short cotton white summer dress and cowboy boots. The air was stifling and stagnant. Her golden hair seemed to have found imaginary wind—it, along with other noticeable parts, bounced with every step. She looked like she was walking off a country music video. Another strand of my carrot hair grudgingly frizzed out of my tight ponytail.

“We didn’t get the chance to meet last time I was here. I’m Frances. You’re Emily, right?”

I smiled weakly.

Griff practically knocked me over extending his own hand to Frances. “I’m Griffin.”

Griff-in? I mouthed to myself.

Frances shook his hand. “Where is everyone?”

Griff had forgotten how to speak.

“Working,” I responded for both of us.

“Well, I guess it’s just us then. Griffin, mind if I steal Emily for a bit?” Frances checked as she looped her arm around mine. Griff just grinned and nodded.

“See you later, *Griff-in*,” I emphasized and threw him a glare.

He sheepishly smiled back, his cheeks glowing red, not because of the sun.

Frances’s empty Mercedes sparkled in the sunlight.

“Where’s my nephew?” I blurted.

She was a little shocked.

“Cameron told me about you and Bill,” I explained.

She eyed me and shook her head in disbelief. “I’m very surprised he would have told you that.”

“I overheard the two of you talking,” I admitted.

“Ah,” she grasped and answered, “My mom is watching Daniel.”

We ended up sitting by the pool. Some of the guards who were supposed to keep watch over the clearing behind the pool house took turns promenading closer inland. The stupid grin outbreak had spread to them too—a pandemic was surging. While they were trying to catch Frances’s attention, her eyes were partly fixed on me.

“It’s weird finally meeting you. I’ve heard so much about you from Bill,” she gushed. I was coming up smiling until she added, “You don’t look anything like I thought you would.” While I busied myself with watching the pool water leak down my skinny white legs, I imagined her blue eyes making their way to my hair.

“You just don’t look anything like your brother is what I meant ...” She was trying to make small talk, and amends. Her voice was hushed and sweet, like a morning dove cooing.

“How did you meet Bill?” I asked her, still looking at my wet feet.

“Gosh, that was such a long time ago.” From the corner of my eye, I could see a smile coming to her lips. “We met in high school after he moved to Callister.”

“How long were you together ... dating?”

“The first time, just a few months.”

My eyes shot up. “The first time?”

She reddened. “We broke up in high school. He dropped out, and I didn’t hear from him for a long time. Then I ran into him on the street a couple of years later ...” She stopped and took a breath. “I didn’t know about Carly. Bill never told me he had a girlfriend ... I had never met her ... I thought ... he told me they were just friends.”

Although there was another flash of extreme disappointment in my brother, I knew that this was really none of my business. “Did he tell you he was taking drugs?” One of the questions that was bugging me most.

“He didn’t need to tell me,” she stressed. “Your brother was always using, Emily. He was using even when we were in high school. Everyone

who knew him well enough knew that.”

“Cameron didn’t,” I blurted. It wasn’t that I didn’t believe her ... I just didn’t want to believe her.

“Is that what he told you?” she hissed under her breath, her knuckles clenched tightly to the side of the pool.

I noticed that she kept a distant eye on the loitering guards. She smiled at one of them, artificially; he was elated with her attention.

“I guess Cameron is just trying to protect you. The truth is hard to swallow.” Her voice was sweet again.

“It must be difficult for you to have to keep coming to Cameron for money,” I said.

Frances sneered. “I don’t *need* to come here and I certainly don’t need their money ... Bill had opened a bank account for Daniel and I before he died.” She half-turned her head to me, never fully taking her eyes off the guards.

“You know how much money your brother had when he died,” she stated in passing.

When I shrugged, she raised her eyebrows.

“Didn’t you get Bill’s money after he died?”

I shook my head in response.

Frances became somber, pensive. The guards had finally gotten sunstroked from watching us and went back to rest in the shade of the trees down the property line.

“Why do you come all the way here if you don’t really need—”

She interrupted me by turning her attention completely to me and leaning in very close. “We don’t have a lot of time,” she whispered. “Are you okay? Have they hurt you?”

“I’m fine,” I answered awkwardly. “Has who hurt me?”

“Cameron, for one—”

“Of course not!” I immediately said.

With a wield of the hand, she shushed me and glanced around erratically. When she was reassured of our seclusion, she brought her blue eyes back to me.

“Cameron is ... very nice,” I whispered, trying to find a descriptor that wouldn’t make me flush. It was pointless. The blood was already climbing up my neck in a ladder of red blotches.

She paused long enough to catch sight of my ruddiness.

“Cameron is handsome ...” she ventured with awareness, watching my expression.

I went back to watching my feet splash in the water.

She exhaled very deeply. “Emily, you need to be extremely careful around Cameron. He’s young ... too young to be a boss, too young to be doing what he’s doing.” There was a resentful edge to her voice. “He’s charming and very smart, which is why he has managed to keep himself alive for so long, but he’s immature. When he gets bored, or when things start to get too hard for him ... bad things start to happen.” She seemed rushed. “Am I making any sense?”

I shook my head.

“He’s not like that,” I assured her confidently, even though my voice was the squeak of a mouse.

She put her hand on my shoulder, willing me to look at her.

“Your brother was a terrific boss,” she cooed. “Cameron always looked up to him. They were like brothers. Spider was very jealous of Bill because of that. When Bill died, he tried to take over the business. But the other bosses wouldn’t have it. They didn’t trust him, didn’t think that he was smart enough to manage the business for them and make them money. They picked Cameron.” Her voice was bitter, and she shifted in her seat. “Spider knows that Cameron is too young to make the tough decisions, and he uses this to get what he wants ... to control the business ... to control Cameron.”

I shook my head, trying to find the words to explain to her that Cameron wasn’t the fickle monster she was making him out to be, but she wasn’t done.

“From what I saw the last time I was here, Cameron seems to be taken with you. You’re like a new, expensive toy to him ... but this won’t last. I’ll help you get out of here, but I have to find a safe place for Daniel and my mom, somewhere they can’t find them. You need to keep Cameron happy until I can come get you out.”

“Frances, really, I’m fine,” I insisted. “Everyone has been nothing but nice to me—”

“There’s nothing nice about these people—”

“Frances,” interrupted a stern voice from behind us. We simultaneously wheeled around.

Spider was standing by the basement doorway, glaring. Frances looked momentarily terrified, but she quickly regained her self-assurance and her cheerful smile to replace the fear on her face. She got up and strolled toward Spider. Unlike the guards, Spider's mood did not improve as she approached him.

"It was very nice to meet you, Emily." Frances disappeared into the house, closely followed by Spider.

Frances was wrong. Griff was wrong. They didn't see what was under the surface. I knew what Cameron looked like to everyone else—cold, scary. I had unwillingly seen this side of him—this morning for example—and I didn't like it either. But when the hard surface melted and Cameron reappeared, he was magnificent. It infuriated me that I couldn't let anyone else in on this secret. They were all wrong.

By the time I made it back to the front of the house, Frances was rushing out with a paper bag in her hand.

"Take care of yourself, Emily," she whispered intently as she passed by and speed walked to her car.

Spider followed her out and stood in the driveway until her Mercedes rushed out of sight. After a fierce look at me, he made his way toward the garage.

Griff was still standing by the tree line. I purposefully ignored him and smugly walked into the cool, air-conditioned house.

Rocco was slouched at the kitchen table with two empty frozen dinner cartons in front of him and a third one well on its way. I copied him and threw a frozen cardboard in the microwave.

Out of everything and everyone, Rocco being upset with me, even if it was for absolutely no reason, seemed the worst of all.

"I didn't say anything to Cameron about your age. I didn't even know that he was going to make you do this," I told him while the microwave counted down.

"I know. I wasn't mad at you. Not really anyway. I just really hate school," he said and shoveled rubberized meat in his mouth.

"Why?"

"I don't know. It's hard and too boring and it's a waste of time. I don't need school to work for Cameron."

“Hmmm ...” I thought out loud, “You know, you could use this to your advantage.” With his interest piqued, Rocco looked up and listened. I continued my train of thought. “You could tell Cameron that you’ll do the homework and get your GED if he takes you along when he goes to work.”

“Like blackmail?” he asked with hesitance.

“Call it a negotiation tactic.”

Rocco enthusiastically chewed over this and grinned to his ears.

“Negotiation tactic ... I like it.”

“I’ll even help you do the homework, if you want. It’ll be easy, you’ll see. Before you know it, you’ll have your GED and won’t ever have to think about it again,” I proposed, to seal the deal.

Rocco gave me a heartwarming smile. “Thanks, Emmy.”

I peeled the lid off my steaming TV dinner and burned two fingers.

Rocco looked up questioningly. “Did you and Cameron have a fight or something?”

“Not really,” I said with a mouthful of burnt fingers. I wasn’t sure if Cameron thinking that I was a hopeless coward counted as us fighting. Then I wondered if Cameron has said something to his kid brother. “Why do you ask?”

Rocco shrugged. “He was in a really bad mood this morning. I haven’t seen him in a mood like that since you got here.”

“How was he before I got here?” I was all ears.

“I don’t know. Mad, I guess.” He then decided to pull back a bit to defend his brother. “I rarely saw him. He worked. All the time.”

“Doing what?”

“Beats me,” he muttered. “I never get to go along, remember?”

Rocco brought his empty cartons into the kitchen and sat back down at the table, watching me finish my cardboard meal and breathing loudly.

“I’m bored,” he finally admitted. “Do you want to watch a movie or something?”

I looked over at the forms that were still on the table where I had neatly stacked them earlier that morning. Rocco let his head fall back in despair as he understood my meaning.

“No time like the present,” I told him brightly. And, to annoy him a little bit more, I added, “We should probably get started on the laundry too ...

since we both lost at poker.” Technically, he had lost two seconds before me—but who was keeping track?

I thought Rocco was going to start crying after my last suggestion.

It had been a lovely afternoon of filling out forms, struggling over homework assignments and never-ending piles of laundry to wash and fold. We had barely made a dent in the laundry room when the clock neared dinnertime. Music thumped in the distance again.

By the time the troops started making their way downstairs for dinner, Rocco and I were finishing up a load of bath towels. He kept eying the kitchen doorway, antsy to show his big brother the work that he had done and commence the negotiation round.

Dinner came and went. Cameron never walked through the doorway. Disappointed, Rocco went to the couch. The two of us lounged in front of the TV for the rest of the night and eventually fell asleep on the couch. We were awoken at midnight when Cameron finally dragged himself in and pilfered through the kitchen cupboards.

Rocco waited impatiently for Cameron to make his way to the table and got up, picking up the work that he had strategically lain next to him. He dropped the papers on the table in front of Cameron. I smiled after him—his unfettered excitement made me excited for him.

Cameron sighed, his eyes small and lifeless. “Not tonight, Rocco.”

Rocco looked jittery as he willed his brother to look at the documents. “But I want to talk to you about this. Look I’ve done all of this work—”

“I said not tonight,” Cameron snapped.

Rocco and I both jumped. He looked at me despairingly. I didn’t know what to say.

He glared at Cameron and then flung the papers on the table. He stomped back to his room and slammed the door behind him. It was a *déjà vu* from this morning.

Cameron continued absentmindedly picking at his food. I scowled, but he didn’t notice.

I got up and decided to let him brood in peace.

“You were talking to Frances today?” he called out as I reached the doorway.

“Yes,” I responded, refusing to look at him.

“What did you talk about?” he asked evenly.

I spun on my heels.

“Why?” I said, attempting to mimic his coldness.

“Because I have a right to know what goes on under my roof.”

“We were outside,” I snipped back.

Cameron fixed his stare, waiting for an answer.

“We talked about Bill,” I finally conceded.

“Anything else?” he probed

“Nope. What else is there?” I fumed. That was a lie, but I figured that my rage would hide any traces of it.

Cameron didn’t answer and took a bite of his food as he stared me down.

The fact that he was still angry with me, that he had taken his anger out on his little brother suddenly made me furious. My blood boiled, and my breath felt like it was going to spew fire. I wasn’t holding anything back this time.

“Cameron Hillard, I know that you’re still upset with me because of last night, but you have no right to take it out on Rocco. Rocco worked really hard today, and he was excited to show you what he did. You just blew him off like he’s one of your foot soldiers. He’s your brother,” I almost spelled out for him. “Your brother is a really great kid, who deserves better than to be ordered around like a maid. And Frances and I didn’t talk about much, but if I wanted to talk to her some more, I would. This might be your house, but you don’t control me or what I do. I will talk to whoever I want, whenever I want.”

By the end of my speech, I was seething and panting.

Cameron was frozen at the table, his eyes the size of a shot glass. I turned around and calmly walked upstairs. I gently closed the door behind me and sniffed a bit, but did not cry.

Downstairs, I heard Cameron’s chair fiercely pull out and the clinging of a bowl getting pitched into the sink. I was afraid that he was going to come running after me and that I would have to think of a new speech.

He never came. After a few stomped footsteps, the house was dead quiet once again.

The release of fury must have been therapeutic, because I slept quite well that night. I was awoken only once by the usual sound of scratching and whining at my bedroom door. I drowsily got up and let Meatball in for his bedtime.

I had never grown up with a dog—it was definitely strange to have Meatball sleep next to me at first. But I was surprised by how quickly I got accustomed to the brute being there. It was appeasing, even if, deep down, I knew that whatever the reason he slept in the same bed, it was not out of any sense of duty to me.

Chapter Fourteen: The Proper Kind of Diversion

In the morning, a light knock at my door brought Rocco into my room. He lounged himself on my bed while I got dressed in the washroom.

“I heard you and Cameron arguing last night,” he told me.

“As far as I know, it takes at least two people to have an argument. It was more like I talked loudly to myself while Cameron watched,” I yelled back through the door.

“Yeah, that’s usually how it goes with Cameron. It takes a lot for him to lose his cool, which is really annoying when all you want is to just have it out. Sometimes I wish he would just be like everyone else and fight back instead of acting like such an adult.”

I pasted a smile on my face and walked out of the room with a towel coiled on my head.

Rocco was lying on his side watching while I towel-dabbed my hair. “I heard all of the stuff you said about me to Cameron ... It was really nice of you,” he said, squinting. “But you should know that you’re really not my type.”

This made me smile, genuinely. “I didn’t think that fifteen-year-olds could even have a type. Don’t you just go for anything with breasts?”

“Maybe that’s why you’re not my type,” he said. “Besides, I’m much more mature than most fifteen-year-olds.”

“Yes, I forgot that only real men throw tantrums in their rooms when they don’t get their way.”

He shrugged. “Well, thanks for sticking up for me. I’ve never heard any one talk to my brother like that.”

“Don’t mention it,” I said. “Not that it did either of us any good. I didn’t get to fight it out, and you didn’t get what you wanted.”

“Actually, after you left last night, Cameron came into my room,” Rocco told me with his big grin. Something was up—he was getting eager and

fidgety. I waited patiently, excited with his excitement. “Our plan worked,” he finally spilled. “Cameron said that I could go with him next time. That I could be more than just a lookout.”

I didn’t know what being more than a lookout meant but I was glad to see Rocco so happy again. “When do you leave?”

Rocco scowled at the ceiling. “I don’t know. I forgot to ask.”

Contently shrugging his shoulders, he slumped around on the bed and looked outside.

When I turned around to go hang my towel in the washroom, I saw Cameron standing in the bedroom doorway. I froze and Cameron formed a wary smile on his lips. I wondered how long he had been standing there, how much he had heard.

“Can I come in?” he asked with his velvety voice. He was wearing a red T-shirt, making his beautiful features even more noticeable to me. I was now sure that he did these things on purpose.

Rocco looked at me, awaiting my response, but I went to the washroom to hang my towel. “Join the party,” he responded for the both of us.

I came back out and fingered my hair into a wet bun while Cameron sat on the edge of the bed. He raised his eyebrows at his kid brother.

Rocco rolled up and cleared his throat. “I better get going.”

But on his way out, he squeezed me in a bear hug until my feet were no longer touching down. “Thanks, Emmy,” he murmured into my ear and let me go so that my lungs could suck air once again.

Cameron was shaking his head in wonder as Rocco closed the door. “Funny kid,” he said, chuckling uneasily.

I had decided that that exact moment was the perfect time for me to put away the clean laundry that had been sitting in laundry baskets. I had also decided that this chore required my complete and undivided attention.

The room was tensely silent while I folded laundry and opened and closed drawers.

“You’re still angry with me,” Cameron finally caught on after a few minutes.

I briefly lifted my eyes but otherwise ignored him and continued my imperative chore.

Defeated, he fell backward on the bed, his hands passing over his face and halting forked in his hair. “This is so much more complicated than I

ever thought it would be.”

“I’m sorry to be such an inconvenience to you,” I snarled. Then I remembered that I wasn’t talking to him and went back to the laundry.

He laughed and shook his head at the ceiling.

“I should be mad at you, you know,” he said. “There’s no way that Rocco could ever come up with a plan to blackmail me into letting him work for me.”

“You wanted something, he wanted something. That’s called bargaining, negotiation, not blackmail. Anyway, you don’t give Rocco enough credit. He’s a really smart kid.”

“Are you saying that you didn’t put the idea in his head?”

“He would have eventually found a way to get what he wants, whether or not I helped him,” I responded, avoiding the finger-pointed question.

He turned his head to gaze at me. “Having Rocco follow in my footsteps could get him killed. That’s not something that I can live with.”

“You know,” I said with an elongated sigh, “for someone so smart you can be really dense. None of this has to do with working for you. Rocco is just looking for a way to spend more time with you, his big brother. Since you work all the time and won’t talk to him about your life, he probably thinks that working *for* you will get him more time *with* you.”

I could feel Cameron’s eyes on me while he considered this.

“You think so?” he finally asked.

“I know so,” I said while I rolled socks into each other. “This has everything to do with you and Rocco and nothing to do with me. I’m just trying to give Rocco something to look forward to for once. Something beyond channel-surfing.”

“This place isn’t so bad, is it?” he asked me with an edge of concern in his voice.

“It’s definitely one of the nicer prisons I’ve been in,” I mumbled. “You can be mad at me all you want for not following your rules, but Rocco is bored and lonely. You really need to keep his mind busy. Doing dishes, babysitting me just won’t cut it.”

“Rocco likes to be around you,” he said. “I don’t think he feels like he’s babysitting you.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But I’m a very poor substitute for you.”

Cameron sat back up, resting his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands together. I could sense that he was studying me, and I tried to ignore that.

“Emmy, can you look at me?” he asked. “Please?”

I finally let him see my eyes, since he had said please.

His lips curved a little higher, but his eyes were still very tight. “I didn’t come in here because I was mad at you,” he told me. “I came here to apologize. I didn’t react very well after you had a nightmare because it was hard for me to see you be afraid of me. The last thing I wanted was to make you fear me. It made me feel sick to my stomach, but I don’t blame you for having the reaction of a normal person.”

I exhaled overdramatically. “Cameron, I had a bad dream. People have bad dreams all the time. And I’m definitely not afraid of you. If that makes me abnormal, then that’s nothing new.”

“You need to be scared of people like me, Emmy. We can hurt you.”

I crossed my arms like a five year-old. “If you came here to order me to be scared of you, then you might as well just turn around, because I don’t feel like being ordered around again today.”

“I never order you around,” Cameron said.

“What about yesterday when you gave me the third degree for talking to Frances? I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I’m trying to protect you,” he reminded me, like a broken record.

“You use the words protect and control interchangeably,” I shot back and hurriedly stashed away a stack of my unmentionables into the top drawer, slamming the drawer shut with more force than necessary.

“You just need to trust my judgment,” he said, softly. “Believe me, I know better than to try to control you. You can do whatever you want here. Just think of this place as a long-deserved rest, like a spa or one of those places girls like you pay a lot of money to be forced to relax.”

I felt my ears grow hot, fully aware that he had put me in the box that I hated so much. “If I can’t go anywhere or talk to anyone, then I am in a prison. This is no spa that girls like me pay a lot of money to go to,” I pointed out to him with added harshness to my voice.

He was surprised by my change in demeanor. “I didn’t say that you couldn’t talk to anyone and you can walk around as much as you want. I’m just asking you to stay away from Frances.”

“But I can’t leave the grounds, and I have to stay away from Griff too.”

“Who’s Griff?” Cameron’s face was impenetrable.

“Griff ... one of your guards ... the one who’s been told to stay away from me, or else,” I reminded him, with as much patience as I could muster.

“You mean the big tall guy with the red hair who keeps looking at you with goofy eyes?” he mocked, but his expression had grown severe.

“So you’ve met,” I said with torrential sarcasm.

“I didn’t say anything to him. Why would I?”

“Maybe you didn’t but Spider sure did. Spider works for you, doesn’t he?”

“Security is Spider’s job. I don’t mess with his business, and I certainly don’t question how he manages the watchdogs,” he scoffed. Then he bent forward slightly. “What’s your interest in this Griff guy anyway?”

“We’re just friends,” I sighed. “Unless you lock me in here, you can’t expect me to barricade myself in your room when you’re gone all the time.”

Cameron smiled ruefully. “Why not? You could sit here, counting the minutes till I came home after a hard day’s work and made your wait worthwhile.”

I threw a T-shirt at him. He caught it in midair, tried to fold it, and threw it back onto the pile.

“Fine. I get it. You need some diversion. But does it have to be with that guy? I mean, can’t you just hang out with Rocco?”

“I can only watch so much television in one day.” I properly folded the T-shirt and stacked it on top of the others.

“Well,” he said, grinning full-toothed, “I guess I’ll just have to stay here all the time and make sure to keep you really busy.”

“That’s quite an undertaking,” I responded, barely managing to catch my breath. And then a thunderous splash hit the window—and another, and another. We could hear jeering coming from outside. I didn’t have to get up to know that Rocco, and maybe a few followers, were throwing water balloons at my bedroom window.

“When do you have to leave next?” I asked, trying to sound indifferent.

“Tomorrow.”

My shoulders drooped a little. “So much for staying here and keeping me busy.”

“I wish I could stay,” he started softly, seemed to recompose and continued in a more officious tone. “I wish I could do all my work from here, but I can’t. There are some things that I have to be there in person to do.”

Another water balloon assault started, and Cameron sighed. “We better go down there before they break a window or kill themselves trying.”

The day was well-wasted playing by the pool with the rest of the family. Cameron laughed at the appropriate times and had a near-constant smile on his face, but something was different, particularly when he was near me. He was detached—like someone else was artfully playing the role of Cameron Hillard—and he definitely never came within more than a few feet from me. This I noticed more than anything else.

In the evening, after dinner, Cameron, Spider, and Carly removed themselves from the table and headed out to talk business. Rocco and I headed to our station in front of the TV. But before we had a chance to settle ourselves in for the evening, Cameron halted at the threshold and called out to Rocco. “Well, you want to learn the business, don’t you?” he said to Rocco.

Rocco jumped off the couch and the family disappeared through the kitchen doorway.

It was early in the morning when I heard the commotion downstairs. The house was too quickly emptying itself once again. This time, I let Meatball out so that he—at least—could join Cameron. Then I went back to bed to pine under the covers.

When the house was quiet again, Meatball came begging to be let back into our shared bedroom. We had both been left behind, on purpose.

I tried to go back to sleep, and the rolling around under the covers lasted for a good hour. I gave up, threw on an old T-shirt and shorts, and went outside to let Meatball out and find diversion.

But Griff wasn’t at his station near the bottom of the property.

I ought to have known that with the bosses gone, Griff would start slacking off—immediately. I considered going to drag him out of bed but decided against it—one of the line guards was watching me, with persistence. Making a scene on the first day Cameron was away was

probably a bad idea. After talking myself out of it, I bitterly went back into the house and tiptoed past the snoring night guards on my way to the gym.

I was never one for running on a treadmill. Something about running for miles and never getting anywhere used to make me feel uneasy—I had forgotten about that, but the memory was resurfacing; running in a room, a house void of people, staring at the unmoving water of the pool, the large windows ... I was feeling claustrophobic, like a mouse stuck in a cage, getting nowhere fast on a spin wheel.

With significant effort, I managed to run a few miles, then made it back upstairs to shower and dress.

I had given Griff enough time to sleep in. If he wasn't up, I was going to go wake him up—no matter what. I opened the front door just as the guard who was staring at me earlier was coming in.

The guard followed my gaze with delight as I looked for Griff outside.

"You're wasting your time," he sneered. "Griff already left."

I saw another guard standing at Griff's usual post. "Where did he go?"

"Don't know. He left with the rest of the crew this morning."

"What? Why?" I asked with slight panic.

"For some reason, the chief all of a sudden decided that he couldn't leave without Griff going with them. Griff got woken up late last night and told to get ready to leave this morning."

We stood facing each other for a moment, and I immediately regretted finding myself alone with him. All of a sudden, I was very afraid and felt very alone. The guard reached for the door, and Meatball flew in before the door could close on him.

Meatball stood between us while the guard kicked off his shoes and made his way downstairs, mumbling to himself, "Go figure. The guy that screws off the most gets promoted first."

I breathed hard and kept my hand on Meatball's head, but neither of us moved for a little while. And then my mind started working again, and I started thinking. Cameron's sudden interest in Griff ... a coincidence? The sick feeling at the pit of my stomach told me otherwise. Then another reality set in: Cameron and Rocco and Griff were gone; I had absolutely no human refuge until they all came back. I looked down at Meatball and decided to stay very close to him from now on.

When Meatball and I had taken a few deep breaths and our limbs had uncrystallized, we went into the kitchen. I started with a load of laundry and fed the hungry dog. I crisped some bacon and fed that to him too. I got whatever I could find out of the fridge and cupboards and started measuring and mixing and frying and baking. I labored away until the kitchen table and counter were stacked with pancakes, French toasts, muffins, cookies and a couple loaves of bread. I knew I was done when I ran out of room and supplies.

I brought all of the food downstairs to the guards' kitchen with Meatball closely guarding my heels. No one was there thankfully. I left the food out and sped back up the stairs, hoping that maybe feeding the guards would keep me in their good books. At least no one would starve while I was still alive.

Within minutes, I could hear cheering from the night guards who had either been awoken by the smell of food, or by the clamoring of pots and pans from my cooking session. Either way, happy jostling sounds filled the house—in many ways, a small relief. But when I looked at the clock, horror struck again because I had only managed to kill a few hours.

Taking the box of dog biscuits out of the food pantry, I tried to lure Meatball to me so that I could entertain myself by teaching a guard dog to roll over. But Meatball had stationed himself by the threshold and did not move from there, no matter how much I begged.

So I threw the wash in the dryer and a new load in the washer and waited, walking without aim from the kitchen to the living room windows. I turned the TV on and then paced down the hall. I paused in front of Rocco's chaotic room. For a second, I thought I might have been hopeless enough to clean his room; that is until manifold, nauseating images of what I could uncover in a teenage boy's room suddenly popped into my head. I gently kicked the clothes out of the way so that I could close his door and creep away like the thought had never crossed my mind.

I eventually reached the end of the hallway and of the house, and wandered into the library. My roving eye was drawn to the piano. Bill had been a natural at everything he touched, music was no exception. Anything I produced in his shadow was a failure in comparison to what my brother could do. Sooner or later, with Bill's help, like always, I had been able to memorize sequences of keys, enough to fool my parents into thinking that I

could play, enough for them to stop cycling piano teachers through the house.

Taking advantage of the fact that there was no one in the house to deride my triumphant musical comeback, I sat at the piano and started punching the ivories. As I brutally attempted and reattempted to recall the theme song from *Cheers*, I almost fell backward off the bench when something moved from the corner.

"That sounds really awful," Carly said, pointing out the obvious, standing by the couch.

I was never happier to see her. "I thought you were gone with the rest of them?"

"I decided to take a few days off and stay here instead." She approached and sat next to me on the bench.

"You mean you were told to stay back to babysit me," I corrected.

"Something like that," she said, smiling, gliding her fingers over the piano keys. "I don't think anyone has played this thing since Bill died. He was a really good musician."

It had surprised me to hear Carly talk about my brother in that way. "Don't you hate my brother for what he did?" Still, I wasn't sure how Carly would react to my question, and whether I should seek shelter behind a couch or just curl up into the fetal position right away to avoid pummeling damage to any vital organs.

But Carly was quite calm. "No. I don't. I know I should and it would probably be a lot easier if I did, but I don't."

"Do you hate me then?" I said, practically whispering.

"No, I don't hate you either," she said, laughing. "But it's definitely a shock to see you, here, after so many years." She lifted her eyes. "When you first got here, it was almost like having Bill here again. Seeing you, it just brought back a lot of the anger that I had when Bill died. I couldn't believe that Cameron would have brought you here, that he would do that to me. I understand why now."

"What do you mean you understand why?" I pressed.

Carly smiled wider. "That's something you need to talk to Cameron about, not me."

I made a mental note to remember to ask Cameron.

“Why do you think he did that to you? I mean Bill, and the whole Frances thing. I know that he would have loved you very much. Given my family’s history, how angry he was, it doesn’t make any sense to me that he would have ever done that.”

Carly sighed and paused, her face slightly tensing. “I don’t know. I never saw it coming, to tell you the truth. Even when Bill started getting weird and secretive, I never once thought he would do that. Of all the things that I imagined, that was never an alternative.”

“Did you know he was taking drugs?” I asked, aware that I was looking to make excuses now.

“No ... I don’t know ... Maybe,” Carly said shaking her head. “If you would have asked me this question a year before he died, I would have said absolutely not. Bill hated drugs, which was pretty funny given our line of business. But then he started to change.”

She glanced down while sadness passed over her porcelain face. “A few months before he died, he started waking up in the middle of the night, in cold sweats, screaming, not making any sense. He was losing so much weight, and the way he was handling the business ... he was going to get all of us killed.” Her eyes came back to me, and she held them there. “Emmy, this life that we lead, it’s not for everyone. Most people can’t handle it. Your brother was too sensitive ... he just couldn’t handle it all anymore, it was killing him. I think that he wanted to get out before it killed him. The drugs, Frances, they were his way to escape it all.” She dragged breath. “When he died, the business had been falling apart for a long time. Cameron brought it all back. If it wasn’t for him ... we might not ... we definitely wouldn’t have survived.”

She took another breath. I couldn’t take my eyes and ears off her.

Then her lips crept up. I realized it was for my benefit. “You know, Cameron’s really brilliant. He got into MIT after he graduated from high school.”

I wasn’t really shocked. I already knew of his brilliance. “Why didn’t he go?”

“Your brother called him with a better offer.”

I wondered if he ever regretted that decision—and then realized I already knew the answer. “What were Cameron and my brother like when they were together?”

“I guess they were a lot like Cameron and Rocco, except that your brother was like the kid brother, even if he was older than Cameron. It was funny to watch sometimes. Your brother coming up with the quick moneymakers, as he called them, and Cameron the voice of reason, the one who brought him back to reality. I guess Cameron hasn’t changed much in that way. I think if it wasn’t for Cameron, your brother would have gotten arrested a thousand times.”

“What about Spider and Bill? What were they like together?”

“Exact opposites. Fire and water. Bill was charming and outgoing. Spider is, well, much more quiet. They fought constantly, sometimes in front of customers. It was embarrassing.”

“Spider hated my brother for what he did to you,” I mused.

“Spider did hate Bill for cheating on me, but he had his own reasons for hating Bill too,” she agreed, eyeing me. “You know, no matter how cool some guys think they are, when it comes to some girls, it’s like they lose their mind. They start saying and doing really stupid stuff.”

I knew that this observation was directed at me. “I don’t like to be ordered around, and I definitely don’t like to be told who I can and can’t talk to. What if Spider told you that you couldn’t talk to someone, for no good reason?” I demanded.

“He did ... so I started dating Bill just out of spite,” she said smiling. “Anyway, you shouldn’t be so hard on Cameron. He’s got a lot on his shoulders right now. This life isn’t easy for any of us. Some days it feels like it sucks all the life out of you—whatever’s left feels inhuman sometimes.”

“Was my brother ever happy?”

Carly wasn’t smiling anymore and hesitated before answering. “Yes, at some point, he was really happy. We all were in the beginning. It was hard not to be.”

“Was Bill ever suicidal? Do you think he wanted to overdose?”

“I don’t know. Like I said, he wasn’t the same person in the end.” Carly looked at me searchingly, and then exhaled and chuckled. “Cameron was right. You are exhausting.”

My heart leapt, a large smile split my face, and a few red blotches popped up. “What else does he say about me?”

Carly smiled, put a hand on my shoulder, and suggested we go downstairs before the food was all gone. We picked up our guard dog on the way down, but we were already too late—not a morsel was left from the spread I had prepared. Two of the night guards were sugar-crashed on the couch, vacantly staring at the ceiling with their hands on their full bellies, stuck in a gluttonous daze. The scary guard wasn't there.

"Animals," Carly grumbled as we strolled past them. She motioned for me to follow her into the small pool house.

Inside, Carly's hideaway was cozy, distinctly feminine—and very festive. Bright red and orange and yellow and deep blue colors were splashed everywhere from the walls to the curtains to the assorted furniture. Wooden dividers of painted purple and yellow flowers separated the small apartment into three rooms: the bedroom, the living room, and the kitchenette. It all hurt my eyes a little bit.

While Carly fixed us some food, I asked her about her bold choice in décor.

"It reminds me of home," she explained warmly.

She told me about her mother, who had emigrated from Mexico as a young girl. She told me about her five sisters and about the house that she grew up in—a house that had been decorated in a similar bright fashion, and had been almost as small as Carly's cottage. She laughed and told me about some of the trials of living in a one-bedroom house, and sharing one tiny bathroom with six other women. She told me about all of these things with a constant smile on her lips and a tear in her eye. She never mentioned her father. I didn't bring it up.

"Do you see them very much?" I wondered.

"Not anymore," she answered, a tear almost breaking surface. "It's just too dangerous. I don't want them to get caught up in all of this. My sisters have kids. I don't know what I would do if one of them ever got hurt because of me."

She looked at me, and her eyes lit up, a bit. She dashed into her bedroom. After searching through the dresser drawers, she rushed back.

"Spider had to go steal this from my mom's house for me last Christmas," she told me, handing me a picture of her family. They were standing in front of a bright and ornate Christmas tree—a cluster of happy,

smiling faces, young and old. “It’s all of them—my family. The holidays are always the hardest for me.”

“Do you ever regret choosing this life?”

Carly looked at me strangely, like I had just asked her if she regretted breathing.

“I didn’t have any choice, Emmy. People like Spider, Cameron, and I are lucky just to survive for this long. If we weren’t doing this here, we would be doing it from the street, where things are even more dangerous. We’ve all had to make big sacrifices in order to get here, but at least we have some control over our lives now. I send money back to my family. I can keep them safe from here.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to suggest that you shouldn’t be doing this.”

Carly conceded a sigh. “I know. It’s hard to understand when you don’t come from the streets, when you’ve always had everything you’ve ever wanted. Your brother always had that problem too.”

I could sense that Carly was getting upset by our conversation. I decided to not push my luck any further.

We spent the rest of the day together, Carly and I. I found that I liked her more and more. In some ways, she was very reserved—but her temperament seemed to flare up easily. I thought that we were very similar in this way; yet it was clear to me that, in her eyes, we were very different.

In the evening, we popped some popcorn and settled in for a girls-only movie night—though our chick-flick choice probably had more explosions and gunfight than a movie that most “normal” girls would have picked.

Carly even brought out a bottle of wine.

“I was able to sneak this past Spider last time we got back from the city,” she told me a little shamefacedly.

“Why would you have to sneak it in?” Dating the head of security should come with some perks.

“Spider doesn’t allow booze anywhere on the property,” she explained.

“That’s ... unorthodox,” I mentioned, though “control freak” came to mind.

She was slightly dubious. “Would you want these boys carrying machine guns after they’ve been drinking?”

Touché.

Two bags of popcorn later, with plastic goblets and an almost empty bottle of wine ... Carly and I were thoroughly on our way to having a great time. But when the male lead got hit by a bus, Carly suddenly turned the volume down. The slamming of a car door confirmed her suspicions that she had heard something.

I turned to Carly with question. Her face had blanched. "Oh God," she gasped, bringing her hand to her mouth. "They're early. Something's happened."

As she pounced off the couch, the front door slammed opened. What we heard next stunned both of us.

"Is someone singing?" we asked simultaneously.

Chapter Fifteen: Flying High

Cameron and Spider slumped in together and were followed by Griff and Tiny, who were dragging Rocco in by the waist. Rocco's foot was heavily bandaged, but he was otherwise very happy.

Carly was as shocked as I was. But Spider meaningfully shook his head at her; now was not the time to ask questions.

Rocco was still singing like a drunken sailor as Griff and Tiny helped him to the couch. Griff was ashen. He glanced at me from the corner of his eye, and then he glanced at Cameron. He looked like he was about to say something to Cameron, but Tiny grabbed him by the arm and led him back out.

While Carly and I wondered about Rocco's concerto, Spider caught sight of the almost empty bottle of wine on the coffee table. He picked it up and accusingly glimpsed at Carly and me. Our cheeks burned wine red. Carly smiled, guiltily, while she examined her fingernails; I immediately went searching for the remote control, to turn the movie off.

Cameron smiled, but his eyes were lined. "Did we interrupt your party?"

I found the remote too quickly and changed the subject. "What's wrong with Rocco?"

"He's heavily sedated," Cameron told me.

Rocco suddenly took interest.

"I'm not sayne-dated. Dr. Lorne just gave me some happy pills," he squeaked, shaking a sandwiched-sized, clear plastic bag of multicolored pills. And then he ravenously grabbed the nearly empty popcorn bowl, and we all watched him try to bite through the unpopped kernels.

Carly piped up in the inflating pressure. "So, are we supposed to guess what happened?"

There was a tense moment of silence between Cameron and Spider, between Rocco's teeth-splitting crunches.

“Rocco shot himself in the foot,” Spider finally spilled, keeping his eye on Cameron.

Cameron’s already treacherous mood exploded like a volcano. “He wouldn’t have shot himself if my orders had been followed.”

“It was an accident, Cameron,” Spider reminded him, quickly, patiently.

“I said no guns! What part of my order wasn’t clear?”

Rocco got up from the couch and limped toward the patio doors.

“Where are you going?” Cameron demanded, the anger of his voice ricocheting off the living room walls.

“To bed. It’s too loud in here,” he responded groggily. He opened the patio door, limped through, and disappeared into the darkness outside. Carly and I watched Spider and Cameron stare each other down. The tension in the room was now thick and unnerving.

Carly smartly excused herself and left through the kitchen doorway. I followed her lead and went to check on the patient out on the deck.

It was pitch black outside. At first, I couldn’t see where Rocco had gone, but as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I saw his elongated shadow lying on a lounging chair. There was no moon; the sky was softly lit by a million twinkling stars. It was amazing how quickly it came—my sense of insignificance in the grand scheme of things.

I sat down next to him and watched the sky. It smelled like summer now, like the woods were breathing, too alive to sleep the darkness away. Rocco drowsily mumbled and tussled on his improvised bed. After a few minutes, he went silent. I assumed that he had finally fallen asleep.

“He loves you,” he garbled.

At first I thought he was still mumbling to himself, but as I turned to look at him, I saw that he had twisted onto his side and had been staring at me. His hair was disheveled—with one side completely flattened while the other stood straight up on its ends.

“Who are you talking to?” I asked, playing along with his drugged stupor.

“You, stupid. Who do you think?” he grumbled and turned on his back and squinted, like he was trying to figure out what those twinkly things above were doing on his bedroom ceiling. He gave up trying to focus on anything and sighed, “I think Cameron has for a long time.”

I couldn't remember how it went: inebriated people always tell it like it is, or never trust what someone under the influence tells you? Maybe the truth was, as always, somewhere in the middle. Either way, my heart thudded.

He scratched his nose and then his ear. "That night, when I knocked you over the head, I seriously thought that Cameron was going to kill me ... I screw stuff up all the time ... so I guess that wasn't really weird ... Except that he made me bring you here, you were more than just some chick he picked up off the street. I think it's driving him nuts having you here. He must have called me a thousand times in the middle of the night to check up on you last time he left to go to work."

"You should really get some sleep, Rocco," I suggested unwillingly.

"Before you came here," he continued, ignoring me, his sole audience, "Cameron used to work all the time and then left us whenever he wasn't working. We used to assume that he just wanted to be alone. Since you've been here, he doesn't disappear anymore."

"Don't you think it's strange that, out of all the people in the park that day, Meatball would run after you?" he asked me. "I mean, I'm not really good at math, but it seems pretty slim odds that the dog would jump on the one girl whose brother just happened to be the dog owner's best friend. I think Meatball knew who you were a long time before you actually met. He likes you better than everyone else, that's for sure." Was he still talking about the dog? He turned to me, keyed up. "You know what else?"

I shrugged, because I didn't know what else there could be, because I was holding on too tight to my bottom lip to play along anymore.

"I overheard Tiny tell Spider that someone told Tiny ..." I was having trouble keeping up with this given my state of mind and wondered how he managed given his state of mind. "... that Cameron was in the projects a lot even when he wasn't working. After you came here, it all stopped ... *and*," he added like he was expecting a drumroll, "Tiny told me that when they went to get your stuff from your house, Cameron knew exactly where you lived and where your room was in the house. Tiny was the only one Cameron even allowed in the house. But no one was allowed to go near your stuff. Cameron packed it all himself."

Images were running through my head—images of what had, might have, already happened; images of what could be ... it took me a while to

remember how to speak. Rocco was—absurdly—making a lot of sense, or at least that was what my heart wanted, very much, to believe. My head, on the other hand, was shielding the rest of me, challenging the mere possibility. For Cameron to—and I had trouble saying this even quietly to myself—love me, was, as Rocco had used, slim odds. Cameron was everything; and I was, not enough. My mind was looking for ways to protect me from the reality of my shortcomings.

“Why would Cameron send Meatball after me?” I contradicted, but there was no answer. While my innards had been fighting, I hadn’t noticed that Rocco had gone quiet. I looked over—he was asleep.

A serene voice in the darkness did answer me. “I didn’t.”

Cameron had been standing in the doorway with his arms crossed, listening to Rocco and me.

“Meatball got away from me after he spotted you running.” His shadow moved past me to the furthest end of the deck.

I could only watch.

“Taking advantage of my brother’s state to extort information?” While he had spoken from the darkness, I had listened for traces of anger but deciphered nothing like that. I exhaled just a little.

“He offered,” I corrected and went to investigate him in the darkness. From what I could see, he was standing with his arms casually resting over the side of the rail, looking toward the shadows of the trees. Other than the lights coming from Carly’s house, the landscape was blackened, and I could barely make out Cameron’s face—just his dark eyes that twinkled under the stars.

“So what were you doing there in the first place? In the projects, I mean,” I probed, trying to keep my voice casual.

“Checking up on you. Making sure you were safe,” he answered, his voice mastering casualness.

“Did you do that ... often?” I asked him.

Cameron didn’t answer.

“How long have you been doing this?”

“Since Bill died.” His tone was still unbearably unruffled.

I gasped. “That was six years ago, Cameron! You’ve been doing this for that long?”

Cameron took his time. “Bill made me promise a long time before he died that I would look after you if anything ever happened to him. I kept my promise.”

I was trying to analyze his intonation again. This was even more difficult when I had nothing but a darkened face to match the voice with. “Is that the only reason?”

Cameron remained silent again and kept his dark eyes fixed on the imperceptible landscape.

“If Meatball hadn’t gotten away from you that day, would you have ever introduced ... shown yourself to me?”

Cameron turned and faced me. I couldn’t see his eyes anymore.

“No,” he said without an inch of doubt. “You had your own life.”

“Not much of a life,” I mumbled and pouted.

“Better than this.”

“So you just decided all of this on your own, without consulting with me. You had no right to make that decision for me.”

Cameron chuckled, but I caught a glimpse of his uneasiness. “You would have never known the difference, Emmy. Your life would have gone on without ever knowing that I was there or that this ... life even existed. It’s not like it was easy to do, especially after you moved into that hellhole in Callister.”

“It must have been inconvenient for you to have to spy on me in a grubby part of town,” I quipped.

“That’s not what I meant,” he said. “At least if you would have done what you were supposed to and gone off to a good college, lived in a nice place, and eventually met a good guy, I would have felt a lot better about letting you live your life. But imagine what it was like for me to see you so miserable and not be able to do anything about it.”

“So why didn’t you do anything about it?”

I felt Cameron’s hand move smoothly over my cheek, displacing a strand of hair that had fallen out of my ponytail.

“You and I are just too different.”

I didn’t know if it was the wine that I had shared with Carly or the fact that Cameron and I stood in the darkness, hidden from the world and each other, but I suddenly felt very brave.

“So is Rocco right? Do you love me?” I brazened into the night, though disbelief still encased my voice.

Cameron chose silence.

“Answer me,” I demanded.

But Cameron would not be ordered.

It was surely the wine, because I stood on my tiptoes and searched in the darkness and found his face. He moved his head forward in instinct, and his face all of the sudden emerged from the dark. He looked as nervous as I felt. It was the way he looked at me, like he was searching for something—like he had just found it, that made my fingers tingle with ants. With his face inches away from mine, Cameron paused for an instant, and his darkened eyes stayed fixed on mine. He closed in, my eyes closed themselves, and he parted my lips with his. He kissed me too softly at first, like he was expecting me to break into pieces. But I was quite suddenly strong and inched myself closer to him. I felt his hand loop around to the small of my back while the other gently pushed my head toward his.

I was overwhelmed, too overwhelmed to notice the patio door open—but Cameron noticed. Footsteps approached; he grabbed my shoulders and pushed me away. He rushed past me. I was left blurry.

Griff was standing over Rocco. He was startled when Cameron emerged from the darkness and fleetingly glared at me when I followed Cameron, attempting to rapidly fix my disheveled ponytail.

“Get away from him!” Cameron ordered.

Rocco, who had been awoken by Cameron’s loud voice, sat up and skimmed confusedly from Griff to Cameron and me.

Griff looked terrified and angry. “I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t see you ... standing there. I just came to check on the Kid.”

“You’ve done enough for one day. Leave,” Cameron commanded.

“Sir ... I wanted to apologize for what happened earlier today ...” Griff stammered.

Cameron’s eyes became crazed. “I said leave! Now!”

Rocco and I both jumped as Cameron lost his cool.

Griff glimpsed at me with fury and quickly spun around, leaving just as Tiny and Spider came running through the doors.

“What’s going on?” a dazed Rocco asked.

I looked through the crowd of panting angry men. Instinct told me that I needed to get out of there—quickly.

So I turned to Rocco, “You need to go to bed. You can’t sleep out here.”

“Out where?” he wondered.

I helped Rocco off the lounge chair and painstakingly held him up as we dragged ourselves back into house. I made sure to close the patio door behind us, sensing that the tension bubble between Cameron, Spider, and Tiny was about to burst.

After I heaved Rocco into his bed, I hurried back to my room to be alone and let the men air out their differences. I was still quite high—though I wasn’t sure whether to dance around my room or lock my bedroom door. I plummeted onto the bed, tracing my fingers over my lips over and over until I drifted to sleep, before I could drift back to reality.

That night, the disfigured monster came back into my nightmares. I woke up screaming, but no sound came out of my mouth—in fact, no air came into it either. A large hand covered both my mouth and nose. I fought back, kicking and punching my unseen assailant. The intruder struggled to switch my tiny ballerina lamp on, knocking it over in the process. The light was on, and Griff was standing over me with his hand over just my mouth now, anxiously scanning the room and shushing me erratically.

“Emily! It’s me! Chill out!” he hushed.

When I could take a few breaths through my nose and my heart had finally slowed to an almost normal tempo, Griff let me push his hand from my face.

“Griff, what are you doing here? It’s the middle of the night!” I demanded in a half-whisper and half-sleep.

He got up and started pacing back and forth, looking at the floor while he collected his thoughts. “How could you do this to me?” He looked up, wretched. “I should have known that when the boss asked for me to go with them today, then he kept glaring at me the whole time, that he meant something by it. I’m such an idiot. I’ve been racking my brain for weeks, trying to figure out what these mongrels want with you and how I was going to get you out of this place, when it turns out that you’re the boss’s concubine.”

I shot straight up in bed. “What did you call me?”

He moved over to me with a look of disgust on his face. “I’ve been putting my life in danger for you while you’re messing with the boss like a concubine.”

Before I knew it was happening, my hand was raised, and I heard it smack Griff across the cheek. “I’m not messing with anyone, Griffin! Not that that’s any of your business. I’ve already told you, I don’t need to be saved, and I certainly didn’t ask you to do anything for me. Don’t pretend that your choice to slack off has been entirely for my benefit.”

Griff rubbed his cheek and glared away.

I tried my best to calm myself down. “What on earth happened out there today?”

He sat on the bed, still rubbing his cheek like a child, like someone who wasn’t used to getting paid to pummel or be pummeled by much bigger people than me. “It’s like I said. I got told last night that your boyfriend insisted I go with them today. Apparently I was supposed to keep an eye on the Kid while he learned the trade. Spider almost blew my head off when I said I didn’t want to go. So I followed orders and went like a good soldier. Your boyfriend stared at me the whole way down. It was getting creepy. Then we get to this house, and all the boys were told to hang back on the street while Spider, Tiny, and the boss went in to talk business. They were in there for almost an hour ... the Kid was getting bored and asked to see my gun.” He shrugged defensively. “I gave it to him. I didn’t see any harm in it—it wasn’t like he was going to shoot anyone. But one of the boys thought it would be funny to set off firecrackers to scare him. The Kid jumped and shot himself in the foot. Spider came out of the house, screaming at me, something about no guns. How was I supposed to know the Kid would shoot himself?”

“Roc ... the Kid is fine. So what’s with the theatrics?” I said, plunging back into my pillow and breathing with care.

“You don’t get it, do you? These guys have been looking for an excuse to whack me ever since you got here. Now I know it’s because the boss wants you for himself. With the Kid shooting himself today and Spider’s warning last time, I’m done for sure. They’re going to off me.”

“Griff, don’t be ridiculous. No one’s going to do anything to you. I’ll talk to them tomorrow if you want.” I rubbed my tired, burning eyes and yawned.

Griff was incensed and leaned in. "I'm not blind. Even I can see that the boss is a great-looking guy. You probably imagine yourself spending your days at his beck and call, and I'm sure a pretty girl like you could definitely keep him busy for a while. You also probably think that because the boss wants a piece of you, you've got some kind of power over him and that you're safe. Wake up, Emily! The guy doesn't love you and never will. The minute he gets what he wants, you're done for too. I won't be here to save you when that happens."

His eyes were bloodshot and looked like they were about to bug out of his head. He was panting hotly, and every muscle of his body was tightly knotted and he was very close to me.

"Griff, you're scaring me," I admitted, my voice shaking.

He stepped away from the bed and started pacing back and forth again.

"We have to leave tonight," he thought out loud.

I pulled the warm blankets up to my chin. "We're not going anywhere—"

"You need to pack a bag. We leave tonight. One of the night guards usually falls asleep against the tree. We'll sneak past him when he does and follow the road from the woods and flag someone down on the highway. We'll have to hitch a ride out of here."

"We're not going anywhere ... tonight. This is ridiculous. You're upset and paranoid. Everything will be better in the morning. You'll see," I assured him.

Griff sat back on the bed and looked at me closely. "Emily, if you don't leave tonight, they will kill you. Maybe not tomorrow, but they will, eventually. There's a reason they don't want anyone to talk to you, makes for less witnesses when you suddenly disappear from the face of the earth. I've been looking on the news to see if anyone is looking for you, there's been nothing at all about you. I don't think anyone even knows you're missing. I didn't tell you this because I didn't want to scare you."

I suddenly realized that Griff was right. I had watched enough television with Rocco to know that my face never appeared on any news bulletins. This had upset me for reasons beyond Griff's grasp.

He took my hands into his. "I'll come back in three hours. Get your stuff together. Just the essentials. We have a long trek ahead of us."

I didn't know what to say to him, except that I wasn't leaving with him. I looked around for inspiration and noticed that something big was missing.

“Where’s Meatball?” I asked him, when what I really meant was: *How did you get in here without Meatball biting your arm off?*

He pointed to the patio door. My guard dog was contently lying on the deck outside gnawing on the gigantic meat bone that was nestled between his paws.

Griff got up.

“Remember, three hours,” he whispered again as he stepped out onto the balcony and climbed down until he was out of sight.

I did set the alarm clock to go off in three hours. In three hours, I would have another chance to convince Griff that running away alone in a dark forest was a really bad idea. I had three more hours to sleep.

Three hours later, the clock rang. I waited and let Meatball back inside.

But Griff never showed.

Chapter Sixteen: Scar Tissue

The house was filled of people and yet unnaturally, densely quiet, like the woods would get right before a storm came crashing down.

I could have sworn Cameron had seen me trotting down the stairs, but he kept walking like he hadn't. When I called out to him, he paused at the front door without looking back. Carly did turn, and she glared ... at me?

Cameron murmured to Carly and Spider that he would catch up with them. They left, he finally turned around, and I was almost in tears. His face was impenetrable, robotic. He forced a smile—it was thin and bloodless. This only made it worse.

"What's wrong?" I managed to ask as I slowly walked toward him—I was sure he had taken a minute step back when I had.

"Nothing ... Just work," he said with the same strained smile. "I'll be gone most of the day. Can you keep an eye on Rocco for me?"

"Of course," I softly agreed. "Are you sure everything's okay?"

"Everything's fine," he answered with an automated tone. "Have a good day."

He swiftly spun and left the house. I stood in the foyer, befuddled as usual.

I wondered how bad things had gotten the night before between Spider, Tiny, and Cameron for Cameron to still be so upset. I found myself being angry at Griff—for refusing to follow orders, for ruining my sleep and my perfect moment with Cameron, for causing a rift in the family.

Rocco was in his room, lying in bed, looking at the ceiling.

His face was wrenched in pain.

"How are you feeling?" I asked him.

"I'll be fine in a few minutes once these green pills kick in," he said through gritted teeth.

I noticed the bag of rainbow tablets next to his bed. “What does your prescription say?”

Rocco laughed, with difficulty. “Dr. Lorne isn’t the type of doctor who gives prescriptions. Who knows what these pills are, I just know they make me feel a lot better ... once they work.”

“Can I get you anything?” Like a drug dictionary or a stomach pump ...

“You can come keep me company,” he suggested, still focused on the ceiling. “I’m getting really bored lying here by myself.”

I scooted next to Rocco, and we watched the ceiling together.

“You didn’t have to shoot yourself in the foot just to get out of doing homework.”

He chuckled, and then loudly inhaled as the pain hit him again. I took his hand and he squeezed it hard.

“I think I told you some stuff about Cameron that I wasn’t supposed to tell you last night,” he said.

“You weren’t making much sense. I didn’t pay any attention.”

“Just don’t tell Cameron I told you, okay?” he pleaded. “He’ll be really upset if he finds out.”

I hated being the bearer of bad news. “Actually, you weren’t exactly discreet about it.” I played it down a bit, “I think Cameron might have overheard you.”

He swore under his breath. “Was he mad?”

“I don’t think so.” I struggled to keep the burning localized to the back of my ears.

“What did he say?”

My cheeks were getting hot. I was trying to find something to answer without telling Rocco anything. “Not much.”

A full-toothed grin formed on his face. “I guess he had a hard time talking when he was sticking his tongue down your throat.”

“You saw?” I gasped in horror. “I thought you were sleeping!”

“Actually, I thought I had dreamt the whole thing,” he narrowed his eyes, “which would have been really weird if I did dream about my brother kissing some girl ... Yuck! But you just confirmed that I’m not going nuts. Thanks.”

I reached over and punched him hard in the arm. “How much did you watch, pervert?”

“Don’t worry,” he said lightly, “I just saw a couple of arms thrashing around in the dark. And then, of course, there were the kissy sounds.” He puckered his lips together and made exaggerated kissing noises near my face to remind me that he was definitely just fifteen years old.

I pushed his face away. “You got Griff in a lot of trouble yesterday for shooting yourself.”

Rocco’s grin was replaced with a pout. I was a little smug.

“Cameron promised me a rank position. I was the only one who didn’t have a gun. How am I supposed to get any respect from the guys if he keeps treating me like I’m a kid?”

I was going to remind him that he was a kid, but changed my mind. “I think Cameron was just trying to keep you safe.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Maybe. But you obviously can’t take care of yourself when you have a gun in your hands,” I pointed out.

He sulked for a bit ... And then he wondered, “How much trouble is Griff in?”

“I don’t know. Cameron was pretty upset last night. He still looked really angry this morning.” My voice quaked a bit.

“I bet Griff is pretty upset with me too.”

“I don’t think so. But he’s definitely scared.”

“Scared? Why?” He looked as incredulous as I had been.

“I don’t know. He came into my room last night and kept saying that they were going to kill him,” I edited, deciding it was better to not tell Rocco everything that Griff said. It was too painful.

“He went into your room!”

“He climbed up the deck in the middle of the night,” I said.

“Wow! He must have been really freaked. Have you talked to Cameron about it? I mean, Griff is being pretty ridiculous about this. He’s not going to get killed just because I shot myself in the foot.”

I was glad to hear that I wasn’t the only one who thought that Griff was being ridiculous—but at the same time I didn’t want to tell Rocco about Griff’s notion that he was going to get killed ... because of me. Had I led Griff to think that there had been something more than friendship between us?

“I haven’t said anything to Cameron about this yet ... he wasn’t in a very good mood this morning.”

“I’ll talk to Cameron,” he stepped up. “This is my fault. Griff shouldn’t get in trouble because of me.”

The moment of maturity was short-lived ... Rocco started giggling.

“So you finally sucked face with my big brother. Hallelujah! I think I deserve a prize for that one.”

“I wouldn’t go advertise the fact that you can’t keep your mouth shut, Rocco,” I snapped.

“Looks like we have something in common then,” he said, disgustingly flicking his tongue at me.

I punched him in the arm, even harder this time but he was quite numb now and didn’t feel a thing.

“You’re gross,” I muttered. Irritated, I got up and stepped on something sticky on the floor. “And your room is gross.”

I thought about it and announced, “I think I’m actually going to clean it today.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” he said, his eyes round.

I started picking up dirty clothes from the floor and throwing them out into the hallway. “You’re going to be spending a lot of time in here, and you can’t lie in this disgusting smell all day,” I lectured and gave him an ultimatum, “You can watch me go through all of your stuff, or you can tell me where I can and can’t go, but either way, I’m cleaning your room today.”

I fixed him a couple of sandwiches. With a full belly and incapacitated state, Rocco agreed to guide me through his maze of a mess. It took us a long time to dig our way out. In the end, I had stacked three large bags of garbage on the front stoop, had filled the dishwashers to the brim with newly discovered dirty dishes, and we had five more loads of laundry to do.

Supper came. His room was close to spotless, and I helped him limp into the living room to eat and watch TV, which, as he explained, was his treat for working so hard all day—talking while I worked away had been an exhausting task for him.

I knew that Rocco was feeling better when his needs became more extravagant. At some point, he complained that his voice was getting tired from having to make so many demands and suggested that I get him a bell

so that he could just ring it instead of moving his mouth. I respectfully declined. I refilled his juice cup one last time and went to bed.

I still hadn't talked to Griff since the night that he had broken into my room. I threw on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and went to check on Rocco before going down to confront Griff. The kitchen was empty. The house was still hushed. I peeked into Rocco's room—he was still snoring. I groaned quietly when I noticed clothes already piled on the floor.

It was sunny out and the guards were out and about, but Griff was not. I could feel their stare as I walked toward the garage, but I didn't care if they saw me. I was determined to clear the air.

I opened the side door into the stifling hot garage and walked past the lineup of cars. The Maserati had been dug out of the mud and dragged back in. It was hard to tell because of the extreme amount of mud, but it looked in pretty bad shape: clumps of grass were stuck under the crooked front wheels, the front fender was also bent and scratched, the driver's-side mirror was missing.

I tiptoed up the stairs and could feel the choking humid air get worse as I climbed. Upstairs, there were half a dozen floor fans running in tandem, which caused the makeshift curtains to fan in and out of the window sills and sporadically cast rays of light onto the room. A handful of night guards were sprawled on top of their beds, uncomfortably sleeping in the heat.

From the end of the room, I couldn't see Griff in his bed. I tiptoed over to be sure. What I found when I did get to his bed shocked me—not only was he not there, but his bed was completely empty—devoid of any pillow, sheets, or blankets. There was just a naked mattress. The areas around and under Griff's bed had also been cleaned out of his personal effects. Griff had already left ... I realized this in horror ... but he hadn't taken everything with him—still tucked under his bed was his box of fighting magazines—the nonessentials.

I didn't care much that he had left me behind or that he had broken his promise to come and get me before he did leave, but the thought of him walking around in the woods by himself concerned me greatly.

I dejectedly sat on his bed and ruffled through a magazine, looking for an explanation, until my peripheral interrupted my train of thought. The garbage bag curtain next to Griff's bed had moved with the wind of the

oscillating fan. From the second-story window, I noticed someone walking on the grass by the forest line below. I looked closer and saw Carly walking by herself, carrying her usual stack of files. She strolled toward the woods, turning onto a shoelace of a beaten dirt path and disappearing through the tree brush.

A booming voice abruptly raised me from my meditation. "What do you think you're doing in here, girl?"

It was one of the line guards, the same one who had informed me that Griff had left with Cameron a few days before, the same scary one who liked to glare at me. He was standing by the top of the stairwell, a tall and grossly skinny man. His hair was greased, like it hadn't been washed in a few days. Adding to my luck, all of the night guards had been awakened by the man's roar.

In the moment it took the angry guard to stomp toward me, it occurred to me that coming here alone, without Griff, had been a really bad idea.

"I was just looking for Griff," I stammered.

The man approached the bed. "Your boyfriend's long gone, honey," he sneered. "Finally got what was coming to him. Acting like he was better than us ... maybe if he hadn't been so high and mighty we would have told him to stay away from the boss's latest girl. Playing that game will always get you wacked."

"Griff ran away," I insisted, my shaking voice failing to convince either of us.

"The only place that guy is running to is hell."

He grabbed me by the arm and tried to pull me off the bed. "Girls like you come and go around here all the time, you ain't nothing special, and I ain't gonna get killed for some prissy little girl." He twisted my arm and yanked me from my seat. "Now get the hell out of here before you get another one of us killed."

"You're hurting me!" I told him.

He twisted harder. I yelped.

"Roach! Let her go!" one of the bigger night guards commanded.

"Mind your own business, Brick. Go back to bed." Roach was dragging me away from the bed.

Two night guards swiftly jumped off their bed and made their way toward us. Roach immediately chickened out and let me go.

“Go,” the guard ordered me as he pushed Roach out of my way and kept his eyes on him.

I ran from the garage without protest, without looking back. Outside, nothing was different. The sun was still shining. The armed guards were still stalking the property, still doing their best to ignore me. But, to me, it was all a little different, like Griff’s absence had shaded it all in various shades of gray. I loved Cameron. And Cameron loved me. Of this I was sure—I couldn’t have imagined that feeling. Everything else was now gray.

I didn’t stop running until I was back in the house. My heart was pounding through my chest, and Rocco was shambling down the stairs.

“I was looking for you. Where were you?” he asked me.

“Just walking around,” I lied. I knew that I wasn’t supposed to be hanging around Griff or looking for him either. My head was buzzing too much to give Rocco a better excuse.

I had to admit that Rocco looked funny standing in his swim trunks with a plastic bag over his injured foot.

“I’m going for a swim,” he announced. “Coming?”

“You really shouldn’t be going in the water with your foot injured like that. It’ll get infected.”

“No, it won’t,” he squeaked and pointed at his plastic wrapped foot, “My foot will stay dry in this.”

My expression was laden with doubt, but he ignored me. “So are you coming or not?”

I shrugged and didn’t waste time changing my clothes and my frame of mind. I desperately needed to be with a friendly face while I cleared my head. When I got to the pool, Rocco was in the water, and the plastic bag had already been thrown to the side.

“It didn’t work,” he explained before I could ask him. I raised my eyebrows in a “told-you-so” way and plunged into the pool.

When I came back up for air, he was looking at me oddly.

“What’s on your arm?”

I followed his gaze and looked at my upper arm—five finger-sized bruises were surfacing where Roach had grabbed me.

“I think I’m getting a rash,” I said.

He swam away from me.

I tried to forget Roach, count my blessings, and focus on what Roach had said, not what he had done. I could tell that he wasn't the most reliable source ... but he had seemed so sure of himself that Griff was ... I couldn't bring myself to believe him.

"Did you talk to Cameron about Griff yet?" I asked Rocco, trying to sound as cool as possible.

"Yeah. I talked to him about it last night."

"And?"

"And nothing. Cameron said the same thing I did. Griff is being stupid—no one's going to kill him or anything like that. I'm the one who screwed up, not Griff." His voice was slightly bitter.

"One of the guards told me he was gone," I mentioned innocently in passing.

"I know," he admitted. "Griff was sent away yesterday."

I wondered if sent away was a code for ... something else. "Why would he be sent away if shooting yourself in the foot was your fault?"

"Because he doesn't follow anyone's orders. I guess him breaking into your room was kind of the last straw."

I was mortified. "You told Cameron that Griff climbed into my room!"

"No, I didn't!" Rocco whimpered. "They already knew. Spider caught Griff climbing down."

I knew this couldn't be good.

"Where was Griff sent away to?" I asked, acting as casual as I could.

"Cameron found him another job with one of his distributors."

"And you believe him?" I questioned, too quickly—what was I insinuating?

He looked at me strangely. "Why wouldn't I believe him? That's a stupid question."

I left it alone. Rocco was getting upset, and so was I.

After a while, the patio door opened. Spider and Carly walked right to the pool house, completely ignoring Rocco and me. A short while later, Cameron also appeared and tensely sat on the edge of the lounge chair.

He surveyed me.

"What's on your arm?" It had sounded like an accusation.

"Rash," Rocco explained for me, thankfully.

Cameron continued to stare at my arm with suspicion. I swam away, grabbing the piece of bandage that floated by and throwing it at Rocco.

He mumbled a curse, stumbled out of the pool, and hopped on one leg back into the house to go fix his foot.

From the opposite end of the pool I was suddenly brave. “Why didn’t you tell me Spider saw Griff climb out of my room?”

“Why didn’t *you* tell me that Griff climbed into your room?”

“You weren’t in a good mood, and I didn’t want to get him in trouble. He was already pretty scared,” I answered right away.

“He didn’t follow orders. He had reason to be scared.”

His voice chilled me and I was less brave now. “You still haven’t answered my question.”

Cameron chewed on his answer. “You and this Griff fellow seemed to have grown ... close over the past few weeks. What you and he were up to in your room is none of my business. I won’t stop you from being with who you want to be with. What I can’t have is an employee who refuses to follow my orders.”

It had all sounded too rehearsed.

“You think that Griff and I were doing *something* up in my room?”

“Like I said, you can be with whoever you want, and I’m sure the two of you probably have a lot in common. I still have a job to do and that includes keeping you safe. We have rules for a reason around here and someone who doesn’t follow rules is a danger to you and the rest of us.”

I tried to push my family’s history of adultery out of my head. “Do you really think that I would kiss you and turn to someone else on the same night? What kind of person do you take me for?”

“That thing last night—”

“That *thing*?” I should have braced myself, but I never got the chance.

“The kiss was just a kiss. It didn’t mean anything. I was really tired and you were drinking ... It should have never happened. Let’s forget about it.”

I couldn’t tell if he had meant his words; his expression, his tone were so well hidden behind the mask. It didn’t matter much. The words had already done their damage, leaving a deep gash in their path.

I took a long, ragged breath.

“But ... you told me you loved me,” I argued, my voice barely a whisper.

“No. I never said that,” he reminded me coldly.

My heart was already plastered with wounds; most were mended, the rest were well calloused scars. I doubted the one that Cameron had freshly carved would ever fully heal. It had reached my core. What I didn't know yet was that everything had started to harden around my broken heart again—a well-practiced reflex.

I could hardly breathe, could hardly hold on. I pulled myself out of the pool and wrapped a towel tightly around me.

“Just so you know,” I told him, my voice shaking, “Griff and I didn't do anything. We talked. Well, he talked mostly, and I listened.”

“What did he talk about?”

“He thought that you were going to kill him,” I spilled, eying him to see whether I would be able to figure out the truth from his face.

He didn't flinch.

“He also told me that I should be scared of you. That you were going to kill me too,” I fired back, hoping it would hurt someone else for once.

Cameron cruelly remained unchanged. “And you believe that?”

I had no answer to give him.

I walked away.

I held on while I climbed the first staircase. I still held on as I made it up the second staircase. When I was safely concealed behind Cameron's bedroom door, I let it go, let myself fall apart. Cameron ... Griff ... Cameron ... it was all too much. I wasn't sure of anything anymore.

Chapter Seventeen: Different Worlds

I didn't want to open my eyes. I could feel the warmth of the sun on my face—which was the last thing I wanted. Why couldn't it just rain today? Part of me wished that I would open my eyes and find myself back in my tiny room in Callister, living an ordinary life where people like Cameron remained unseen and definitely unfelt. But the other part, that bigger part again, knew that I didn't want to go back to my former life, no matter what mean things Cameron Hillard could find to say to me. I threw the blanket over my head with the hopes that if I waited in the darkness long enough, clouds would come, to match my mood. But I could feel the bed shake as Meatball was wagging his tail wildly. He knew that I was awake now.

"Not yet, Meatball, please ..." I whined.

"You're going to have to get up eventually." I didn't have to pull the blankets away to know that it was Cameron. I hadn't heard him come in, yet there he was. "Anyway, Meatball won't go back to sleep if he knows you're up."

His chilled tone hadn't improved. It was going to be another one of those days. I stayed hidden.

"Don't you have anything better to do than watch me sleep?" I complained from under the blankets, trying to keep my voice as cool as his, even though my somersaulting heart had silently betrayed me. I hated that he had this kind of power.

Something thumped next to me. I peeked out—Cameron had thrown a shiny silver object at me. It was a cell phone—*my* cell phone.

"Call your mother," he ordered.

Call my mother? That was probably the last thing I felt like doing in that moment. It was definitely not what I had ever expected Cameron to say. "Why?"

“She left you three messages. Sounded urgent.” His voice seemed unnecessarily guarded.

“You’ve been listening to my phone messages?” I didn’t know what made me more upset: the fact that he had totally violated my privacy, or the fact that I had probably only missed three calls—from my mother, nonetheless—since disappearing from the face of the earth and that Cameron now knew how pathetic my other life was.

He lifted one eyebrow and nudged me to pick up the phone. In other words, he wasn’t asking me to call my mother. Sighing, I climbed out of hibernation and picked up the phone. I went down the list of missed calls and found that my mother hadn’t been the only one who had called. I couldn’t help but casually bring this to Cameron’s attention.

“Looks like Jeremy called a bunch of times too. Did he leave any messages?” I feigned innocence.

He glowered in an affirmative response. The fact that my heart leapt at that precise moment had nothing to do with this Jeremy guy.

“And?” I continued, growing amused by his scowl.

“And nothing. He left a bunch of messages asking why you were mad at him ... the guy sounds like a doorknob, if you ask me.”

“I didn’t know that doorknobs could talk.”

“They don’t. They just squeak and spin in a circle.”

I tried to not dignify his response with a further reply, but I just couldn’t contain myself. “So, I should probably call him back too, then. It might be urgent.”

He grinned even wider; like I had fallen for the trap—hook, line, and sinker. “No worries. He’ll never call you again.”

Horrific thoughts suddenly ran through my head. “Oh my God, Cameron! What did you do to him!”

Cameron eyed me, and his face contorted as he understood my meaning. “Definitely not what you apparently think I’m capable of.” He was offended. I was afraid that I had ruined his good mood—but he quickly regained his grin, antsy to finish his story. “I got Rocco to call this Jeremy guy last night and pretend to be calling from a hospital in ... Sweden or Switzerland, I forget ... I was laughing so hard ... something about you having a highly contagious rash that made your ears swell up ... that he should run to a hospital right away to get his ears checked.”

I couldn't imagine Rocco pulling off any believable accent—but then again, Jeremy had probably been the vainest guy that I had ever met and the mere possibility that his ears could enlarge would have certainly distracted, devastated him.

“And Jeremy bought it?”

Cameron shrugged. “Like I said, your boyfriend’s a doorknob. Don’t know what you see in that guy.”

“He’s a nice and normal guy,” I emphasized, for his benefit. He winced. “Anyway, he’s not my boyfriend.”

“Well he *was*, wasn’t he?” he urged dryly.

I narrowed my eyes. “What difference does it make?”

“It doesn’t,” Cameron responded abruptly. “Call your mother.” He had quickly regained control over himself.

I dialed my mother’s mobile number, and the line rang over and over. I hoped ... and grimaced when she finally picked up. All hopes were dashed.

“Emily? Is that you, honey?” my mom almost sweetly asked. *Honey?* There were so many things wrong with that statement that I couldn’t even begin to analyze it.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Honey, where have you been? I’ve been trying to reach you for the last two weeks.”

The fact that I’ve been kidnapped and I’m being held against my will by a gang of drug dealers in their million-dollar compound out in the middle of nowhere came to mind. “Er, sorry. I’ve been really busy. What’s up?” was what I actually said.

I could hear the clinging and clanging of dishes and silverware in the background. It was close to dinnertime in France.

“Well, you’ll never guess who we ran into.” Drumrolls played in my head as I paused for the incredible revelation. “Mr. and Mrs. Jacobsons. You remember them don’t you?”

No. “Uh-huh,” I lied to keep things simple and quick.

“Well, imagine the coincidence of them meeting us ... here! And guess what,”—more drumrolls—“They brought their wonderful son Damien with them,” she gushed.

“Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Yes, honey. What else is there?”

“Nothing,” I grumbled. “So what were you saying about the Jacobsons?”

Cameron had settled himself by the couch, leaning against the back and watching me with hilarity while my mom carried on about the Jacobsons and their son: they were pronounced to be such a good family, and Damien was absolutely delightful and well-bred and ... not to mention that he was staked to succeed his father in taking over the family empire. I was biting my tongue a lot.

“I’ve been talking to Damien, and he is just dying to see you. How quickly can you catch a plane to come meet us?”

There it was—the reason for the niceties. The only time my mother was ever “motherly” was when she wanted something. The only time my mother spoke English to me and didn’t force me to speak French to her was when she was trying to impress someone who was listening. This time I assumed it was both. I couldn’t imagine what embellishments my mom had told Damien for him to be just dying to meet me. The truth was that I remembered Damien Jacobsons all too well. We were seven years old, and I had been forced to go to one of those stupid family picnics for one of my dad’s clients. Damien had decided it would be good fun to play connect the dots with my freckles—when I dared to protest, he stabbed me in the back of the arm with a pencil. I still had the scar to prove it. I doubted that someone like Damien Jacobsons would remember that small fact, but, unfortunately for him, I never forgot and I was really good at holding a grudge.

“Mom, Europe is just not an option right now and—” Cameron had curiously raised an eyebrow.

But my mom didn’t let me finish with my attempts at finding more excuses. “Oh, here he comes now. He wants to talk to you.”

“No. Mom! I don’t want to talk to this Damien—”

“Hello? Emily?” A deep voice rang through the phone.

I cringed. “Yes. Hi. Damien.” Cameron’s interest had picked up when I had said Damien’s name.

The clanging and chatter noises became more distant on the other side of the line. Damien had clearly walked away from the rest of the party. “So did you ever grow out of your polka dots?” he said.

So he remembered me—and had apparently not matured past the age of seven. “No. I haven’t—actually, it’s gotten worse. Much worse. How about

you? Are you still eating your snots when you think no one is looking?” I wondered out loud.

Cameron practically choked on his own saliva.

There was awkward silence on the other end of the phone. Damien then cleared his throat and continued the conversation, unfortunately. “So ... you should totally come meet us here. A bunch of us are spending the summer chill-axing in the Riviera. The whole gang is here—Chuck, Jimmy, Lance, Chrissy, Angela ...”

Images of the “whole gang” came into my head—all of them had, at one point or another, pulled my hair or taunted me in some horrible way when I was a kid. “Sorry, I’m really tied up right now.”

Damien wasn’t listening. “My Dad had the yacht sailed to port in Monaco. I’ll take you sailing—just you and me. Come on ... it’ll be great!”

Nothing about being alone with him where the only way to escape was to drown trying to swim to shore sounded fun. I would have picked drowning any day. “Damien, sorry, my phone is about to die. I’ll get back to you on the boat thing. Say—bye—to—my Mom—for me ...” I hung up and threw the phone at the foot of the bed. I fell back onto my pillow, worn out.

“Emergency averted. Happy?” I said to Cameron.

“Yeah. I am,” he said with a grin that almost reached his eyes. “That was more entertaining than I thought it would be. I didn’t know Europe could be an emergency.”

When you’ve had everything handed to you on a silver platter, it was surprising the things that became a crisis. “Weren’t you afraid that I would tell my mother where I was?” Not that I had any idea where I was.

“Would she have believed you?”

He had a point.

I heard music booming in the distance. “You’re working today,” I mused, surprised by my automatic connection.

He nodded yes, but didn’t look like he was in a big hurry to go. “So, who was this Damien fellow you were talking to?” I thought I had glimpsed jealousy—or maybe it was just wishful thinking.

“His parents’ money is friends with my parents’ money,” I explained wryly, but Cameron looked lost. I sighed. “Just some boy my parents would love to see me settle down with.” As I said this, another thought occurred to me. “You know, you and my parents would probably get along quite well.”

“Oh?” Cameron fell into my ambush this time.

“You both try to control my life and seem to think I’m better off sticking with my own kind, whatever that is.” I threw the blanket back over my head before he had time to respond. “Do you have any more orders, or can I go back to sleep?”

“I wasn’t ordering you. I was just concerned that—”

“Whatever,” I interrupted coolly. Now I was in a *really* bad mood—a common side effect of my mother. “Can you let Meatball out when you leave?”

I exhaled loudly—my indication that the conversation was over.

The room was silent. He remained still. I imagined that he was staring at the big bulge that was under the blanket, considering his next move. After a minute, I heard him walk with insistence past the bed, and he left the room, calling Meatball to follow him.

As soon as I heard the door click and confirmed the noise of his steps down the stairs, I ripped the blanket off me. I had an idea where Cameron was going—and I had a plan. With record speed, I was dressed and ready to execute. I crouched by the bedroom door and listened. After what seemed like forever, I heard what I was waiting for: the muffled voices of Cameron, Spider, and Carly as they walked out the front door. I waited a few more minutes after I heard the door close and then headed out to follow them. I slightly opened the front door, peeking to make sure they were out of sight.

My encounter with Roach had taught me that wandering around the grounds was a dangerous thing, especially now that Griff was gone. I glanced around and didn’t see Roach; I was safe enough—for a while anyway. I made my way down to the garage, stopping as I neared the corner. There was a guard walking by the entrance of the pathway where I had seen Carly trek through the day before. So I waited for my opportunity.

The guard walked back and forth by the path’s entrance; he got bored after a few minutes of having nothing to look at but the back of the garage and kept marching down the line until he disappeared around the corner. This was my chance. With as much speed as I could rally, I ran straight for the pathway and didn’t look back until I was sure to be hidden in the trees.

There I stopped and listened: rustling of leaves and creaking and cracking of branches, all above my head. I breathed again when I was sure no one was running in after me.

I warily continued on the beaten path. I had no idea how far the path went, or how far I would be able to go before I was discovered—then who knew what would happen. I tried not to think about that, and focused on getting moving instead.

The dirt line seemed to go on forever. With every step I took, I was losing my nerve. I was starting to consider turning around when I hit a green brick wall. Strangely erected, tightly up to the tree line was the back of a one-story building that had no windows facing out and the beaten path ended directly under its metal door that had been left ajar.

I stood by the door and listened for voices—I heard nothing. I gulped and, with the speed of a snail, softly treaded in.

Inside was a small office—or at least it looked like it was supposed to be an office. At the farthest end of the room was an oversized wooden desk with a sleek, black leather chair half hidden behind it. In the middle was a burgundy rawhide couch and a ratty blanket pitched upon it. There were two wood-burning stoves stuffed in a corner, but no wood.

The floor and desk were spilling over with disarrayed piles of clothes. Recognizing some of Cameron's wrinkled T-shirts, I realized that this was where he had been sleeping since I had taken over his room. I glanced at the stiff-looking couch and the yellowed pillow and felt a bit guilty—I couldn't imagine having to sleep on that every night.

I moved toward the large desk. Apart from Cameron's improvised bedroom, there was something else that made this room seem like just the shell of an office—its emptiness. The floor-to-ceiling bookcases were, for the most part, empty of normal office stuff. There were no pictures, papers, pens, computer, files, or anything else that would make this office an office.

When I heard quick footsteps, I froze.

Next to Cameron's improvised sleeping quarters was a closed door. The footsteps seemed to be approaching from the other side of it, and getting closer fast. I pushed the leather chair aside and hid under the desk, peering through the hairline cracks between the wood planks that faced the desk.

There I held my breath and watched Carly speed across the room and exit outside, closing the heavy door behind her.

My heart was wildly thumping. I took a few seconds to calm myself and puffed. This had been a close call. Too close. Ghastly thoughts of what

Carly would have done had she discovered me went through my head. Somehow I knew that I was not welcome to snoop here.

I crawled out from under the desk and headed for the metal door. Whatever this place was, it wasn't worth getting in trouble for ... or worse.

But when I pushed on the heavy door—nothing happened.

I pulled, and then I pushed, using my whole body, but the door still did not budge.

It was stuck—and so was I.

When I heard unrecognizable voices through the other door, I froze in place again, terrified, listening. There were several voices echoing in the distance, yet none seemed to be coming closer.

I tiptoed to this new, possible, alternate exit and peeked out. It opened onto a short, narrow passageway that led nowhere. A dead end. And oddly, there was no one there, though I could still hear people noises.

I went to the dead end and noticed a door-shaped split in the wall. At the bottom was a small pedal, which I assumed would open the secret way. In the middle of the frame was a dime-sized eyehole. I slowly brought my face forward and peered through.

Over a dozen people talked over each other in a bright room. There were darkened windows on the opposite wall, and I could see cars, SUVs and motorcycles outside. In the middle of the room was a large, rectangular glass table. Cameron was calmly seated at the head, engrossed in paperwork, while the others slowly found seats.

It was a mind-boggling assortment. Sitting next to each other around the table were over a dozen men and one woman who looked like extremes of each other—people of all shapes, sizes, and age—some were dressed in three-piece suits, while others had lopsided ball caps and gold chains or full leather outfits ... rival gang bosses, together, in one room, acting like normal people.

The seated members, the bosses, were noisily talking among themselves and each had one man standing guard behind them, each man looking fiercer than the other. Spider stood behind Cameron.

When Cameron lifted his head, the table immediately went quiet. “We have several items on the agenda today. I thank you again for making the trip out to attend this meeting. I can assure you that we will pursue our meetings in the city as soon as feasible for me.” The room stayed very

quiet. “Let’s try to keep on topic today so that everyone can get out of here at a decent time for once.”

Cameron’s voice was intimidating and very businesslike. Everyone inside—and outside—the room remained captivated. “The most pressing item is an apparent breach of territory lines which has led to hostilities between two of our branches and the loss of some of their members. This conflict has also brought coverage in the news, and our suppliers have expressed concern over media attention.”

Cameron eyed one of the suited men sitting at the table. “Johnny, I understand that this started after some of your boys tried to distribute product in California.”

A man who was wearing a blue bandana around his head piped up. “They didn’t just try to distribute. They were trying to undercut me and take over my territory.”

Cameron calmly lifted his hand in a motion for silence. “Viper, you will get your chance to speak. Johnny, my sources support what Viper has just said. Can you explain?”

The gel-haired Johnny looked nervous. “Listen, some of my boys went on a road trip and got a little carried away. It was a misunderstanding. No disrespect was meant.”

Cameron turned to Viper. “Viper, you have heard the explanation. Do you have anything to say?”

Viper mumbled. “Just that it’s total bull.”

Cameron continued, “Johnny, I believe that a ten percent contribution of your branch’s earnings last month should be sufficient to settle damages to Viper. Do you agree?”

Johnny nodded, begrudgingly.

Cameron turned to Viper. “Viper?”

Viper nodded, cheerfully.

Cameron glanced around the table. “Any objections?”

Everyone remained silent.

Cameron wrote something on a piece of paper and handed it to Spider. “Johnny, next time your boys want a road trip from Chicago to L.A., make sure they leave the business at home, all right?”

Johnny sulked in response.

I was entranced as an officious Cameron led the meeting and methodically went through a list of agenda items: new products coming onto the market, competitors, price listings, FBI reports and sightings, and other bad blood that had developed between the members' gangs. Spider hung back and collected the paperwork that Cameron handed him as topics were discussed. It didn't take me long to realize that Cameron didn't just sit on the crime bosses' board of directors—he was their CEO.

After two hours, my legs were like jelly, and Cameron finally stopped the meeting for a break. Everybody stretched out and slowly walked outside of the room as Cameron and Spider went through the collected paperwork. When the room was emptied, Spider took the paper stacks and walked straight for the trapdoor, and me. I struggled to wake my legs up, and I ran back to the office like a baby deer wiggling into its first steps. I had barely had time to duck my head under the desk when Spider stepped through the doorway.

Like Carly, he kept walking across the room to the metal door. When he got to it, he realized, as I had, that the door was stuck. He backed up and rammed his whole body into it. The door finally burst opened, and, cursing under his breath, he disappeared, leaving it ajar.

My heart jumped for glee as I realized that I would finally be free.

I waited a few minutes more to make sure that Spider wasn't coming back right away and crawled out. And then I heard voices nearing from the passageway again. I banged my forehead on the desk as I hurried to crawl back under.

"It seems like forever since I've been back here," reminisced a female voice.

I saw Cameron approaching through the cracks in the wood. I recognized the woman next to him as the only female who had been in the meeting room sitting with the other crime bosses. She was tall and slim, with short, dark hair that was tucked behind her ears. She looked like one of those girls that I had seen in my brother's car magazines—the girls that made any car look fabulous by just standing next to it.

While Cameron leafed through the duffle bag that was on the floor, the woman glanced over the clothes that were stacked on surfaces.

"Are you sleeping in here?" she asked him.

"Sometimes," he replied, distracted.

He found what he had been looking for and handed it to her—the pink T-shirt that I had found in his drawer the first day I came to the farm.

“You forgot this here,” he said to her as she took the shirt.

The woman kept her eyes on his face.

“She’s still here, isn’t she?”

“Who?”

“That girl who saw you killing one of Shield’s boys in the projects,” she responded.

Cameron squinted, arms crossed. “What makes you think I brought her here?”

“I heard from one of my guys that you took her home with you,” she admitted composedly.

“The board has already ruled on this, Manny. The girl will not be a problem for any of us. I don’t intend on revisiting this issue with you.”

“The board was forced to make a decision without having all the facts. I think that they might be interested to know that the girl is alive and that you’re keeping her here.” Her voice had gone up an octave.

“What are you saying exactly?” he snarled.

Manny immediately became sedate. “Nothing. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

She raised her hand and stroked his cheek. I squirmed. “I’m just wondering what interest you have in her.”

He didn’t pull her hand away. “You know we can’t have contact like this when there are other leaders around.”

“Do you love her?” she asked pointedly.

“Of course I don’t love her,” Cameron told her without skipping a beat.

I felt the gash in my heart rip open again.

“Then why is she here?” she demanded. “I thought I was the only one who you would ever bring here.”

Cameron sighed like I had heard him sigh so many times with me. “I’m just bored right now, Manny. I need something to play with, to keep me busy. When I’m done, I’ll get rid of her.”

“Well, hurry up and be done with her. I miss you. I want to be with you again,” she whined.

Manny leaned in and kissed him, on the mouth. His body was tensed, and he let her kiss him. I couldn’t breathe, even after he had finally pushed her

away.

His voice was softer now. “It was a onetime mistake that will never happen again. I can’t show bias for one boss over the other.”

Spider came back inside, empty-handed and patiently waiting for Cameron by the closed trick door. With an indifferent head nod, Cameron motioned to Manny to get out. Resigned, Manny followed Cameron’s order and walked out. After Spider peeped through the eyehole, all three stepped back through the passageway—and I was left hiding alone under a desk, shaking, beaten.

I fought back tears.

Then I ran out the door.

I followed the dirt line back through the woods, falling at least twice. I ran out at the other end without stopping or looking to see if the guard was back at his post. In a split second, I thought that he probably wouldn’t rat me out if he did see me—otherwise he would have had to admit to Spider that he had let me through in the first place. Even if he did rat me out, I didn’t care—either way, I was dead. Cameron had confirmed this himself. What I did, or didn’t do, didn’t matter anymore. It had never mattered. I was just a pawn in Cameron’s twisted game.

I ran straight to my room and plopped myself onto the bed. My teeth and my fists were tightly clenched and a few tears started escaping.

Chapter Eighteen: Heated Moments

When Rocco came knocking on my door, I wiped the tears away with the back of my hand before he came limping in.

While I leaned against the wall with my knees tucked into my chest, we sat in uncomfortable silence.

He eyed me and finally asked the question that was bugging him. “Em, is everything okay? You look really awful.”

Only Rocco could find a way to critique my appearance on the worse day of my life.

“I’m fine,” I lied.

“Are you sure? Because you look really pale—even more than normal.” He thought about it, suddenly looked deathly afraid and pushed himself down to the foot of the bed, as far away from me as possible. “You’re not going to throw up are you?”

I did feel like I was going to throw up, but I didn’t tell him this. “Really, I’m fine. I’m just a bit tired, that’s all.”

He exhaled. “Good, ’cause if you’re going to puke again, I’m outta here.”

He convinced me to watch a movie with him. I must have looked really dreadful, because he let me pick the movie.

Even if Rocco spent most of the time under the influence of his rainbow medication and sleeping with his head bent back and his mouth wide open, here, huddled head-to-toe on the couch in Cameron’s room with Rocco’s big feet stuck behind my back, it was easy to feel safe. Though the pain in my heart was still very much throbbing, the feelings of helplessness, of isolation dissipated with every drop of Rocco’s drool that hit the throw pillow. He had no idea of the turmoil that bubbled inside me, and I was thankful for this. His obliviousness, at least, would remain unspoiled. I imagined that I would have liked to have a little brother like Rocco, even if he was bigger than me and a total slob.

When my mind had quieted and I could think without interruptions from me, I pushed myself to concentrate on making sense of it all. Cameron wasn't just a drug dealer or a crime boss; he was the big boss and led most, if not all, crime bosses in the United States. And there was no doubt in my mind that I loved him, no matter who or what he was, no matter what he said. This made it all the more painful. Last, I was still alive, because Cameron wanted it this way, because he was bored, because he was looking for fun. Whether Griff was still alive ... I had my doubts, though I couldn't be sure ... theories were too terrifying, too crippling.

How did I get myself in this situation?

I remembered the person I had been back in Callister. Cautious. Removed. Invisible. Parts of an armor that had taken me years to erect; parts of an armor that had too quickly fallen away the day I had met Cameron ... there was no point in trying to find an answer to the question—the damage was already done.

This led me to my next question—could I do anything about it? Could I fight back? Cameron hadn't let his guard down—everything he did was with purpose. Earlier that day, I had halfheartedly accused him of being like my parents. This comparison had been more accurate than I thought it had been, even if Cameron, like Carly, seemed to have some preconceived notion that his world was so different from mine. But our worlds were not so different. Yes, I could fight back ... after years of practice with my parents, I knew how to deal with their kind.

I didn't know if it was Rocco's allied presence, or the headache that had slowly grown into a massive migraine, or just the fact that I hadn't eaten all day, but my grief had turned to anger, and I was getting angrier as the hours rolled by. By the time the sun set and the sound of the board of directors' car stereos dissipated into the distance, the steam was practically coming out of my ears. I spent the next minutes anxiously listening, half-hoping that Cameron would show his face, half-hoping that I would wake up and find that all of this had been a dream—some of it really good, some of it nightmarish.

One of my desires was realized when I heard the front door slam shut and stomps hastening up the stairs. My heart and head pounded riotously. I immediately got up, marched to the bed, and rigidly sat. I faced the door and geared up for combat. Cameron thrust the door open and entered the

battlefield. His eyes were fierce and wild, like a caged animal set loose—his war face looked much more daunting than mine.

I shrank back, realizing that my plan for an ambush had been crushed.

I attempted to regroup while Cameron furiously looked at me then glanced around the room. He spied Rocco, who was sleeping on the couch. “Rocco, get out,” he ordered madly.

Rocco didn’t move.

“Rocco!” Cameron shouted like I had never heard him shout before.

Rocco’s torso snapped up instinctively. “What?” he yelled back with annoyance.

“Get up and get out,” Cameron repeated, regaining his calm voice. He was glaring at me, breathing through his nostrils.

“Why? What’s going on?” Rocco looked at me questioningly. My heart was thumping through my ears, making the headache a thousand times worse. I wanted to tell him that I was okay, that he could leave without worry, but that would have been a colossal lie.

“Now!” Cameron ordered again. For the second time within the span of a few seconds, he had lost his composure. I knew that this wasn’t good, and wondered what excuse the path guard had made for his own lack of attention when he squealed on me.

“Geez! Okay! I’m leaving,” Rocco said. “You don’t have to yell. I’m getting really sick of no one telling me what the hell is going on around here.”

He hobbled out, and Cameron closed the door so quickly that he almost knocked Rocco over. Cameron then spun around and raced toward me. I flinched like a coward as he grabbed my arm—I had prepared for a battle ... but not the bloodshed that came with it. There was never any physical warfare when I fought with my parents, just a lot of yelling and crying.

Cameron lifted the sleeve of my T-shirt with such force that I thought it would rip.

“Jesus,” he gasped. “Why did you lie to me?”

I didn’t know where to start. I hadn’t expected our combat to start in this fashion. The speech I had prepared in my head started with me accusing him of being a liar, not the other way around. My mouth was frozen shut.

What came next was not what I had expected him to say either.

“One of the guards attacked you yesterday,” he told me with agony. “Why didn’t you tell me?” He held my arm out in evidence and waited.

I looked down and realized that he was looking at the bruise that Roach’s fingers had left behind on my bicep. The bruise now had a greenish purple hue to it. Though this wasn’t what I thought I was being attacked for, it gave me the ammunition I needed to fight back.

I mentally discarded my preplanned discourse and decided to improvise. “Why would you care?” I asked coldly, yanking my arm away from him. “You’ll just get rid of me when you’re done. Why would it matter if one of your guards roughs me up before you do it yourself?”

Cameron looked confused. I had regained the element of surprise.

“What are you talking about? I would never hurt you or let anyone else hurt you. I would definitely not let one of my men do ... anything to you.”

“Do not patronize me!” I interjected. “You care about me like people care for their pets. I’m just something for you to play with when you come home. Then you’ll have me put down when you get sick of me.”

“Emmy, if this is about the kiss thing, I shouldn’t have—”

“Cameron, please don’t insult my intelligence by pretending that you care about what happens to me. The game is over. I overheard you talking to that Manny girl in your office.”

The blood rushed from Cameron’s face, and his eyes widened. He turned his back and paced a few steps. I was blistering hot. But while I was huffing, he took a moment for the shock of my revelation to wear off, and he came back, his face completely composed.

“You shouldn’t have gone wandering.” His tone was acerbic.

He sat next to me and glared.

I was getting extremely dizzy but stood anyway.

“I can’t believe I fell for ... all of this,” I said, unable to hide my pain. “I actually thought that you loved me. I thought ...” I was shaking my head, pacing, winded, struggling with the tears and the heat. I didn’t know what to think anymore.

When a very calm Cameron leaned over to take my hand—and I felt like I wanted him to take it more than anything—I panicked and jumped out of his reach. He flinched, and I caught a glimpse of something in his eyes.

Suddenly, I remembered how to fight again. I stopped and narrowed my eyes at him. “I guess I should apologize to you because I haven’t been

much fun at all since I've been here. So, I'll make this really easy for you ..."

On a calculated whim, I furiously pulled off my T-shirt and unbuttoned my pants.

Cameron quickly glanced away. "Jesus! Emmy, what are you doing?" he cried out, in shock and embarrassment.

I kicked my jeans off and stood in front of him in my underwear.

"Have you gone completely crazy?" he squeaked keeping his eyes down.

My eyes were throwing daggers. I put on a brave front, but felt like I was going to throw up.

"This is what you told Manny you wanted, isn't it? Well go ahead—have your fun with me. I'm not sure why you went through all this trouble in the first place—it's not like I have anywhere to go. Hell, you could have done this on the first day and gotten rid of me then instead of going through the effort of making me love you. Or is that your fun? Messing with my mind before ... all of this," I said, rapidly waving my hands over my nearly bare chest.

Cameron was up on his feet. He looked ill, but his expression remained otherwise even. He took a step toward me. Out of fear that I would let him take me in and in an act of devotion to the cause, I threw myself onto the bed and laid on my back, my body taut like a soldier.

When I glanced up, I saw that he had folded his arms and was waiting. His attempt at patience was disparaging.

"What are you waiting for?" My voice was pleading, almost begging.

He didn't move an inch and continued to watch me, his eyes concentrating on my face.

A ball of tears was making its way to my eyes. I didn't know what was worse: the fact that I had unclothed myself without much effect or the fact that he wasn't even slightly interested in taking me up on my offer.

I took a breath, took my hands away, and posed myself on my side. I looked him in the eyes while tears carved a river down my cheeks. "I love you. There ... I've admitted it. Now you can check that one off your list of things to do. Just know that I don't have any experience with the next part ... but I'm getting pretty good at taking orders from you."

Cameron's face remained impenetrable, though his glare never left my face. "Actually, you're not. If you were good at following my orders, we

wouldn't be here. Now please put your clothes on so that we can talk about this ... rationally."

I shook my head in defiance and started to talk to myself. "I've been cooped up in this house, slowly going crazy, trying to figure you out ... but you've just been using me. All this time."

The tears were coming in steadfastly. Cameron had gone to grab the blanket that was over the couch, walked back, and placed it over me like I was a child throwing a tantrum. This only made me more incensed. I sat straight up.

"You treat people like they're your personal property. I don't even think that you can tell the difference between right and wrong anymore. Whatever makes you feel good is right. Everything else is wrong. You had Griff killed just because you thought that he and I might be more than just friends ... or maybe because we were just friends ..."

I was calming down, or I was running out of energy.

"I didn't kill this Griffin guy. I don't know why you would think that I did," was all he retorted.

"The guard, Roach, told me."

Cameron cringed. His lips thinned until all the blood vanished from them. "You would believe an idiot who takes his anger out on a girl, rather than believe me?"

"This *idiot* had no reason to lie to me. But you haven't stopped lying since I got here. I just didn't know that you were still lying to me until I overheard you speak to that woman today."

"What you overheard me say to Manny wasn't true, Emmy. If I told the truth ... I'm just trying to protect you," he stammered.

"Protect me? You bring me here against my will, order your guards to not talk to me or let me go anywhere, and you even leave your dog here to make sure that I don't run away when you're not looking. You're not protecting me—you're keeping me prisoner."

The pain was now fully visible on his face. "Meatball sleeps here because he wants to, and I thought you would like the company at night."

"Don't do me any more favors," I spat.

Cameron stood frozen in place. I wondered if he was faltering or just scrambling to come up with his next lie.

“You have to know that I would never hurt you ...” He had almost sounded sincere, but this was nothing new and I was prepared for it.

“I don’t believe you. You’re a liar and I’m not buying it anymore.” I was weeping now. My whole body was aching and shaking—I was hot and cold, all at once.

I looked up through my saturated eyelashes. “Are you going to take me up on my offer?” I asked him in final desperation, my voice a whisper.

“Em ...” he started again, slowly regaining control.

My hands covered my face and I wept while he calmly stood and watched. I couldn’t stand it anymore.

“Go away!” I ordered through my hands and turned my face away from him.

When he just stood there, I ordered him to leave again, but I sounded more convincing this time.

Cameron stormed out, slamming the door behind him.

I heard the thundering whack of his fist punching a hole through the staircase wall.

Then the whole house shook as the front door slammed shut too.

The room was spinning uncontrollably. My breathing was labored, and I was foaming at the mouth. And then my stomach lurched. I struggled out of bed as quickly as I could and sprinted to the washroom. I made it to the toilet on time. Too bad the lid was closed.

When I woke up, I was still lying on the cold bathroom tiles. I crawled back to bed and shivered under the blankets, squeezing my eyes shut. I slept very badly—there were nonsensical voices talking over each other in my head.

The next time I awoke, the room was exceedingly bright, and Carly was standing over me with the back of her hand on my face. I tried to pull her off but none of my muscles were responding to my brain’s orders.

“She’s burning up. Go get Cameron,” I heard her command.

“I did. He told me to go get you,” Rocco moaned.

Carly cursed under her breath. “Neither one of us can carry her.” She sighed. “Go fill the tub with cold water and I’ll go get him.”

My throat felt like it was on fire. I closed my eyes when it became too much work to keep them open. When I forced them open again, I saw Cameron’s stretched face. I was floating, and we were in the bathroom. He

dropped me in the tub, and I cried out as my body hit icy-cold water. I flailed my arms, trying to get out, trying to grab hold of him, but he walked to Carly.

“She doesn’t want me here,” he said to her with a low voice.

“Fine!” She waived him off. “Leave. You’re just in my way anyway.”

She spoke, or cursed, in Spanish while she poured buckets of freezing water over my head. My body was trembling, and my jaw quaked so hard I was sure my teeth were going to shatter.

Rocco came through the door with his hand covering his eyes.

“Here,” he said as he blindly tendered a bucket over to Carly.

“Geez, Rocco! Have you never seen a girl in her underwear before?” Carly went to grab the bucket and poured its contents into the bath water. It was ice, and I wretched forward as the chill hit my skin once more.

“Please ... stop ...” I managed to voice through my teeth.

Carly laughed. “And she finally speaks. Must be a good sign.” She poured another bucketful over my head. “I come from a family of six kids, remember? Too bad for you, a cold bath is the only thing that will bring the fever down. I’m afraid you’ll have to suffer through it until your skin stops boiling.”

My body had graduated from trembling to full-out convulsions. Carly looked worried, but she continued to soak me, over and over. After a short while, she dunked her hand in the bath water to check the temperature. She cursed again. The ice was melting quickly under the heat of my skin. Rocco followed her shouted order and rushed back with another bucket full of ice.

“I’m still mad at you, you know,” she finally said softly. I was curled up in a ball and just stared at her while she continued to douse me. “Spider told Cameron that you would disappoint him—something about betrayal being in your blood. But I defended you ... the whole time, I stuck up for you. Why you decided to mess with that Griffin guy is beyond me. I mean the guy had nothing going for him. He looked at us like we were trash, even though we’re the ones who put money in his pocket.”

“Just ... friends,” was all I could stutter between shivers to defend myself.

“Right. Like I’ve never heard that one before.” Carly sneered. “I swear, people like you are way more trouble than you’re worth. Now it looks like

I'm stuck playing nurse Carly just because you and Cameron can't get along."

"Can ... take care ... of myself."

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, I can see that." She poured another ladle of water over me and placed the back of her palm over my forehead and cheeks. She contentedly hummed as she pulled the rubber plug. I watched the water drain out of the tub while she wrapped a thick towel around me. She walked out, and Cameron walked back in to carry me back to bed. I looked up at him. He kept his eyes out front and left the room like a ghost. Carly helped me get changed into my pajamas and threw all the blankets that Cameron had brought in over me. I gobbled down the pills and a few sips of the tall glass of water she gave me. Every bone and muscle in my body ached. I closed my eyes and fell into a comatose sleep.

The smell of food hit my nostrils, and I thought I was going to be sick again. I opened my eyes. Carly had brought a bowl of soup in. It was dark out, and the room was lit solely by the bedside lamp. I turned away in revulsion as Carly shoved the bowl under my nose.

"I'm not leaving until you eat all of this," she announced.

My hand struggled to bring the spoon to my mouth. My stomach heaved. I dropped the spoon back into the bowl.

Carly grumbled and picked up the spoon. "It's late, and I'm getting really tired of this babysitting thing. This won't be a pretty visit if you don't hurry up."

She fed me the soup, and I ate as quickly as my stomach could manage. She gave me another round of pills, which I took without argument, and then she left. I laid my head back on the pillow and closed my eyes, focused on keeping the soup down.

The door opened and clicked back closed. I opened my eyes and confirmed my sick intuition.

Cameron stood by the bed with his arms folded. My head was pounding from watching him stand there. I couldn't focus on him and on my stomach at the same time. I squeezed my eyes shut for a bit and felt him sit next to me on the bed.

When I slit my eyes open, I saw him leaning over his knees, looking at the ground.

He took a long ragged breath. "I know you're not feeling well, so I'll try to keep this short." He looked like he was talking to the carpet. "I have no excuse to make for what you heard me say to Manny, except that you weren't supposed to hear or see any of that. It was very dangerous what you did ... for you to be there. I don't know what I would have done ... if anyone of them had seen you, found you there ..." He shook his head in despair and recouped.

"I know you don't believe anything I say, so there's no point in me trying to defend myself to you anymore, even if it kills me to see you so disgusted with me. But there's one thing I do need you to know: I love you Emmy. I've loved you for a very long time." He turned his eyes to me for the briefest of moments, and I felt a crack in my newly erected armor. "To have you here, with me ... I guess in some sick way, for a while, I thought that this thing between us could work. Hurting you was the last thing I wanted to do, but looks like I managed to do that anyway." Cameron took another breath. "This place is where I have to be, but it's not a place where you can or should be. There's nothing that I can do to change that. I won't put this life on you."

He looked at me, like he was awaiting some kind of response. But I wasn't lucid enough to be able to come up with any response to what he had just hit me with.

With no reaction from me, Cameron sighed and continued his conversation with the carpet. "I'm leaving for work in a couple days. I'll speak to Spider and make arrangements while I'm in the city to have an armed guard watch over you from your house instead of here. When I get back, we'll plan for you to go back home. I'll make sure to stay out of your way until I leave."

He got up and hesitated over me.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

He kissed my burning forehead before walking out of the room.

I wanted to cry. I fell asleep instead, my thoughts in a state of shock.

In the night I heard Meatball whining at my door ... Cameron shouted for him to come downstairs ... but ended up having to come to the door to drag Meatball away by the collar when the dog defied him. Sadly, in my battle with Cameron, I had also lost my bedfellow.

I fell asleep again. Cameron's face cruelly filled my dreams. But the monster never came back.

Chapter Nineteen: Expecting the Expected

Over the next few days, Cameron didn't have to put much effort into trying to avoid me, because I didn't leave the room or the bed. Rocco came to visit regularly, but he would quickly get bored of me just lying there. He'd drop on the bed next to me and then venture to the couch to watch TV or leave altogether. Carly continued to sourly bring me my meals, and I slowly got stronger as the days wore on.

By the third day, I was able to walk around my room without feeling like I was going to vomit or pass out, and I took a long-overdue shower. After I got dressed, I went to the opened patio door to feel the fresh air on my face. There were voices down on the deck below. I peeked around the curtain to see Spider and Carly lounged on patio chairs while Cameron was slouched over the rail, facing away from them.

"Carly and I can't keep this up for much longer," Spider said.

"Carly and you? Did you really just admit that out loud?" Cameron's voice was very bitter.

"We know that you're tired, but we need a decision to be made on this before things get too out of hand," Carly added in an almost whisper.

"I have enough to deal with right now without having to think about that," Cameron barked in reply.

Spider raised his voice. "We've waited long enough. All this time and things keep getting worse. She sneaks around here like she owns the place. She gets the guards on her side and they tell her whatever she wants to hear. I can't control them when she's around."

"Why can't we just order her to stay away from here, away from us?" Cameron offered as an alternative.

"She knows too much already, Cameron. Besides, we all know that she won't follow any orders you or anybody else gives her. She's proven that already."

Cameron spun around and glared. There were deep lines carved into his forehead and his eyes were coal black. “What about Bill? Have you thought about what this would do to him if he heard us talking about her in this way?”

“Bill is dead.” Spider’s voice was cold and to the point. “We’re in this far because of him.”

Cameron turned away from them. “You’re letting your resentment for Bill affect your perspective on this.”

Carly got up and put her hand on Cameron’s shoulder. “Spider’s right. Bill has been gone for a long time, and we have to protect ourselves now. We can’t let someone who has this much information run loose like that. If it had been anyone one else, she would have been dead by now. We’ve waited long enough to try to make this work, but it hasn’t. It’s time to get rid of her for good.”

Cameron stood silently and watched over the grounds. After a while, he let his head drop and sighed. “Fine. Just take care of it. I don’t want to know anything about it.”

Spider stood.

“We’ll take care of it. It’s done,” he said somberly.

Just like that, my fate had finally been determined. Carly and Spider walked back into the house, Cameron was left to ponder over his decision alone, and I sunk to the floor. I knew it had been coming, I knew I should be making a plan fast, but all I could think about was that I didn’t want to leave Cameron. Where would I go? There was nothing for me in Callister or anywhere else. My life was with Cameron and Rocco and Carly. Spider could stay too—if he had to.

I loved Cameron; that hadn’t changed. When Cameron had looked at me and told me he loved me, I believed him without a doubt; the fact that he had also said to me and then to Manny that he didn’t love me, I had decided was made up, like he told me it was. But he had also promised that I would live, that he would send me home with an armed guard. Even if I didn’t want this to happen—the thought of being separated from him made me feel nauseated—and I had planned to convince him otherwise, this had proven to be a lie.

I was so mixed up.

There was a chapter in one of my criminology class books that was dedicated to the story of this rich girl from California who had been kidnapped by a left-wing group. Two months later, she walked into a bank with a gun and helped her kidnappers rob it. When she was arrested, she said that she had been brainwashed by them, she said that she suffered from Stockholm syndrome, a condition where hostages start having feelings, like loyalty and love, for their captors. The girl was convicted but was pardoned a few years later. Apparently, there was such a thing as Stockholm syndrome.

Everything was different between Cameron and me. What I felt wasn't just mind games or some fabricated syndrome. What I felt for him, I had seen him, felt him feel for me too. I was sure of this ... but then there was all the other evidence that I couldn't refute either: he was a killer, a drug dealer, a crime boss, an expert pretender. He was very smart and too beautiful to fall for someone like me. Frances, Griff, and even Roach had warned me about him. Though I couldn't deny the existence of any of these things, none of them changed my mind. There were two sides to Cameron—the real side was the one who took my hand and answered my incessant questions about his secret life while I tried to avoid watching the movie he had picked up just for me. The real Cameron was the one who kissed me in the darkness, the one who sat on my bed and admitted that he loved me ... and had loved me for a very long time.

The final blow—Cameron's decision to end my life—I tried to attribute to Spider and Carly's cunning abilities to sway Cameron. I loved him, and he loved me ... but I still needed proof that I hadn't just imagined it all, that I wasn't going crazy.

When I got downstairs and didn't see Cameron right away, I got sidetracked in the kitchen. My belly was grumbling loudly, and after days of liquid meals, I was ready for some real sustenance. I started pulling miscellaneous food out of the cupboards and managed a vague cheerfulness as Carly and Spider walked by.

"Mornin'," I said.

Spider glanced at his watch and graciously pointed out, "It's the middle of the afternoon."

Carly appeared behind him and looked almost genuinely concerned. "Feeling better?"

I nodded my head, stuffed a handful of animal crackers in my mouth and walked to the table, my arms full with cereal, milk, bowl, spoon, cookies, crackers. I noticed that Carly and Spider both seemed to be in a better mood; they were either happy to see me finally go, or the thought of killing someone just brought the best out of them.

“You know you made half of my guards sick with the flu,” Spider charged.

I hadn’t realized that, along with everything else, I was also to be held responsible for getting sick first. “Sorry,” I mumbled through my Oreos.

When Cameron walked through the patio doors, I kept still on my chair. His dark eyes automatically came to find mine, and he slowed his walking pace. Catching himself, he quickly looked away, picked up his pace again, and kept going out through the front entrance. Carly and Spider followed him out, and I heard the front door shut behind them. In that brief moment, I knew what I had to do and immediately started planning over my bowl of cereal.

Rocco hobbled over from the couch and grabbed himself a bowl to help me with my meal. He poured and analyzed.

“What’s the matter with you?” he asked me with an accusatory tone.

I wasn’t sure what he was referring to. When I’d looked in the mirror this morning, I thought I looked better—at least I didn’t look like walking death anymore. “Nothing. Why?”

“You’re staring at the wall. Smiling by yourself for no reason.”

I shrugged, removed the smile, and shoveled Captain Crunch into my mouth. I wasn’t going crazy—not anymore.

“I did a bunch of homework while you were loafing around,” he announced. “I’m having trouble with the math homework though.”

I would have offered to help him, but math was my worst subject—I had always found it unsettling that, no matter what I did or how I calculated a problem, there could only be one right answer in the end.

“I was thinking that we could do a bunch of the work while the rest of them leave,” he continued when I didn’t put anything forward. “That way, next time they go, my foot will be better, and I’ll be able to go with them again.”

I wondered if he had discussed any of this with his brother.

“When are they leaving?”

“Tomorrow morning,” he said dejectedly. “With most of the guards down with the flu, it’ll be pretty quiet around here.”

The plan was quickly taking shape.

By the time the diminished troops started pouring in for supper, Rocco and I had dug clean through a second box of cereal, and the Oreos had vanished. The minute I got up, I regretted gobbling down so much food in one sitting. I lay on the couch and spent the better part of an hour focusing on not hurling Captain Crunch. Rocco enjoyed his second supper with Tiny, Spider, and Carly. Cameron didn’t come back for the rest of the evening. When eight o’clock rolled around, Rocco was opening a bag of chips for his mid-evening snack. I’d had enough of the gorging marathon by then and excused myself to go up to bed.

I went to work as soon as I got into Cameron’s room. With Cameron and the rest of the high-rankers gone, with most of the guards out of commission, there was no better opportunity for me to sneak away in the night. In his almost empty closet, I found an old green duffle bag and started packing. The bag looked bigger than it was; I had barely emptied three drawers and the bag was already full. I still had two drawers to go, plus all my stuff that littered the bathroom.

I had two options: run on foot and get to the road, like Griff had planned, or try to steal one of my brother’s cars, try to drive it without crashing, try to drive fast enough to elude the flying bullets ... as far as I could see, I had only one option, even if I didn’t take any pleasure in the idea of running through the woods by myself in the dark. I packed, and repacked, and realized I had no idea what I would even need to camp out in the wilderness, how long it would take me to get to the road or what I would do when I actually made it to the road. Once again, my cushy upbringing had come back to bite me ... I was full of excuses. I didn’t want to go, but I couldn’t stay either. Maybe I could convince him, change his mind, make him see what I saw. But what if I couldn’t convince him? I dragged the duffle bag to the patio door and hid it behind the heavy curtain. And then I went to the small desk, found a working pen, and pulled out a piece of paper. “Cameron,” I scribbled.

“I love you. I do believe you when you say that you love me. That’s why I have to go. If you do this, you’ll be changed forever. I can’t let that happen.”

I took a breath, gulped, and finished.

“I wish things could have been different. I promise to come find you someday, when things are better. Please don’t worry.” Then I signed it with love.

I didn’t want to risk leaving the letter out until I was ready to leave. I grabbed my *Rumble Fish* book from under my pillow, took my *Rumble Fish* movie off the shelf and coiled them into a pair of jeans along with the letter. I packed the jeans on top of my stuff in the duffle bag.

Spider would keep his word to Cameron—of this I was sure. I just hoped that he wouldn’t come for me that night.

I spent the night listening for any sound that he was coming. Trying to keep myself awake, I sat in front of the TV, with the sound barely audible. Shortly after two o’clock in the morning, I jumped when front door squeaked opened. When I heard the clinging of dishes and cupboard doors in the kitchen, I relaxed.

A few minutes later, Meatball came scratching at my door. In an almost imperceptible voice, Cameron ordered him down—several times. He had to climb up the stairs again to get the dog. Sitting there, knowing that he was so close, just a door between us, knowing that I wouldn’t see him again, it was very hard not running to him. But I had to stay in place for both our sakes.

When dawn broke, I watched Carly and Spider sleepily trudge out of the pool house with their bags. By five o’clock, the troops had left the compound once more, and I finally went to bed.

I was sad when I figured out that Meatball wasn’t coming back, begging to be let in. He had gone with the rest of them. I wouldn’t get the chance to say goodbye.

Knowing that this was my last day at the farm, I didn’t sleep for very long after they all left. I went downstairs to wait for Rocco to get up. How could it be that the Kid would turn out to be my best friend in the whole world?

I would miss Rocco so much. It felt like I was leaving my family behind.

My efforts to spend as much time with Rocco as possible went somewhat wasted; he didn’t get up until well past noon. He lumbered into the living room, grunted and crashed on the other couch. We slept until mid-afternoon. I told myself that, at least he spent his last hours with me doing

one of his favorite things: sleeping. As for his other favorite thing—eating—I commemorated by making a really big lasagna. We sat at the table. He wolfed down most of the lasagna. I ate without appetite.

“You know you can come visit me any time,” I told him, spearing my cold lasagna.

He squinted over his fork. “I already do.”

“I don’t mean upstairs. I don’t mean here ... I mean when I go back to Callister. Someday.” As I said this I realized that I wouldn’t be able to go back to the city, or back to my former life.

“Okay?” Rocco watched me with awareness.

I dropped the subject. I was giving myself away, getting emotional. He was getting suspicious.

The night pushed forward, and I became more apprehensive about leaving. I had to remind myself several times that I had no other choice. It was time to go—before it was too late.

I had decided that I would follow Griff’s lead and sneak out of my room in the middle of the night by climbing down the two levels of balconies—strolling out of the front door would have been a lot easier, but a little too obvious, even with sparse guards. Climbing down without breaking my neck was as far as my plan went.

I waited for Rocco to go to bed, but after having slept all day, he was going to be up for a while. I closed my eyes to rest before the big escape.

Chapter Twenty: Terrorized

There were firecrackers resounding in the night. Rocco was on his feet before I had even opened my eyes. He ran to the front door just as the off-duty day guards who had been unwinding in the basement bolted past him and ordered him to deadbolt the door behind them. Rocco did as he was told and limped back to the living room, his face white with terror. He had a cell phone to his ear.

“Cam ...” he half-yelled out of breath, “We have a big problem. The house is being attacked.” I heard a voice calmly responding on the phone, but couldn’t make out what was being said.

Rocco answered the voice, “I don’t know who or how many! It’s dark out!”

A fresh round of gunfire exploded in the distance and seemed to be moving closer fast. The voice on the other line was now rapidly speaking.

“I’m not running, Cameron. I’m not a coward. I’ll stay and fight with the guards,” Rocco told him.

Cameron was screaming, cursing on the line. Rocco peeled the phone away from his ear and handed it to me. “Here,” he said, “Cameron wants to talk to you.”

I picked up the phone, “Camer—”

Cameron didn’t give me a chance to greet him. “Emmy ... Go with Rocco. Get out of the house. Run for the woods.” He was panicked. I could hear commotion behind him. Spider was barking orders, and people were yelling and shuffling rapidly.

Rocco had tottered to the cabinet and pulled a handgun out of the drawer. He handed it to me. Steady thuds could be heard at the front door.

“Oh, God! Cameron, they’re at the door. I think they’re trying to knock it down!” I breathed into the phone.

Cameron swore successively and pleaded, “Emmy, get out—” and the line went dead. I looked at the phone and handed it over to Rocco.

He examined it. “Battery’s almost dead. I forgot to charge it,” he confessed and put the useless phone back in his pocket. Rocco then started to rush me toward the patio door, but I resisted.

“You need to get out of here, Em.”

“I’m not going without you,” I whimpered. “We run together. Cameron said—”

He was incredulous. “Run? Em, I can barely walk! I would just slow you down. Besides, I’m not going to let them take my brother’s house without a fight.”

“This is no time for you to prove your toughness to your brother—”

There was a loud snap at the front door—the doorframe was giving into the attack. The trespassers were moments away from entry.

“Can’t you just listen to me for once? I’m not going with you, and I’ll be dead if something does happen to you because Cameron will kill me himself.” Rocco seemed to be getting calmer while I was getting closer to losing my mind.

“Rocco, I am not leaving without you! Please ...”

Crack! The doorframe had finally given in. I jumped. Rocco swore. He looked around the room and, with all his might, pushed me into the furthest corner of the living room where there was a large wicker chest. He opened it, threw the blankets that were inside it on the couch and forced me inside. As he closed the lid, I heard the front door violently swing open and a trudge of footsteps rushing toward the living room. Through the weaves of the chest, I could see Rocco standing guard in the middle of the living room with his arms bravely crossed.

A heavysset man led the gang into the living room. With his finger on the trigger of his machine gun, he glanced around the room and stopped to stare Rocco down. Rocco never flinched.

“Clear!” the heavysset man yelled.

He and the rest of his men slightly relaxed their grip on their weapons and parted to the sides. A lanky, bookish man strolled in from the back through the split of men, stopping in front of Rocco. Unlike the sweaty and agitated men that backed him, the man was tranquil, unconcerned. There

was something familiar about him. My heart was pumping so fast I was shaking.

“Where’s the girl?” he demanded of Rocco. He had an almost female tone to his voice.

Rocco cocked his head to the side. “It’s Norestrom, isn’t it? I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Where’s the girl, mongrel?” Norestrom repeated more forcefully.

“What girl? There aren’t any girls here.”

Norestrom peered at Rocco through his red-rimmed glasses. “Listen, kid, we know the girl is here. All of your men are dead. Now, you can tell us where she is and you’ll live, or you can die and we’ll still find her. Which one is it?”

Gunfire suddenly erupted at the back of the crowd, and I saw two of Norestrom’s men go down with a splat. One of the ailing guards had crawled out of bed from the basement and snuck behind them, taking two men down before getting shot himself.

While Norestrom’s men had been distracted with the guard, Rocco had cocked his fist back and punched Norestrom right on the nose. Norestrom fell back like a rag doll. He slid to the floor and his head hit the ground with a thud.

One of Norestrom’s men ran to his side but Norestrom shoved him away. Disoriented, Norestrom wobbled to a sitting position, his nose bleeding, and his glasses shattered on his face. He was incensed.

“Kill him,” he ordered pinching his nose with two slender fingers.

The heavy man immediately raised his weapon.

Shots were fired.

Rocco fell limp to the floor.

In that moment, I felt like I’d been knocked out of my body. What I had seen ... it couldn’t have happened. My vision blurred, but my eyes stayed on Rocco. I willed him to get back up, to fight back, to run. But he wasn’t moving. Red stains soaked the front of his gray T-shirt, and a puddle of burgundy was spreading around him.

Thick fog had started creeping into my brain.

Norestrom got up and brushed his hands over his khaki pants. “Find her and bring her to me, dead or alive,” he commanded and thought about it, “Preferably alive.”

The men scurried and spread out, leaving Norestrom behind in the living room. Norestrom approached Rocco and kicked his lifeless body. Rocco didn't react. Satisfied that Rocco wouldn't attack him again, Norestrom bent over him and searched his pockets. He pulled out pieces of my Rocco's world: screws and a nail, a napkin, a few peanuts, candy wrappers, and the cell phone.

Norestrom flipped the cell phone open and quickly scanned the screen before the battery went completely dead. Then he bellowed, and his heavy assistant ran back to him.

"He had time to call them. We don't have much time," Norestrom said. "Get the body out of here and make sure it's the first thing they see when they drive in." The heavyset man jumped and called for aid. They carried Rocco out of the living room, leaving a trail behind.

Norestrom stood and scanned the pool of blood with a smug smile. When the heavy man came back and stood with him, Norestrom turned angry. "Go find the girl!"

The two of them ran off through the kitchen doorway, and I heard their footsteps climbing the stairs up to Cameron's room.

The sound of things getting thrown around and broken rang through the house as the men searched high and low for me.

But the living room was left empty.

I didn't have much time before they started pulling apart the living room to find me.

In a daze, I opened the lid of the chest, crawled all the way to the patio door, sliding it open. I crept out into the night and crawled into the dark recess that had once been the site of my hidden first kiss with Cameron. I could hear men stomping within the living room and kitchen now. I rolled myself under the deck's railing, stuffing the pistol in the waistband of my shorts and clinging to the side as I heaved my body over. Hanging from my fingers, I dropped to the ground and immediately skidded away from the basement light, squeezing my body against the cold, brick wall.

The basement patio door slid open, and a man stepped outside, glancing around. My heart pumped frantically as his gaze was slowly coming into my path.

Gunfire erupted again, and flashes of light were coming through the windows of the basement bedrooms. One of the ailing guards, who had

been too ill to get up, had surely been found and killed. The man rushed back into the house to view the action.

Shadows were moving violently within the pool house. Carly's world was now being ripped apart. Soon the men would start searching the grounds for me. With the moon and stars lighting up the landscape, I knew I would be exposed if I moved out of the shadow of the house. Taking one big breath, I darted across the grounds, praying that no one was watching.

I managed to get near the trees without notice.

Hopefulness started inching its way inside me, until I tripped.

My foot had gotten caught. I pushed myself up through the long grass and staring back at me were dead eyes—eyes that I had once known, eyes of one of the guards who had been shot down by Norestrom's men. A scream involuntarily left my lips, and I kicked, struggling to get my foot loose.

In the distance, I heard a booming voice cry out.

"She's over here!" a man coming out of the pool house yelled. All of a sudden, every man looked out of the back windows of the house and started herding in my direction like a pack of hyenas.

After I managed to struggle free from the dead guard's grasp, I ducked into the dark woods.

Branches slashed me in the face, and I pummeled full speed into a few tree trunks. I couldn't see more than two feet in front of me but I could hear the men's war cries and earth-stomping footsteps near and around me, so I didn't stop. I kept running, often tripping over fallen logs and bushes. My legs were getting severely scratched and bruised. My hands were tattered. The adrenaline was pumping too fast for me to feel much, but after a while, my burning lungs were also starting to plot against me. Though my mind continued to speed through, my body was slowly giving up.

When my shoulder hit an unseen tree limb, I fell backward to the ground, the back of my head hitting the hard ground. I forced myself to get up but just fell forward on my hands.

I couldn't go on anymore.

The forest was black, with the only light coming from an imperceptible moon that reflected off the treetops. I couldn't see the men that scoured the forest looking for me, but I could hear them all around. Voices screamed all

over, and inside my head. I slid my body next to a tree trunk and shakily took the gun into my hands.

I had never actually held one before. It was cold and heavier than I had imagined it would be. My hands didn't fit well around the handle. I pointed the gun in front of me with both shaking hands, resting my elbows on my knees, and curled up into a ball against the tree. I closed my eyes and hoped that the voices would go away. In a half-answer to my prayers, the wind picked up through the trees, and rustling leaves drowned out some of the voices. But the screaming in my head continued mercilessly.

I rocked my body back and forth in an effort to keep my mind focused on staying warm. I was dressed in a T-shirt and shorts, and my bare feet were covered in cold mud.

It got much colder. At first, I could feel the chill flow right through me, and my body shook uncontrollably. Eventually, though my body continued to shake, I felt nothing. On a few occasions, I heard branches crackling and breaking nearby as the men continued to search for me in the darkness. I would just squeeze my eyes tighter, praying that they would go away. And they did, every time.

After what seemed like days of being curled up against the tree, dawn seeped through the woods. I became horrifically aware that I was no longer hidden from them by the darkness but I could see nothing but thick brush around me—maybe this would be enough to keep me unseen?

But then there were rapid steps and crashing branches. I listened with all my senses and realized that the noises were heading in my direction.

I had been uncovered

Somehow, I always knew that I was going to die alone. Maybe I even knew that I was going to die young—or maybe I had once upon a time just wished I would die young to get it all over with—but I had never thought that, in the face of death, I would have something, someone to fight for.

As the stomping steps moved closer, faster, I stopped my hands from shaking long enough to cock the gun's lever back, like I had seen done in so many movies before.

I could now clearly hear running steps just beyond the brush that had kept me hidden until now. Though my hands were shaking uncontrollably once again, I held onto the gun as tightly as I could and hoped that I would figure out how to fire this thing before I was discovered. As the leaves to

the side of me rustled, I turned, closed my eyes, steadied myself tight against the tree trunk and pulled the trigger. With a deafening bang, the gun fired. Pieces of tree bark went flying everywhere.

My ears were ringing. Even more footsteps were now running toward me. The gunfire had alerted the men to my hideaway.

I pulled the trigger again. Nothing happened this time. My body was violently convulsing and I could feel the cold tears on my face as I pulled the trigger over and over but nothing happened; the gun was stuck or it only had one bullet or I had broken it.

A man jumped out from the brush and clasped his arms around me to prevent me from shooting.

He tried to pry the gun from me. I struggled, fought back with everything I had left in me. But I couldn't compete against his strength and he finally managed to get the gun from me.

He cupped his hands around my face and forced me to look at him. It was Cameron. His lips were moving rapidly but I couldn't hear anything—just the screams in my head and the ringing in my ears. His warm lips scorched my freezing skin as he kissed my forehead, my nose, my lips.

The brush next to him moved and I jumped back, petrified. Cameron threw his arms around me, grabbed me in a bear hug, while Meatball slowly slinked toward us and licked my frozen fingers.

Cameron looked deathly panicked. He was holding me by the shoulders and talking to me, possibly shouting, but I heard and felt nothing.

After several failed attempts at communicating with me, he took out a short-wave radio and hastily spoke into it. With one last frightened glance at me, he turned his back to me, grabbed my arms, threw them over his shoulders and around his neck. He hoisted me onto his back and started running.

Meatball was ahead of us and led the way home. We trekked for what seemed like miles. I hadn't realized that I had run so far out into the woods.

Slowly, I started hearing again, starting with Cameron's rapid breaths. I also started feeling the cold through my body. By the time we reached the property, my teeth were chattering, and my naked feet and fingers were burning.

Cameron carried me toward the house. It was chaos everywhere on the property. Some of the high-rankers were carrying bodies into parked

vehicles while others frantically walked around, surveying the land, looking for an enemy.

“Don’t look,” Cameron softly warned me as we walked past two guards placing a body in the back of a pickup truck. I concentrated on how good it was to hear Cameron’s voice again.

Cameron carried me into the house and immediately up the stairs, not giving time to think about glancing toward the kitchen doorway. The bedroom was complete disarray. Drawers, my clothes, my stuff were strewn on the floor, the mattress had been flipped off the bed, and my ballerina lamp was shattered on the ground. Cameron released me from his back and made me sit on the mattress on the floor.

“We need to get you packed quickly,” he explained as he started taking the clothes on the floor and piling them up by my feet. In a nightmarish haze, I got up and walked over to the curtains. The duffle bag was still hidden there, untouched. I dragged it out a few inches.

Cameron looked at me curiously for a second.

Then he threw the bag’s strap over his shoulder and simultaneously grabbed a blanket from the messy bed. He wrapped the thick blanket around me and picked me up in his arms again. We headed downstairs and out the door. Cameron placed me onto the passenger-side seat of his car, kneeling in to put the seatbelt around me and closing the door.

He went to Spider, who was wearily standing by the front stoop, engrossed in a conversation with Tiny. I watched them, and I watched a puffy-eyed Carly walk out of the house with a bag. She threw her things in the back of Spider’s truck, and climbed in.

Cameron, Spider, and Tiny spoke with haste, then they all dispersed. Spider climbed into his truck—his tires spitting rocks as he raced away. Meatball climbed in the back while Cameron grabbed another T-shirt from his own bag on the backseat. I hadn’t noticed until then that his T-shirt had been drenched in blood. Then Cameron and I sped away from the farm too.

He drove us down the gravel road, faster than he had that day when we took the Maserati out. When we had turned onto the main road, he had grabbed hold of my hand. Though I was wrapped in a thick blanket, my teeth hadn’t stopped vibrating. I stared at the road ahead, semi-conscious that Cameron was worriedly glancing at me every other minute.

We drove for hours with neither of us speaking, with me never breaking my stare with the road. Cameron didn't let go of my hand.

Eventually I recognized the Callister city limits, but we continued to drive past the city. Cameron finally veered onto a dirt road through a cluster of trees. We arrived to a small log cottage that had a sunken front porch. He stopped the car and sighed.

We got out, and Meatball excitedly led us to the door.

Inside, the cottage was simply furnished. There was a small kitchen table with two chairs in the middle of the room, a tiny kitchenette on one side, and a black woodstove on the other. A narrow wooden staircase led to a small square loft at the top. Through the railing that surrounded the loft-square there was a single bed. All of the barren walls were made of exposed wood. It smelled of Cameron. It all made me feel a little warmer.

Cameron took me by the hand and led me into a minuscule bathroom that was off the kitchenette. He pulled the blanket away from my shoulders, stood me in front of the mirror and started the shower. I didn't recognize the person who was staring back at me through the mirror. This girl had a horrifying, petrified look to her. There were scratches all over her face, and her hair and skin were muddied and red. Her eyes were wild and shocked. This couldn't be me, I told myself.

Cameron's reflection appeared behind mine. He didn't look like himself either. I noticed that his face was as muddied and scraped as mine and watched through the mirror while he pulled the leaves and dry brush from my hair. His gaze caught mine, but this time, he didn't look away.

The steam from the shower started to fog up the mirror. Cameron went to grab a towel and told me to get undressed.

"I promise I won't look," he said with a weary smile, trying to recall a more carefree time when we had stripped out of our soaking clothes at the farm.

I undressed and entered the shower as Cameron left the room. For a while, I just stood there while the water burned my frozen skin. The water hit my head, and I watched the remaining debris from my hair wash down the drain. Slowly, the feeling came back, inside and out. I could feel the throbbing in my bruised and bloodied legs. I could also feel the fear and the pain that were lingering deep, slowly rising to the surface.

I wrapped myself in the towel that Cameron had left for me and walked out to the kitchenette where Cameron was waiting by the small table.

“Here,” he said as he gently handed me a stack of his clothes. “These will keep you warm.”

Like a robot, I dressed myself while Cameron took his leave for the shower. The clothes he had given me smelled like him. By the time I was dressed, Cameron was already out of the shower, dressed in jeans and shirtless. I noticed him and his tattooed bullet wounds. I could feel my drowned emotions bubbling up.

Always keeping an eye on me, he went to the stove where the kettle was now boiling and poured hot water into two cups. He walked back, placed the cups on the table, and sat in the chair next to mine.

I picked up the mug, cupped my hands around it, and looked up at him. He kept my eyes. When I tried to reassuringly smile back, my vision blurred with the tears that had been dammed up for too long. I had trouble breathing, and I could feel something erupting inside of me.

The cup started to shake in my hands. Cameron pulled it away like he had been expecting what was happening to me.

I started quivering. “Rocco was right there ...,” I whispered. “I didn’t know what to do ... I lost him ...” And I started to fall.

He lunged out of his chair and took me into his arms while long, hard sobs escaped me. Cameron hushed me and held me tightly while images of Rocco’s grinning face and his dead body lying on the floor flashed through my head in a swirl. My heart felt like it was being squeezed into a rock-hard fist.

Leaning into Cameron, I cried until the tea grew cold and the room dark. I cried until my shoulders, my arms, and my lungs ached and until the tears had long dried. When I was done, and all I could do was whimper, Cameron carried me to bed. My head on his chest, he stroked my hair until I fell into a dreamless sleep.

It was the middle of the night. My throat was throbbing, and Cameron wasn’t next to me. The pain that was in my heart was unbearable. The cottage was quiet, and I could hear the crickets lamenting their lullaby outside. I heard a chair creak down in the kitchen, and I tiptoed to the edge of the loft. Through the rails I saw Cameron sitting at the table with his

head in his hands and his fingers raking in and out of his hair. His shoulders were heaving in quick sequences. It took me a moment to realize that he was sobbing, silently, alone.

I knew I was witnessing something never seen. I thought about going down there. But then I let Cameron grieve the loss of his little brother in peace.

After a while, the chair pushed away from the table, and the wooden stairs groaned. Cameron crawled back into the single bed and lay next to me. Feigning sleep, I exhaled, took his arm, and brought it under my arm to my other shoulder, fitting myself into him. Cameron didn't push me away. He clasped his fingers through mine and pulled me even closer to him. He stuffed his face in my hair and sighed, and we fell asleep as we became one skin.

Chapter Twenty-One: I Never Said It Was a Good Plan

I had no idea where I was or what time it was when I woke again. Disoriented, I glanced around the barren room, looking for a clock and suddenly remembered. Disarrayed images of what had happened started filtering through in pieces—gunfire, a wicker chest, the guard’s dead eyes, Rocco ... I gulped to force back down the knot that was growing in my throat and got up.

From the small, downstairs windows, I could see that the sun was up and that Cameron was gone. I climbed down the creaky stairs just as he was walking through the door, grocery bags in hand.

“The corner store didn’t have much, but it’ll do us for a while,” he announced, breathless. He placed the bags on the table and rushed to meet me at the stairs.

He cradled my face in his hands and surveyed it with worry, passing his thumbs over my puffy and scratched cheeks. I forced a cheering smile.

“Mornin’,” he whispered, kissing me on the forehead without reserve.

He went to put the groceries away while I worked to get my bearings back. I made my way to the table, tightly holding onto the falling waistline of his pants and almost tripping on the hems that were dragging on the floor. Cameron chuckled at the sight of me and nodded his head toward the bathroom door. “I brought your bag in if you want to change,” he said, simultaneously glancing at me with questioning eyes.

We sat over breakfast. Even after Cameron’s insistence, I couldn’t eat anything, but I did manage to guzzle down a glass of milk, which soothed my raw throat. The stillness at the table was making me self-conscious, particularly when Cameron kept intently staring at me the whole time. I could tell that something was bothering him—with my damaged face, my untamed hair, I must have looked like I had walked off a safari. I swallowed the rest of my milk and went to shower. When I strolled out of the

washroom, Cameron was sitting on the stairs, waiting for me. Whatever was bothering him hadn't been satiated with my slightly improved appearance.

I took a seat a few stairs below him and struggled to get my wet locks into a ponytail. Cameron didn't wait another second before scuttling down to the stair behind me, his legs to my side, wrapping his arms around my shoulders and pulling me in. Something had changed. His emotions had become ... unrestrained. I couldn't explain it. Whatever the reason for the change, the new, uninhibited Cameron disarmed me. The ache in my heart still throbbing, I found it to be what I needed most.

I closed my eyes and let my head fall back.

"Emmy," he murmured into my ear.

"Hmmm ..."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Uh, huh ..."

"Yesterday, when we went back into the house to pack your stuff and leave, how come you had a bag already packed?"

My eyes shot open. With everything that had happened, I had completely forgotten about the eavesdropped conversation between Cameron, Carly, and Spider.

"What is it?" he asked when I wasn't answering. "Your body just went stiff."

I'd forgotten who I was talking to. "I don't want you to be mad."

"Why would I get angry?" His body had stiffened too. I hesitated saying anything else.

"I promise I won't get mad," he told me finally. "Can you please tell me what's going on?"

While I was playing with my hands, trying to find a way to not ruin the moment or the change in him, he was growing impatient.

"Emmy, you're making me nervous—"

"I know you were going to let Spider kill me," I blurted under his pressure.

"What?" He jumped so high that he almost sent both of us tumbling down the stairs. "... What are you talking about?"

Cameron looked at me in disbelief, like he genuinely didn't know what I was talking about. It was easy for me to forget all the bad stuff when I was

cocooned in his arms—perhaps it had the same effect on him?

Turning my face to his and taking one immense inhalation, I told Cameron everything I had overheard, word for word, without emotion. All of it seemed like a dream now. While the story progressed, I watched his facial expressions change from confused to incredulous to deeply disturbed.

“I can’t believe that you actually think I’m capable of doing that,” Cameron said, shaking his head in amazement. He moved me to the side so that he could see me clearly. “Emmy, no matter what you did or said, no matter how bad things get, that would never happen. No one would ever be able to convince me that getting rid of you is the solution. Not Carly or Spider. Not even you.”

“I didn’t imagine it,” I quickly defended, heat building behind my ears.

“What you overheard had nothing to do with you.”

“I snuck around ... I talked to the guards ... I didn’t follow orders ...” I wasn’t exactly sure why I kept arguing with him. Was I trying actually trying to convince him that getting rid of me was a good plan?

“Yes. You did do all of those things,” he chuckled. “You and Frances have that in common.”

He was still holding on to me. When I had determined that he wasn’t going to let go, I relaxed and spoke up. “Frances?”

He brought his lips to my ear again. “Spider thinks that Frances has been spying on us and selling our secrets to rival gang members. She sneaks around the farm and asks the guards a lot of weird questions about us, about our business.”

“So you ordered her killed? She’s a mother! She’s my nephew’s mother!”

Cameron shushed me. “She’s not who you think she is, Emmy. Daniel lives with Frances’s mother full-time while Frances lives in a big apartment downtown. She disappears for days at a time. I’ve been giving Frances’s mother money every month just to keep food on their table and a roof over Daniel’s head. Frances hemorrhages any money that we give directly to her.”

Though this slightly changed my perspective on Frances, it didn’t make Cameron’s decision any easier for me to understand. After seeing my brother grow up without his mother, I knew how much children needed their mother, no matter what she was like.

I looked him in the eyes. “Cameron, she’s still his mother—”

“Don’t worry,” he hushed after reading my face. “I don’t think she’s smart enough to pull something like that off without getting caught. I was really tired when I agreed to it, but called the whole thing off the next morning.” He pulled me in closer. “After spending three nights up, worrying, wondering whether your fever was ever going to break and whether I should give away our hiding place to get a helicopter to take you to a hospital, I was ready to agree to anything by that point. Spider used my weakness to get what he wanted.”

“He must have been upset,” I said, aware of how close his face was to mine, glad that I had brushed my teeth.

“He’s been wanting to get Frances out of our lives for a long time. He hates how she still gets to Carly.” He shrugged. “He’ll get over it.”

After everything that had happened, I needed him more than ever. I considered bringing my face a few inches forward to bridge the gap while Cameron continued to shake his head in disbelief. “So how were you planning to run away exactly?”

I told him about my plan to climb down the balconies and trek through the woods. This caused him to burst into laughter.

“You were going to climb down with that huge duffle bag and drag it through the woods with you! The bag weighs more than you do! You have enough clothes in there to last you three weeks ... But no water, no food. How exactly were you planning to survive out there?”

I could feel my face turning red. “I never said it was a good plan.”

“I need to take you camping someday. It’d be a hoot to watch you try to survive without a hot shower or electricity,” he teased. “Anyway, didn’t I promise you that I was going to bring you home safely?”

“It was getting hard for me to decipher between truth and lies.”

He was serious again. “Maybe I haven’t always told you everything but I never lied to you.”

“Oh?” It was done in a sort of clumsy way, the way I brought my lips to his. When I bolted in, he jerked sideways and our foreheads nearly smashed together. But I didn’t let this dissuade me. I pressed my lips hard against his. Then I forced myself to pull away to see the effect. Cameron’s cheeks were flushed and he was a little winded.

“Does it mean anything to you or am I still just wasting my time?” I asked him.

He caught on and smiled slyly. “It doesn’t mean anything. Just a kiss, nothing else.”

I leaned in again. This time he leaned in too so that we met in the middle. It was soft, not so clumsy. After a while, he gently pulled my face away and held it inches away from his. “I did lie about that,” he admitted. “I wondered for a long time what it would be like ... but when I finally kissed you that night, I knew I was in really big trouble. And then I heard about that Griff guy being up in your room, alone with you, I felt like someone had just stabbed me in the stomach. I panicked. I shouldn’t have said what I said.”

I understood what Cameron was saying—I had felt exactly the same way when he had told me that the kiss had meant nothing to him. I winced at this memory but quickly recovered. “Actually, I kissed you,” I corrected. “And next time you feel panicked like that, will you talk to me instead of turning into a jerk?”

“Only the truth from now on,” he said.

“Promise?”

He chuckled. “I promise.”

I kissed him again. But when I tried to seal the space between our bodies, Cameron seized up and leaned back. “I have to check on Meatball,” he announced while my lips were still on his. Then he lunged past me and practically ran to the door, where he stood waiting. He forced a reassuring smile but the crazed look on his face confused me.

I went to meet him and tried to mask the ache in my voice. “Where’s Meatball?”

He shrugged. “Swimming. That’s all he does when we come here.”

“Swimming?” I didn’t remember seeing a swimming pool.

Cameron’s eyes sparkled. He took my hand and we went outside. We walked to the back of the cottage and followed the beaten path into the woods. Being in the woods reminded me of something I was trying hard to forget. If he hadn’t been holding onto my hand, I would have turned around, running.

“How did you find me yesterday? I ran pretty far into the woods, but you still found me?” I regretted asking the question as soon as it hit my lips. All the horrifying images of that night started rushing through my mind. I

choked back the tears and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

“Meatball caught your scent by the pool. He started sniffing around and bolted for the woods. I knew he had found you, I ran after him.” He took my hand to his lips as we continued to make our way among the trees. “You really scared Meatball when you shot at him. I don’t think he was expecting that kind of welcoming after running all that way. Good thing you have no hand-eye coordination,” he said. Then he considered with more seriousness, “I’ll have to teach you how to shoot. You should know how to protect yourself better than that.”

“Cameron,” I said, “I was really far out. He couldn’t have possibly followed the scent that far.”

“Meatball has spent his whole life learning to follow your scent. Finding you is his favorite game. He hunted you down through a huge crowd of people the first day we met in the projects, remember? You’re like his real-life *Where’s Waldo*.”

The pathway led to a dock and a pond. There were trees and brush that came right up to the water’s edge and large lily pads floated on the surface with pink and yellow flowers attached to their underwater stem. The sun was peering through the break in the trees, and the beam of light glittered on the water. It was magical.

Meatball was swimming around in a circle; his head was the only thing that could be seen out of the water. He looked like a big muskrat.

We lay on the dock with our hands crossed over our stomachs enjoying the sunshine while Meatball continued his tireless swim in circles.

I looked at the blue sky through the leaves of an overhanging tree. “What is this place anyway?”

“It’s my place,” he said with emphasis. “I come here whenever I need to get away and be alone. It’s the only place that no one else knows about but Meatball and me—and, well, you too, now.”

“Spider and Carly don’t know about this place?”

“Nope.”

I paused, debating whether I was going to ask the next question that I really wanted to ask. It came out well before I had time to dwell on it. “What about that Manny girl? Did you ever bring her here?”

From my peripheral, I could see Cameron break a smile. “No, Emmy. No one.” He continued to smile at the sky and, after a few minutes, he turned his body toward me, resting his head on his fist.

“Well?” he asked staring at me with amusement.

“Well, what?” I tried to make my voice sound as innocent as possible.

“I know you’ve been dying to ask me about Manny. So, go ahead. Ask away. Nothing but the truth.”

“Do you love her?” As the question came out of my mouth, I realized that I had asked him the same question that she had asked Cameron about me.

“At some point I think I might have liked her a lot, but no, I didn’t love her.”

“But she spent the night with you?” I turned to him and confessed, “I saw her T-shirt in your drawer.”

“Yes, she has spent the night,” he answered, alert.

“With you?” My voice sounded more jealous than I had planned to let on.

“Yes, with me.”

“More than once?”

Cameron remained silent.

“Nothing but the truth remember?” I reminded him.

He sighed. “Yes, more than once.”

“Were there other girls like her?”

“I never brought anybody else to the farm,” he replied.

“But you have been with other girls,” I said matter-of-factly.

“Yes,” he admitted. He watched me carefully. “This bothers you, doesn’t it?”

It bothered me as much as a broken nose or a nail in the head would bother me. “A little,” I de-emphasized.

“Does this make you think that I don’t really love you?” he wondered with worry.

That too. “I don’t understand how you could be with someone in that way and not love them.”

Cameron turned his eyes to the sky. When I thought that he wasn’t going to answer me, his voice came back to me. “It was easy for me to check up on you when Bill first died. I’d go watch you play soccer at school or watched while you shopped in the mall. When I was sure that you were

okay, I could leave without thinking twice about it. But then I started to want to see you more and more. That's when things got really weird. I watched you go to rich people parties ... I *wanted* you to have all those things in your life ..."

A shadow had crept over Cameron's face. He took a long breath before he turned his eyes back to me. "The hardest times for me were definitely when a new guy came around to sweep you off your feet. Every time I thought for sure that this guy or that guy was going to stick and be the guy that you'd fall in love with. That's when I'd decide to go out and live my own, abnormal life. Find some girl to keep me company." He took another moment, then he chuckled. "Maybe I didn't throw them off my bed like some people, but the girls never lasted."

"But did you have to do that with them?" I asked half-teasingly, trying to change the mood back.

I was grateful when he laughed. "Emmy, I'm a gang leader. The people I do business with would think there was something wrong with me if I didn't do that."

His face was near mine and he was smiling. I took advantage and kissed him. It was strange for me to want someone so much it hurt. He let me kiss him for a second, but then he withdrew and rolled on his back turning his eyes to the sky. I felt like I had just been slapped in the face.

"I don't understand what you're doing, Cameron."

Cameron turned to me in shock. "What?"

"I know I'm not as pretty as Manny," I told him, holding back tears.

"Is that what you think?" he huffed.

"I don't know what I think. One minute, you're hugging me, the other minute you're running away. I don't understand what you're trying to do."

He sighed. "Emmy, I wish you could see yourself, see what I see, see how beautiful you are. Have you never noticed how everyone's head turns to watch you enter a room?"

"I'm sure the red hair and polka dots have nothing to do with that," I mumbled, sarcasm seeping through.

"Where did you get such a screwed-up view of yourself?" His temper flared a little. "You're beautiful, Emmy. Why can't you see that?"

I didn't know how to answer that. Cameron hadn't been there when kids were trying to outdo each other on finding new nicknames for me or when

they were taking bets in high school on whether I had red hair, all over.

He took a breath, reached over and swept a lingering hair away from my face. “For me, there’s no one else but you.”

A tear escaped the corner of my eye and slid down the side of my nose. “Then why won’t you kiss me?”

His eyes were piercing. “Do you know how hard this is for me? I want to kiss you. I want to wrap my arms around you, never let you go.”

“You’re making me so confused.” This time I let myself roll onto my back in exasperation. Something blocked my sun. I opened my eyes to see Cameron leaning over me. He was wretched. All the features of his face were pulled in pain.

“I thought I lost you,” he told me in a murmur. “When I got back to the house, when I found Rocco ... Emmy, I started looking for your body too, and when I didn’t find you ... I thought for sure they had taken you, which would have been just as bad. I had no idea where to start looking or how I was going to get you back—”

“But you did get me back. You found me.”

“I found you,” he agreed. “But look at what I’ve done to you. Everything that you’ve been through, that you’ve seen ... you would have never had to go through that if it wasn’t for me. The fact that you’re here is pure luck. I’m not going to make this worse for you by making us more complicated. I haven’t changed my mind, Emmy. Once this blows over, you’re going home.” There was no hint of doubt in his voice.

“When?” I asked, my voice shuddering.

“I don’t know. As soon as it’s safe for you.”

I left it alone—for now—but I wasn’t going to give up. Since Cameron had recognized that there was an *us*, I still had hope.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Fitting Pieces Together

I remembered. Rocco was spread on the ground. I yelled at him to get up, but he refused to move. I was frantic. He was lying on the grass right in front of me, and I bent over, trying to get to him, but someone was holding me back. I fought the hand that was grabbing onto the back of my shirt and turned around to see Norestrom sitting across from me at the picnic table. I was back at the outdoor commons of Callister University. I now knew that the man who had joined me during my lunch break all that time ago was named Norestrom.

I woke up in a cold sweat. Cameron had already taken hold of me. I was screaming Rocco's name. His face had implanted itself in my brain while I was sleeping, and it wasn't going anywhere this time. Cameron rocked me back and forth as the tears and quivering started up again. But something was different this time. I didn't want to hold any of it in anymore. After a few minutes, I willed myself to calm down, and I turned to Cameron. He looked sick with worry.

"Emmy, are you—"

"Who's Norestrom?" I asked point blank, wiping the wetness from my face.

He was taken aback. "Why do you ask?"

"Because Norestrom is what Rocco called the man that night," I told him.

"Emmy, do you remember everything that happened that night?"

I nodded that I did.

"Do you think you can tell me everything you remember?" he asked cautiously.

I nodded again. I didn't wait for further encouragement and started my discourse right away. The gunfire in the distance, the phone call with Cameron, the view from the wicker chest ... the words just poured out of my mouth. I couldn't stop any of it. While the tears unnoticeably continued

to run down my cheeks, Cameron's face remained unchanged. He listened to my every word without question or interruption.

By the time I had finished with the part where Cameron came to find me in the woods, Cameron was already digging through his jeans that were draped over the banister and found his cell phone. He pressed one key, and I heard Spider grumble hello on the other end.

"It was Norestrom," Cameron said coldly. "Bring him in." He then hung up the phone and came back to me, while I sobbed every tear that I had left in me. He held me tight. I could tell from the shortness of his breath and the tenseness of his body that he was furious. But he continued to hold onto me without wavering.

In the morning, I awoke to the sound of his voice coming from outside. I went downstairs and peeked out the window. Cameron was pacing back and forth on the old porch, talking rapidly on his cell phone. I could hear him angrily retelling my story to whoever was listening on the other side. He was beside himself, and a string of cuss words preceded and followed Norestrom's name.

I took the opportunity to wash my face and have a boiling hot shower. As the grime washed off my body, so did my remaining jumbled thoughts. Everything in my head was clear again, and, though my heart still felt like it was being squeezed every time I thought of Rocco, I didn't let my brain run away from it anymore. I let myself feel the pain and remember everything as it happened. When I walked out of the washroom, Cameron was still outside. I couldn't hear his voice anymore, so I went searching for him. He was sitting on the swinging porch chair, glaring in the distance. This time I went over to him. I kissed him on the cheek and wrapped my arms around his neck. Cameron followed my lead and held me in a crushing bear hug. His body slowly started to relax, and he dug his head into my neck.

After a while, he looked up with his tired dark eyes. "There's something I need to do today," he announced. "You'll have to come with me. I can't leave you here alone."

While Cameron showered, I got breakfast ready. He came out of the washroom dressed in jeans and nothing else. I couldn't help but ogle as he walked about, bare-chested. I never liked tattoos—but everything about Cameron, especially his tattoos, made him irresistible. When Cameron

caught me staring at him, I quickly glanced away, almost dropping a teacup in the process.

“So where are we going?” I asked, obviously trying to change the subject.

“My mother’s,” he replied, stuffing a piece of toast in his mouth. I couldn’t hide my surprise at hearing this.

We drove away from the cottage and back into the city. Cameron drove too fast, and I noticed that his hand started to squeeze mine tighter.

“You need to prepare yourself for this,” he warned me. “My mother can be pretty shocking when you first meet her.”

I smiled at him with reassurance. I couldn’t imagine any mother being more horrifying than mine.

We pulled into one of Callister’s slum districts. It was the middle of the week. The streets were empty, except for the men and boys who hung around the corners, eying us as we drove by. Most of the shops were boarded up. Those that were open were receded behind steel lattices, with blinking neon lights barely shining through the dirty glass. The streets were lined with garbage bags and empty cardboard boxes, broken down and stacked by the side of the road. Bottles and other litter were strewn by the sidewalks and at the foot of the boarded-up buildings. While I looked ahead, I could feel Cameron anxiously glancing at me, watching for any sign of revolt. I remained unchanged and continued to watch the scene.

We turned onto one of the side streets and were met with row upon row of low-income housing. Most of the lots were completely paved around the houses; the houses that were fortunate enough to have green patches out front had, for the most part, knee-high weeds growing among damaged furniture, old couches, and other forgotten possessions. I watched an old woman slowly stroll on the sidewalk, pulling her disagreeable kitty cat behind her with a leash. There was one of those in every neighborhood.

Cameron pulled up in front of a semi-detached house and stopped. He sat silently for a few seconds, uncomfortably staring ahead.

“Is this your mother’s house?” I asked, breaking the silence.

“Yep,” he said.

“So this is where you grew up,” I mused glancing back at the house. His mother’s house was faced with red brick and had an aluminum door with a ripped screen and cracked window in front of a windowless brown door.

The porch roof looked like it was going to come crashing down on the cement stoop at any second. The front yard had mismatched chairs strewn, broken or lying on their sides, and bottles appeared among the overgrown grass.

“No. The place my mom and I lived in was a lot worse than this,” he said. “The city had it torn down a couple years ago.”

Cameron was gazing at me nervously.

“Well,” I encouraged, “are we going in or are we just going to sit here?”

Cameron sighed, let go of my out-squeezed hand, and stepped out of the Audi. I met him on the sidewalk, where he quickly picked up my hand once more. We strolled in tandem down the walkway, stepping over trash, and finally came to a stop at the front door. With one immense inhalation and a last anxious glance at me, Cameron knocked on the door. We could hear the television playing in the background. When no one came, he knocked again.

We waited for a minute, but still nothing happened. Cameron heaved another sigh, screeched open the aluminum door, and pushed on the windowless front door. He peered inside first and, with his hand protectively on the small of my back, guided me in.

The smell of mold and tobacco hit my nose as soon as I walked in, but I continued to maintain my self-possession. There were hoards of junk piled in the hallway and on the stairs that led to a second story. The pink wallpaper in the hall was yellowed and peeling off in spots, and the dirty greenish carpet was speckled with cigarette burns. I jumped when a cat leapt up from behind the pile of laundry that was on the floor.

Cameron put his arm around my shoulders. I could see that he was embarrassed to have me there. I smiled my most supportive smile at him, but I wasn't sure if he bought it.

We walked into the living room, where two little girls and a boy were sitting side by side on the couch, watching cartoons on TV. They looked so tiny on that big couch. One of the blond girls had mad knots in her threaded hair. Their bare feet were dirty and their eyes looked almost wild as they watched us walk in. I noticed that the little boy had Cameron's same dark eyes.

“Where's your mother?” Cameron asked them abruptly.

The bigger of the little girls expressionlessly pointed toward a doorway.

We continued past the children and walked into the kitchen where a cloud of cigarette smoke hung in the air. Half of the cupboard doors were either hanging off one hinge or missing. There was a pile of dishes stacked in and around the sink and dirty pots on top of the encrusted stove and counters. The floor crunched as we stepped on leftover foodstuff.

A lady was sitting alone at the kitchen table, with a large plastic glass half-full of beer in front of her, two empty beer bottles next to that, and a cigarette left burning in an overflowing ashtray. She lifted her head and peered at Cameron as we walked in. The sound of the television in the background was met by the leaky kitchen faucet dripping water. We quietly stood there while the lady took a puff of her cigarette and looked lost in thought.

She sneered when she finally recognized Cameron. “What the hell are you doing here?” she croaked at him. “And who the hell are you?” she said, turning to me.

“Mom, this is Emmy ... Emily,” he corrected himself nervously. I smiled at her.

“You brought a girl with you. That’s a first.” With her cigarette hanging on her bottom lip, Cameron’s mom strutted over to us and put her hand on my shoulder, directing me to sit at the table. “It must be pretty serious for my boy to bring you here. He’s usually too proud to introduce me to any of his friends—apparently he’s too good for his own mother.”

Cameron’s mother took her seat again, and Cameron yanked out a chair for himself.

“Can I get you kids anything to eat?” she asked, sweetly.

“No, we’re fine,” Cameron quickly answered for the both of us.

Her hair was shoulder length, crimped, and bleached blond—though, from the overgrowth at her scalp, I guessed that her natural hair color was likely closer to Cameron’s dark locks. She was wearing a tight, V-neck sleeveless shirt that showed off her well-endowed cleavage. Unfortunately, it also emphasized the beer gut that hung over her skintight jeans. Her blue eye shadow drew attention to her beautiful dark eyes, and almost all of the cigarette butts in the ashtray still had traces of her bright red lipstick on them. Her skin was translucent, like silk wrapping paper, the kind that stuck out of gift bags.

We sat in silence while Cameron's mother gulped down the other half of her beer and stared at me over the rim of her glass. "You're too skinny and you're very pale. You need to put some makeup on," she announced to the table, "but I doubt there's anything you can do to make that hair color any better. Have you tried to dye it? The lady next door sells wigs—they're made from real horse hair. I can get you a good price."

I could feel the blood rushing to my cheeks.

Cameron was furious. "I didn't come here so that you can insult my girlfriend. I came here to talk to you about Rocco."

"Rocco?" she asked between puffs. "Where is that little bastard?" She leaned over the table, smirking at me. "You know that ungrateful child left me alone with no good-byes or anything." She added, "I was worried sick and almost called the police till Cammy called me a couple weeks later to tell me that Rocco was with him." Cameron rolled his eyes as his mother turned to him. "Seems all of my sons eventually leave me to fend for myself."

We sat in uncomfortable silence again. Cameron's mother got up to pull another bottle of beer out the fridge. Cameron was shaking his leg, nervous, mentally preparing to break the news to his mother.

"You came to talk to me about Rocco, so talk," she urged. She sat back down and poured another glass full.

Cameron cleared his throat and looked at his interlaced hands on the table. "Rocco was ... he's dead."

His mother immediately looked up and glanced from Cameron to me. The tears welled up in my eyes, and the knot in my throat inflated. I had to look away.

"What?" she asked, incredulous.

"He was shot and killed a few days ago," Cameron said, his voice shuddering.

His mother stood and started pacing around the kitchen and shaking her head. I could hear her mumbling and swearing under her breath. Finally she stopped and winced at Cameron.

"You're just a pariah," she rasped to him. "I didn't put up a fight or make the police bring Rocco back to me when I found out he was with you because he looked up to you so much. You come here with your expensive car and your little girlfriend and you think that this makes you better than

the rest of us. All your money did was get my little Rocco killed. You're nothing but a bastard, just like your father. You ruined my life, and now you've ruined my baby Rocco's life. I curse the day you were born."

My fists, my jaw were clenched. I watched Cameron. He was very calm, like he had expected this from his mother. He got up and dug into his pocket, pulling out a large stack of hundred dollar bills.

"Someone will contact you with the funeral details," he said, as he placed the money on the table. "Make sure some of this goes to getting food for those kids." He walked over to me and gently pulled my chair out to help me up. As we exited the kitchen, I saw Cameron's mother snatch the money from the table and stuff it down her shirt.

Neither one of us spoke in the car. Cameron's eyes stared vacantly at the road as we sped down the street. We passed a street light, and, instead of turning on the road that we had come in through, Cameron kept driving and turned down a narrow laneway instead. There was barely an inch between the car's side mirrors and the warehouse walls that flanked the laneway. He continued to drive dangerously fast until we got to the end, where the string of warehouses stopped and the lane opened up into a makeshift pier of gravel and rocks overlooking the Callister River.

Cameron unfastened his seatbelt and dashed out of the car. He stuck his hands in his pockets and stiffly leaned against the hood. I stepped out, climbed on the hood and wrapped my arms around him. His body was rigid, and he was breathing short angry breaths. When I pulled in closer, I felt his muscles slowly relax again.

"I used to come here a lot when I was a kid and needed to get away from my mom," he told me.

I glanced around. We were in the bay of a commercial part of the river. Factories and smoke stacks bordered the shores and large barges carrying steel and crates floated back and forth across the harbor. A dead fish floated on the mud-brown water by the rocks.

"It's lovely," I remarked.

He chuckled. "I didn't have much to work with back then." He turned around to face me.

"So, you met my mother," he said bitterly, "What did you think?"

I smiled sheepishly. "She's lovely too, Cammy."

He shuddered. "Please don't ever call me that. I hate it."

I leaned in and kissed him lightly, so as to not frighten him away.

We lay on the hood of the car and listened to the steam whistles blowing by the other shore. I thought about Rocco and finally understood why he had been so desperate to make a life away from his mother. Another thought occurred to me, and I turned to Cameron.

“That night, when those men came in, Norestrom kept asking Rocco where I was. They were looking for me.”

“Uh-huh,” Cameron replied cautiously.

“This wasn’t the first time that I had met him,” I confessed.

Cameron’s interest was piqued. “Who? Norestrom?”

I nodded and told him about the day Norestrom joined me at the picnic table on school grounds. Cameron was furious and walked to the edge of the water, swearing under his breath.

“I need you to tell me,” I pleaded, “did Rocco get killed because of me?”

“He didn’t get killed because of you. Rocco got killed because of one man’s greed.”

“I don’t understand what that has to do with me,” I said.

He sat on the hood and pulled on my legs, sliding me closer to him. “Before your brother and I started the business, a guy named Shield already had the power over almost all of the underground market. He controlled shipments, sales, business dealings, and all of the money that came with it. He had connections everywhere, and the gang leaders let him control everything because they were afraid of him and his connections. When your brother, Spider, and I came in and started making contacts with the gang leaders, all of them started to join forces with us instead. Even though Bill was a pretty smooth negotiator, the gang leaders didn’t need much convincing—none of them trusted Shield, and they had been looking for a way out. The business thrived under our management. The gang leaders were happy; and Shield lost everything but the small business he ran from his own turf. He tried to threaten us and the other leaders with his connections, but with all of the leaders peacefully united, there was nothing that Shield could do.”

Although it was hard for me to imagine my brother being anything else but a big goof, I still didn’t understand. “What does this have to do with me?”

“Shield feels that we stole the business from him and that we should have to pay him for that. After Bill died, he appealed to the leaders, asking that Bill’s money be given to him. The leaders just laughed in his face. Now Shield is coming after you for that money.”

“I don’t have any money, Cameron. My parents stopped sending me money after they got sick of me sending it back to them.”

Cameron raised his eyebrows. “I never understood that. Why do you choose to make life harder on yourself when your parents’ money opens doors for you that are closed to the rest of the world? You could do anything you want with their money to support you.”

“I can do anything I want with my parents’ money, so long as what I choose to do is what they want me to do,” I grumbled. Cameron looked confused. I shook my head, flustered. “It’s complicated. Don’t change the subject. Point is, I have no money, and this Shield guy is wasting his time.”

“Actually, you do. You have Bill’s inheritance, which is pretty generous, I might add.”

“I think I would have remembered if Bill had left me anything. He didn’t.”

“Yes, he did,” Cameron argued as he reached his hand over and slid it down the middle of my chest. I was frozen in place. He pulled his hand out, with the angel pendant that my brother had given me clasped between two fingers.

I laughed, shaking off some of the nervousness that lingered after his touch. “I hate to break this to you, Cameron, but that thing is worth a few hundred dollars at best. I don’t think Shield will be satisfied if I pawn this and give him the money.”

“Look more closely,” he urged, “What do you see?”

I humored him and looked down. There was nothing unusual about it. It was beautiful to me. An angel standing on a pedestal with a pink gem in the middle. I came up shrugging.

“Look closer.” He held the pendant upside down so that the pedestal faced me.

“Shiny silver and product codes.”

“They’re not product codes, they’re bank account numbers. Bill set up offshore bank accounts in the Caymen Islands for you before he died, with

another promise from me to move all his money into them if something ever happened to him. I kept that promise too,” he said, winking.

For the first time, I realized that the numbers meant something, but that still didn’t explain everything. Last time I had checked in the mirror, I didn’t look all that threatening. “Why didn’t this Shield person just send one of his dumb soldiers to come grab the necklace from me?”

“Because they have no idea that the information they’re looking for has been hanging around your neck for years, and, until they saw me with you, they had no idea you even had the money. They must have assumed that Carly, Spider, and I had kept it for ourselves.”

“What does seeing you with me have anything to do with it?”

“I think Shield’s guys had been following me around for a while. Someone must have tipped them off that I was spending a lot of time in the projects when I had no business to conduct there,” he said smiling at me. “When Meatball hunted you down ... and we officially met, I freaked out because I was afraid that they would figure out who you were. In hindsight, if I had left you alone and not gone back again, I don’t think they would have known anything was up other than my stupid dog attacking some girl.” He held my eyes. “But I really hated to see you so upset with me that day, and Meatball did break your ancient Walkman ... I just couldn’t leave it alone. I had to go back and fix it.”

“I’m glad you did,” I said.

He smiled a tight smile. “Well, I shouldn’t have, because the second time we met, I confirmed their suspicion that something was up. Shield had sent one of his top guys to back up the spotter’s story. When I saw him running past us in the projects, I knew the jig was up.”

Things suddenly started to make sense. “The runner? The one from the cemetery?”

He nodded somberly. “He’s the worst of his kind. He wouldn’t have just kidnapped you—he would have done a lot more nastier things to you before he took you back to Shield. When I heard him say in the cemetery what he had planned to do to you, it drove me over the edge ... I completely lost it.”

I remembered that night in the cemetery and the uncontrollable rage on Cameron’s face as he shot the man repeatedly.

“Shield must have sent Norestrom to try to get information on you,” he reasoned.

“How is Norestrom related to Shield?”

“Norsetrom is Shield’s right-hand man, kind of like Spider is mine.”

“But I didn’t tell Norestrom anything.”

He smiled reassuringly. “I think they already suspected who you might be because of your hair. I guess someone must have told them that Bill had a little sister with flaming red hair.” I would have normally been slightly offended with that comment, but Cameron had a loving smile on his face, so I let him get away with it—this time. “That’s why they planted a trap to see if it was really you. But I didn’t catch it on time.”

“A trap?” I didn’t remember falling into a leaf-covered hole or getting caught in any flying nets.

“We normally paid some local gang kid to keep Bill’s gravesite clean,” he explained. “But the bastards threw garbage around Bill’s grave right before you came through. Of course, you couldn’t resist cleaning up the mess, could you?” he teased. “When you stopped, they knew without a doubt who you were, and we had to stop Shield’s man from coming after you. Spider and I grabbed him just as he was running out of the cemetery after you.”

“Did Spider know who I was?”

“He knew that Bill had a little sister, but that’s it.” Cameron passed his fingers through his hair. “Believe me, it wasn’t a pretty conversation when I had to admit to him that I’d been secretly watching over you and that, because of that, we would have to kill one of Shield’s top guys, possibly starting an all-out gang war.”

“You must have gotten in a lot of trouble because of me,” I mused guiltily.

He nodded. “We had to enlist one of the local gang leaders because leaders aren’t allowed to hunt on each other’s turf without permission. But, for the most part, I tried to keep everything as quiet as possible so that no one would know about you. That’s why I brought Rocco along to keep watch, and, well, you know how that turned out.” He smiled with pain at the memory his little brother. “When we got back to the farm, I held an emergency meeting with all the leaders and gave them my version of events before Shield got to them. I let them vote on my fate. They all hate Shield, so I got a unanimous vote of support right away.”

I turned to him. “What was your version, exactly?”

He smiled slyly. “Strictly what they needed to know—that Shield was still trying to go after the money, even after he was told by all the leaders that it didn’t belong to him, and that the financial controller of Bill’s estate had been targeted for kill.”

The memory of the day that I had heard Cameron coldly talk to Manny about me in his office resurfaced. “And that you had taken care of the insignificant girl who had witnessed everything,” I added. I couldn’t hide the hurt in my voice.

Cameron cupped my face in his hands. “Emmy, if I told them the truth about my feelings for you, the word would get out really quickly, and you would become a target—not just because of your money but because they would know they could control me if they had you.”

He reassuringly pressed his lips against mine—but then he stopped himself and pulled away.

We went to grab lunch at a small diner that Cameron knew about. Then we made our way back to the cabin where Meatball was waiting for us, his fur still wet from a recent swim. Cameron convinced me to join him for a swim in the pond. Although I didn’t enjoy getting the slimy lily pads stuck between my toes, being alone in the water with Cameron was well worth all the ickyness of the weeds.

When the sun went down, we crawled into bed, and I looked for a distraction. What I found surprised me.

“Why can’t you just kill Shield?” I asked him, before I realized that I had just suggested that someone get killed.

Cameron wasn’t shocked by my question. “I wish I could just get rid of him that easily, but he’s got too many connections. When someone like that goes missing or turns up dead, people start asking questions and pry into our stuff. Anyway, any decision like that needs to be made by all the leaders, not just me. They would never risk attention from the Feds just so that I can protect the girl that I love.”

His voice trailed off and he fell asleep.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Normal?

Rocco's face came back to haunt my dreams. I woke up, but there were no tears or cold sweats this time—just a great sense of loss. The room was almost completely dark, with the only light coming from the moonlight that shone through the small cottage windows. I knew that Cameron was still asleep—his heavy breathing was tickling the back of my neck. I spun around without making a noise to make sure that he was really there, and not just something else that my ailing mind had made up.

He was definitely still there.

I watched him for a while and tried to breathe as quietly as possible. I was afraid of waking him up. This was the only time that I could look at him as much as I wanted to without having to look away, embarrassed when he discovered me. I watched his stomach heave up and down, his fists still clenched, readied while he slept.

But Cameron's alarm system was much more in-tune than mine. His eyes snapped open like he could hear my stare. "What's wrong? Are you okay?" he gasped. He threw a glance around the room and stopped back at me, ready to jump up and grab the gun that he left next to him.

I was caught off-guard. The blood came rushing through, my face was boiling hot, I stopped breathing. It was already too late—as soon as his eyes had opened, my brain had turned itself off. I wouldn't have been able to speak even somewhat coherently, let alone conjure up some lame excuse as to why I was staring at him in the middle of the night. I gave into the impulse, and, without an inch of reserve, I kissed him ... more forcefully than I thought myself capable.

Cameron was startled by my attack and remained still. He patiently let me kiss him, like he was waiting for the punch line.

After a few seconds, his body relaxed. And then it tensed again, his hands grabbed hold of my face.

All of a sudden, he pushed himself away, keeping me at arm's length. "Emmy ... please stop ..."

I shook my head. "No," I told him without waiver. "I love you, Cameron. I won't stop."

This was enough.

Everything happened in fast and in slow motion. Our clothes indiscernibly made their way to the floor—yet I could smell every inch of his skin, hear his every breath, and feel every part of him that touched my skin like time stood still.

The gray light of dawn brought a natural smile to my face. I had secretly and guiltily imagined this moment the instant I met Cameron—what it would be like to be with him in that way. Turned out the real thing was a million times better.

I was blissful.

It was still very early. Not even the birds were up. The cottage was so quiet that I thought I could hear Cameron blinking. He was awake too. I turned around. His cheeks were blotted red, but not in a good way, not like mine. He was glaring at the ceiling.

"Was I that bad?" I joked, though I was afraid of the answer.

He was startled out of whatever dark corner of his mind he had been in. "I love you," he said.

"I love you too," I said shakily, carefully, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"I took advantage of you."

Huh? I was pretty sure that I had attacked him. "Then can you do it again? Because I'm starting to get cold over here," I said, confused. I had meant that in every sense of the word. His odd mood was making me shiver.

Cameron searched my face with worry, looking for evidence of whatever crime he thought he had committed. "Are you okay? Did it hurt?"

He was too close for me to try to lie. "A little. At first," I admitted. "It was wonderful."

But he wasn't really listening to me. "I shouldn't have let this happen. I really messed things up."

"If you're planning on telling me that I was just another one of your mistakes, don't bother. I'd rather live in ignorance of it."

“No, you don’t understand,” he said with frustration. “That’s just it. Everything is different because I love you. Now I was your first on top of that. I don’t think I could have screwed this up anymore than I already have.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t let some frat boy mount me before I got here,” I mumbled heatedly.

“That’s not funny,” he said.

“I’m not laughing.”

His eyes turned to the ceiling and his voice trailed off. “I warned myself that this might happen if we were alone together for too long. I definitely set myself up to fail this time.”

“You’re acting like you were the only one there making the decision. As far I remember, I was around for the whole thing too. Cameron, I wanted this. I made up my own mind a long time ago.” My eyes were tearing up.

“Emmy, I’m worried that we won’t be able to go back to the way things used to be.”

“Good.”

“You’re being impossible about this,” he argued.

“Why would I want things to go back to the way they were? Until a few minutes ago, I was smiling so much my cheek muscles were burning.” When I looked away, a drop fell from my eye.

Cameron enveloped me into his naked arms. “I’m sorry. I completely ruined the moment as usual. I just don’t know how to fix this.”

“You can start by not talking about this anymore.”

“No, I mean I don’t know what we’re going to do when we have to go back out there. We can’t stay hidden here forever.”

I struggled out of his arms and glared at him. “Why do you over-think everything? Can’t you just turn your brain off, even for just a little while? It works for me all the time.”

He chuckled. “I don’t think I can do that. My brain has had too many years of practice at constant juggling.”

I leaned toward him and kissed his cheek. “How about now? Still juggling?”

His eyes smothered me. “Still juggling—a mile a minute.”

I kissed him on the lips. “And now?”

“Uh-huh,” he said, his voice croaking slightly.

I shrugged and proceeded to get up. He had tackled me back into bed before my toes ever touched the floor.

Whatever dilemma was raging inside him would be pushed aside, for a while. I was grateful for this, even if it would be short-lived.

In the late morning, Cameron grudgingly got up to let an impatient Meatball outside. His cell phone started ringing as soon as he got back into bed. He nuzzled in close to me and sighed.

After a minute of incessant ringing, the phone went quiet. Then the ringing started up again.

Cameron didn't move.

"Um, are you going to get that?" I wondered.

"No," he said sleepily.

The ringing eventually stopped ... and started again a few minutes later.

He huffed, whipped the blankets off in annoyance, and stomped toward his jeans. He dug his cell phone out, looked at it, threw it back in his pocket, and rushed back, closing his eyes.

I waited.

Not a word from him.

The suspense was killing me. "Do you have to call anyone back?"

"I turned it off so it'll stop bugging us," he said.

"Won't you get in trouble for doing that?" I asked ingenuously, avoiding the real question.

"I'm the boss, remember? If I don't want to pick up the phone, I don't have to."

"Oh," I said, disappointed.

Cameron chuckled and finally quenched my curiosity. "It was Spider, no big deal. Whatever's going on, he'll have to handle it himself."

"Where is he?"

"Don't know. Somewhere with Carly, I suppose. They're doing the same thing we are," he explained.

I raised my eyebrows and he blushed. "Not that. I meant that they're hiding out too. Everybody is. We have a rat in the gang. Nobody's safe until we figure out who the traitor is."

"What makes you think someone sold you out?"

“Someone told Shield where you were, when we’d leave for the city, and that half our guards were out of commission because of the flu. It was all a little too convenient for him to decide to attack that night. Somebody from the inside warned him.”

“You have doubts about Spider and Carly,” I said matter-of-factly.

“No, of course not.” Cameron looked confused. “Why would you say that?”

“They’re hiding from us, we’re hiding from them. Why would we need to hide from them unless you suspected them or they suspected you?”

His cheeks grew deep crimson. “I was looking for an excuse to be alone with you, for once. This was as good of an excuse as I was going to get. I told Spider that you needed some quiet time to recover.”

“He bought that!”

He smiled sheepishly. “Not at all, but I wasn’t asking his permission either.”

I thought about what Frances had told me about Spider trying to take over the business after my brother died. “Do you like being the boss?”

He looked at me curiously. “I don’t know. Never really thought about it.” He pondered for a moment, and then said, “Most of the time, it’s just a pain. Everyone wants you to make all the decisions so that they have someone to blame if something goes wrong.”

“Why doesn’t Spider just do it then?”

“I wish he would. He did do it for a little while, after Bill died. But the bosses decided that I was going to manage everything, and we had to go with what they wanted. If they don’t like or trust the big boss, everything falls apart really quickly and the turf wars start up again.” Cameron was rolling a lock of my hair around his finger. “It doesn’t matter much because Spider doesn’t want to be the big boss anyway.”

“Seems to me like he would love that power,” I mumbled.

“You’re under a lot more scrutiny when you’re the boss,” he said. “Whatever decision you make is made for the good of the business, no matter what. You can’t have any weaknesses that could affect your ability to manage the business and to make the right decision. For some bosses, it’s things like drug addictions or gambling. For Spider, it’s Carly. He knows Carly is his weakness—if he had to choose, he would put her before the business, which would be bad for all of us. The bosses only care about the

money that goes into their pockets. Anything that threatens their bottom line would get all of us killed and replaced.”

I looked away and asked, “Wouldn’t your relationship with Manny put you at risk of making bad decisions?”

He chuckled at my tactless insinuation. “If she had meant anything to me, and if the bosses had found out, then it could have been an issue. But none of that happened. It never will. The leaders don’t care what you do on your spare time, so long as it doesn’t affect your judgment.”

“Have you ever had any weaknesses then?”

“Nope. Never. And I don’t plan on it,” he said coolly.

I looked at him in shock. He laughed and pulled me into his arms.

“My addiction to you is definitely a catastrophic weakness,” he softly said.

“Oh, dear! What are you going to do?”

His face turned glum for a second. “I haven’t figured that part out yet.” With a smile, he added, “Right now I’m planning to just keep you here as my prisoner. We’ll pretend that the rest of the world doesn’t exist and that no one cares that I love you.”

My heart flapped. That sounded like the best plan I had ever heard. “So, Sherlock, do you have any suspects in mind as potential traitors?”

“Could be anyone. We have a lot of people who work for us.”

One shady character came to my mind. “What about Roach?”

“There’s no way.”

“You seem pretty sure about that.”

Cameron shifted uncomfortably. “You think I would let him live after what he did to you?” he asked with the bitter voice that I hated. “He was gone before he could betray us.”

I was taken aback. It wasn’t that I was sad to hear that there was one less maniac like Roach roaming this earth, but I was shocked that someone else had lost their life because of me.

“Cameron, can you try to not kill anyone else on my behalf? No one will want to even come close to me anymore if they think that one wrong glance in my direction will get them on the chopping block.”

“Good. No one should come near you anyway,” he said and looked at me intently. “He was dead, no matter what, Emmy. I can’t have an animal like that hanging around in my crew. He was too much of a liability.”

He brushed my hair aside and started to kiss my neck. I was a little winded.

“What’s it like doing what you do?” I wondered.

“What do you mean?” he asked, his voice like velvet.

“I mean having to make decisions like you did for Roach and having to act like a different person.”

“I don’t know. I guess I’ve been doing it for so long that I don’t really notice a difference.” His interest was piqued. “How do I act?”

“You’re just different. You don’t smile, you don’t laugh; you become distant—and sometimes you’re, well, scary.” My face went red.

His brow furrowed. “I forget sometimes that what I do is scary to normal people like you.”

“I’ve never heard anyone call me normal.” Apparently I was doomed to be abnormal in everyone’s world.

He halfheartedly chuckled, then eyed me. “Are you scared of me now?”

I looked into his brown eyes. My face was still burning, my fingers were still tingling, and my heart had still not regained its normal pace since I had attacked him that night. “I’m terrified,” I answered truthfully.

He smiled.

When I got out of shower, he was sitting at the kitchen table, engulfed in the paperwork strewn in front of him and mumbling into his phone. I ate my cereal and listened as he rhymed off numbers to Spider’s voice. “Forty, ten, eighty ...” These didn’t seem like big numbers, but I expected that several zeros probably followed the double digits.

Cameron grinned when he caught me peeking at his papers. I couldn’t make anything out anyway. I found it odd that they would have any kind of records. I didn’t know much about criminal enterprises, but I had watched enough TV to know that leaving any kind of evidence behind was a really bad idea.

“Aren’t you afraid that those papers are going to fall into the wrong hands?” I asked when he finally got off the phone.

He slid the papers over the table to me. “Here. You can look if you want.”

Though the papers were now right in front of me, I still couldn’t make out anything. All I could see were jumbled letters, numbers, and symbols—

nothing that made any sense.

“We have an encryption system,” he explained. “Carly came up with it. Every letter, symbol means something else.”

“Wouldn’t someone eventually figure it out if you gave them enough time? Like the FBI?”

He shrugged. “Sure they would. But we take extra precautions, like changing the meaning of codes every couple weeks and only writing down what we absolutely need to. Once we’re done with the paperwork, we destroy it right away.”

“So how do you keep track of everything if you don’t keep any records?”

He smiled deviously and tapped on his head with one finger. “I’ve got everything I need in here.”

One smile from Cameron, and I had already forgotten what I had eaten for breakfast a few seconds ago.

I pushed the papers back over the table. “I guess it’s back to work today.” I wasn’t even trying to mask the sadness in my voice.

“If I don’t get some work done soon, Spider will have a heart attack.”

“You got in trouble for playing hooky,” I teased.

“Yeah, Spider was pretty upset. He thought something had happened to us.” He smirked. “But I just blamed it on you, so we’re good.”

“Thanks.”

With no TV and nowhere to go, I wondered what I was going to do to occupy my time. It occurred to me that I would have to be alone, which suddenly made me hyperventilate.

“How long are you going to be gone for this time?” My voice slightly cracked, but I was trying to keep calm and brave for Cameron’s sake.

“A day, if we leave within the next five minutes.”

“We?”

“I’m not going to leave you here alone. You’re coming with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“I have to go see one of my distributors and check on the new shipment.”

“Drug dealers?” All of a sudden, the thought of staying alone for a day seemed like a better alternative.

“Distributors,” he corrected.

“Cameron, I don’t think it’s a very good idea.” I was going to add I wasn’t like him, but we had already established that, more than once.

“I have no choice. I don’t know how long it’ll take for things to settle down. The business can’t wait any longer,” he said.

“What do I have to do?”

“You have to be scary like me for a day.” He looked pleased with himself at the thought of our role reversals.

“I don’t think I could pull that off.”

“Actually, you’re already really good at it,” he said dismally. “Pretend that I’m standing in front of you after you just overheard me tell Manny that I don’t love you—because that reaction was pretty scary ... except, without the crying ... and don’t start ripping your clothes off just to prove your point. I don’t think it’ll have the same effect on them.”

I blushed as I remembered that night. “I was feverish. I wasn’t myself.”

“Right.” I thought I saw him roll his eyes as he turned to put the papers away.

“You better get dressed. We need to get going if we want to be back at a decent time,” he told me.

I was wearing shorts and a T-shirt. “I forgot to pack my cocktail dress. I didn’t realize that drug dealers were so formal.”

“Distributors,” he corrected again. “You’ll be cold if you don’t get changed.”

It was early August. Even though it was still early in the morning, the cottage was already steaming from the sun’s rays.

He headed to my duffle bag and grabbed the pair of jeans that was on top. When he took them out, they unrolled and out fell my *Rumble Fish* book, my *Rumble Fish* movie, and the letter I had written him. He pitched the jeans to me and picked up the letter. While I anxiously got redressed, he carefully unfolded it, read it and re-read it. Then he folded the paper several times until it was the size of a credit card, slid it into the front pocket of his jeans, and took possession of it. When he returned to me, his smile was perturbed, but genuine.

We walked out closely together.

Outside, Cameron’s smile had turned suspicious. This only grew as I started to walk toward the Audi.

“We’re not taking the car,” he finally announced when I pulled on the car handle.

He handed me a backpack and walked to the tool shed that was next to the cottage. He opened the door; my heart dived.

Chapter Twenty-Four: A New Calling

Cameron rolled the fluorescent green Ninja race bike out of the shed.

I looked on in quiet fear while statistics for motorcycle accidents ran through my brain.

He went back into the shed and returned with a plastic bag. He ruffled through it, took out a vanity plate and matched it to a drivers' permit card.

"So, who are you today?" I teased, though my brain was now at statistical data for fatal motorcycle accidents.

I picked up the card while he screwed the plate to the back of the bike. "Melvin Longhorn from New York," I announced. "It suits you."

Cameron chuckled and continued to get everything ready for the ride. He handed me a child-sized black helmet. "It's the helmet I wore when I got my first bike. It should fit your little head."

"Remind me again why we're not taking the car?"

"I don't use anything that can be traced back to me when I'm working. You never know who's watching. Besides," he said with a full-toothed smile, "this is a lot more fun."

Fun wasn't one of the words that had been floating through my brain.

I squeezed my head into the helmet. My cheeks were compressed so much that my lips were forced into a fish pucker. Cameron laughed and took advantage of my incapacitated state to pat on my helmet and steal a kiss. "This is the last one for a while," he reminded me.

I would have nodded or growled but I was afraid the heavy helmet would knock me off balance.

He climbed on the bike, and I, with extreme ineptness, got on behind him.

We zipped down the gravel driveway, leaving Meatball to eat his breakfast on the porch. I kept my eyes shut while the flying pebbles stung my face. It wasn't until we reached the pebble-free road and I was still

getting stung, that I realized that the pebbles were actually bugs, making like a kamikaze against my exposed skin. I made a point of keeping tight-lipped after that.

Cameron skillfully weaved in and out of traffic. At some point he complained that he couldn't breathe. I was forced to relax my death grip around his torso. I even eventually opened my eyes and watched the scenery whoosh by.

We drove on the outskirts of the city and made our way down a country road that snaked the Callister River. The river divided the state of New York from the province of Ontario, serving as a natural border between the United States and Canada. Although a freshwater supply trickled down from the Canadian mountains into the river, it was, for the most part, sourced with salt water from the Atlantic that poured in at its basin. Because of its proximity to the ocean and its practically bottomless depths, the river was almost always congested with commercial schooners that motored back and forth from one country shore to the next and back into the ocean.

Little by little, the evergreens turned into cornfields and farmland. There was something exhilarating about being exposed and open to the elements and about holding onto Cameron for dear life. After a couple of hours, Cameron turned onto a farm road. My hips, legs, and arms were starting to cramp up and I had to close my eyes as rows of corn hypnotically whipped past us. When we finally came to a stop and I opened my eyes again, what I saw was not what I had expected to see.

There, in the middle of a field, stood a slanted wooden barn ... and nothing else. There were no ten-foot-high electric fences, goons with machine guns, or man-eating dogs—just an old barn, barely big enough to fit a tractor. And there was a lot of corn around us. My first experience with the drug world was, so far, extremely disappointing.

When I got off the bike and tried to put my full weight on my frozen legs, I almost fell on my face.

“Ready?” Cameron whispered anxiously. I wasn't sure if he was checking with me or himself.

I yanked the helmet off my head—it was like sucking a strawberry through a straw—and struggled to put the escaped hair locks back into my ponytail.

“Leave your hair down,” he commanded.

“I hate having my hair down,” I whined.

“That’s the point. It’ll force you out of your comfort zone. Make you look like you’re on edge.”

Like most things, what he said made no sense to me. I didn’t think that now was the right time to argue with Cameron about my follicle insecurities. I grudgingly obeyed and pulled my flattened helmet-hair out of its comfort zone. Cameron gave me a quick once over. I thought for sure I had spied a hidden smile in his eyes and couldn’t help but feel like I’d been duped.

With one head nod, he indicated that it was time. I watched his face expertly turn to stone. He stepped away from me like I no longer existed. Even if I knew that this was just an act, it still stung.

Cameron coolly walked toward the barn, and I not-so-coolly followed not-so-closely behind him. He opened the barn door, and a shadow moved within the darkened barn. My eyes anxiously tried to adjust to the barn’s obscurity as we stepped through the threshold.

“Ginger!”

My heart leapt. The voice that, until then, I had assumed I, or anyone else on earth, would never hear again.

“Geez, you’re a sight for sore eyes,” he told me. I could finally see Griff; he had jumped off the table he was sitting on and grinned from ear to ear as he marched toward me, ignoring Cameron.

Cameron turned to glance at me just as Griff walked past him. From the sour look on his face, I knew that he was, one, extremely jealous, and two, warning me to stay in character. With extreme difficulty, I glanced away from Griff and kept moving with Cameron.

It was painful to watch Griff’s face wince at my snub.

“Open the hatch,” Cameron ordered him impatiently.

“Yes, sir,” Griff bitterly obeyed. He walked to a bale of hay that was loosely strewn in the middle of the wooden planked floor and pitchforked it to the side, revealing a square door within the floor. He pulled on the exposed cords and the hatch-door opened. Stairs led down the uncovered hole to a darker hole under the floor.

Cameron strolled past Griff and started to climb down the stairs.

Griff uncomfortably shifted, deliberating. When he decided, he called after Cameron. “I heard what happened to your brother,” he said softly, genuinely. “I’m sorry for your loss. He was a really great kid.”

“Thank you.” Cameron almost looked surprised, but his still harsh voice did not betray him.

I followed him down the stairs and waited until I was sure he was out of sight before quickly turning to Griff. I smiled at him, only for a moment. The effect was instantaneous—Griff’s face instantly lit up. He understood the game.

The hatch closed above us, and we walked through a doorway that had been carved out of the ground. The barn’s floorboards above were soon replaced with rock and dirt as we walked further into the cave. A few feet ahead was a stainless-steel door. Cameron pressed the yellow button next to it, and we waited in silence.

A million questions were speeding through my head. Most of which involved Griff’s new job location. With every inch of my self-control, I resisted the urge to ask any questions. Like he could sense my fraying composure, Cameron cleared his throat to get my attention, and his brown eyes quickly glimpsed above. There were glass globes above us with cameras scanning back and forth. We were being watched.

The door finally opened into a compact elevator. We stepped in and were plunged deep into the ground. My ears kept popping from the increasing pressure. I had to swallow repeatedly to prevent the pressure that was pushing against my skull from forcing my brain through my nose.

When the elevator door opened, two men stood to greet us. The man in front was tall and sturdy. From the wrinkles that were starting to line his olive skin, I guessed that he was in his mid-thirties. His demeanor was grave. His black hair and dark facial features only enhanced his severity.

The man who stood behind him was older—much older. Although he had similarly dark features and skin, he was shrunk by two or three inches, and his face was leathery and worn. Except for the few black strands that remained on his head, his hair was grayed and went straight down to his elbows, like dead straw. His tired eyes twinkled—and stared at me without abandon from the moment we stepped out of the elevator.

“New bodyguard?” said the young leader with a grimace.

Cameron didn’t flinch. “I brought my accountant.”

I almost choked and hoped with every fiber of my being that I wouldn't be asked to test my fictional mathematical skills.

"You haven't seen the need to bring an accountant before. Why now?" the young leader continued to probe.

"Things change," Cameron said plainly. And then, in a haughty-tone, he said, "I'm a busy man, Hawk. If you don't want to talk business, I'll take my business elsewhere. I don't like to waste my time."

While Cameron and Hawk stared each other down, the older man continued to look intently at me—like he was waiting for me to make a mistake. I was trying hard to ignore his stare and keep my facial muscles tensed and expressionless. But I could feel the corner of my mouth starting to twitch as the exerted muscles of my face were slowly surrendering. I had no idea that being purposefully uptight was so much work.

Hawk finally acquiesced and hesitantly turned on his heels to have us follow him and his older counterpart. They led us through a pearl white marble tunnel. Because of the narrowness of the tunnel, Cameron and I were forced to walk shoulder-to-shoulder, which made it even more difficult for me to neglect him. I focused on looking ahead.

Unlike the cave tunnel under the barn, the winding tunnel was sparkling clean and tailored with silver lanterns on the walls and expensive-looking cameras on the ceiling. Every few feet, we awkwardly brushed past armed guards that would look me over as we passed by.

Hawk and the old man continued to move ahead of us. I could hear their echoed voices as they started discoursing in French. Though the men's dialect was definitely different, with a little concentration, I could understand most of what they were saying. My mom had grown up in Marseille, France, and was, by no stretch of the imagination, a proud Frenchwoman. Of the few childhood memories I had of my mother, almost all of them included her correcting my French.

Suddenly aware that I had been intently staring at the back of the men's heads, I averted my eyes just as Hawk anxiously glanced back. He thankfully didn't notice, or at least I didn't think that he had. He turned back to his partner, while I continued to eavesdrop with my eyes on my feet.

"Why the hell would they bring a girl like that here?" Hawk exclaimed in French to the old man, "The crows are hiding something, Pops. I can feel

it.”

“I don’t know about the boy, but I think you are right about the girl. She is without a doubt hiding something,” croaked the old man.

“Like what?” Hawk asked nervously.

“I’m not sure yet, but I sense something distinctive in her.”

“Do you think she could hurt us?”

“How much harm could one young girl do?” the old man said pensively, like he was talking to himself rather than his partner.

“I don’t know. There’s definitely something strange about her,” the young leader continued.

“There’s something strange with all the crows, son,” said the old man. He chuckled hoarsely. “At least the girl is easier on the eyes than the unpleasant baldheaded crow they call Spider.”

Hawk groaned in annoyance and wondered, “What should we do?”

The old man paused before answering. “Call the guards. Tell them to be on high alert. We’ll see where this goes.”

Hawk took out his shortwave radio, and his uneasy voice reverberated within the marble tunnel through the radios that were holstered on the belts of the tunnel guards. While I was growing nervous, Cameron remained unchanged. I doubted that he had understood any of the men’s discussion and wished that I could warn him. But I knew that if I could so easily hear the men ahead of us, they would just as easily hear me if I spoke. I remained silent, for now.

A pungent smell had started to seep into the tunnel. By the time we had reached the end, the stench was unbearable. I understood the source as we stepped out of the passageway and into a large greenhouse. Fluorescent lights were hanging low from the ceiling, acting as artificial sunlight to the illegal plants. People in white coats were moving about the room, tending to them. Lined up against the walls were more armed guards, all of whom were glaring in our direction—now on high alert.

Cameron and Hawk met up and walked ahead between the tables, while the old man joined me behind. Cameron spied the plants and disapproved. Their color, their size, and their quality were, apparently, unsuitable. This, of course, sent Hawk into an uproar, and the two business men commenced arguing over proper pricing of the crops. While I fixed on the argument, I could feel the old man studying my every move. That was when I realized

that, in an unconscious response to the overpowering smell, my face had recoiled into a grimace. I corrected this immediately, but not before the old man had noticed and smirked at his detection of my defection.

I was starting to feel sick from the reek of the plants. Eventually Cameron and Hawk were able to agree on a price that neither seemed pleased with. I was really glad when we continued to move forward. The old man had rejoined Hawk ahead, and Cameron was back at my side, continuing to artfully ignore me.

Hawk turned to the old man—his face was red and sweating. “That insulting ... How dare he attack the quality of our work? We have been growing for generations, before that kid was even born.”

The old man was calm. “You know as well as I do that it’s a bad crop. The boy is smart, and he’s a good businessman. You shouldn’t be severe with him for doing his job.”

Hawk huffed. “Well, whatever his reasons, I’ll make sure to give him the worst of all of the plants. Maybe next time he’ll think twice about insulting us.”

The old man quickly peeked back and caught me looking at him. I veered my eyes away and felt my cheeks burning. He only smiled and kept walking.

We passed the endless tables of plants and headed into another marble tunnel. Large vents were churning out fresh air over our heads. I cheerfully took several large inhalations.

I could see the old man’s mouth moving but couldn’t hear what they were saying because of the noise from the vents. This was the opportunity I had been waiting for. I waited until I was certain that they weren’t watching then I turned to Cameron with urgency, unsure as to how long I would have before they noticed us talking.

“They think that I’m hiding something ... they don’t trust us ... they put the guards on high alert ... you’re right, the crop is bad ... the Hawk guy is planning on giving you all the worst plants ... oh and, why do they keep calling you crow?” I finished, out of breath.

Cameron first looked at me with puzzlement, and then his face quickly turned to fury. He pushed me behind him so quickly, so fiercely that I almost fell to the floor. Hawk, who had come running in my direction, looked violent, his rage equal only to Cameron’s.

“What game are you playing at? You brought the girl so that you could spy on us?” Hawk screamed. I had been tricked into thinking that they couldn’t overhear me. Hawk and the old man had now heard everything.

Cameron shoved Hawk away and looked like he was ready to kill him. “Step away. Now.” His voice was sharp, leaving no doubt that he would kill if pushed to it.

The old man stepped between the two boys and urged them to calm down. He then he turned to me with an excited smile.

“I knew I recognized those green eyes,” he said in French. “You looked like you understood what we were saying, but I had to be sure. There aren’t many people in these parts who speak French. Your brother Billy was the only one I knew outside our tribe.”

The old man started to move toward me, but Cameron barred him and looked at me—absolute confusion on his face.

I translated in a hurry. “He knows I’m Bill’s sister.” That was the gist of it anyway.

Cameron continued to stand his ground, glancing from me to the old man, trying to figure out what to do. In my mind, there were only two options: fight through an army of armed guards and try to escape without too many bullet wounds, or let the defenseless old man approach me. Deciding for both of us, I held Cameron’s gaze and tugged his arm down. He let me by with great reluctance. The old man gleefully looped his arm around my shoulders—Cameron flinched as he did so.

“In Manuuk tribal legends, crows,” he explained in French as we moved ahead of Cameron and Hawk and continued to wind our way down the vented tunnel, “are said to be spirits of great powers that move between the worlds of the living and the dead. They are highly intelligent creatures. They learn and adapt quickly.”

“Crows are also greedy and tricky,” bitterly added Hawk, in English for Cameron’s benefit—the effect was lost on Cameron, as this was the only portion of the conversation that he had understood.

“Yes, crows are mischievous—they like to play tricks on us, but they are also extremely loyal to their kind. When a crow is struggling, it will seek out its kind to survive. They take care of each other like a family, blood ties or not. Your brother and this one,” he said pointing at an oblivious

Cameron, “were a lot like the crows of my tribe’s legends when I first met them.”

We arrived at another elevator, and the four of us squeezed in. Hawk pulled the elevator grid closed.

“I’m Emily,” I blurted out. From the look on Cameron’s face as I said this, I thought he was going to jump out of his skin.

“Your brother called you Emmy, yes?” the old man asked, his inquisitive eyes persistent.

I figured that I wouldn’t be able to lie to him, so I chose not to. “When I was young.”

“And you’re not young anymore,” he said. This was funny to him. “I’m Jerry, but call me Pops.”

The elevator motor hummed. Pops still had his arm looped into mine. He patted my hand like he could feel my heart beating a mile a minute. His skin was cold and rubbery, and I could smell pipe tobacco off his clothes. I usually didn’t like to be touched by strange old men. But I decided that I liked him, even if he was a drug dealer ... distributor.

We stepped out of the elevator into a darkened grotto. The rock walls and ceiling were glistening with dripping water, and a stream gushed along one of the walls through gaping holes, from one side of the cave to the other. The room was barely lit by lanterns that were clumsily hung on the walls. I couldn’t see my feet in the darkness and had to rely on the old man to guide me to a small bench that was next to the gushing stream. We sat down, while Cameron and Hawk silently stood behind us. Men with guns against the walls completed the scene. We waited. For what, I didn’t know.

“I was really sorry when I heard your brother passed on. He was a good kid. Much too young to die.” Pops was sincere.

“Thank you,” I said in English.

The water bubbled. It was too dark, I couldn’t see, so I leaned in for a closer look. A big fish suddenly surfaced, and I screamed, almost falling over the bench. Cameron caught me before I busted my skull open on the rock floor. Everyone laughed, except me. Cameron chuckled, only a bit. The men quickly went to work as more fish broke the surface. Pops and I watched from the sidelines. One by one, the whale-sized fish were pulled from the water by the gunmen and gutted—guts in the form of plastic bags fell out.

“Look real, don’t they?” Pops said proudly. I nodded, still in shock.

“They’re just robots covered in latex,” he explained.

“Where do they come from?”

“From everywhere—boats, submarines, neighboring states, Canada. This batch came from a German boat two miles off the eastern coast.”

“Aren’t you afraid that they’ll get seized?” Or fished?

“Hasn’t happened yet.” He seemed amused by my questions. “They can’t be traced back to us anyway.”

A string of curse words erupted between Hawk and Cameron. They had resumed their earlier argument over the market value of the merchandise. I had to plug my ears as echoed profanities bounced off the rock walls.

“Are they always like this?” I asked loudly.

“This is the most well-behaved I’ve ever seen them. By this point, I usually have to order them to put their guns away or get one of the guards to pull them apart,” he said. “Both as stubborn as mules.”

Pops caught Cameron nervously glancing over at me for the hundredth time. I quickly distracted him.

“What was my brother like?”

From the smile on his face, he knew it was a diversion, but went along with it anyway. “Your brother was just a boy when I first met him,” he remembered. “One day he showed up unannounced and demanded to speak to me. The first thing he said to me: you need to change your alliances. I didn’t know what to make of this kid. He was either a fool or pretty brave for strolling in here like that. I decided to listen to him. Well-spoken kid. Made a good case. He convinced me. Been doing business with these crows since.”

I inertly smiled at this memory of my brother. Apparently his charm had also worked on drug dealers, not just girls’ panties.

Pops’s voice brought me back to reality. “This one, on the other hand,” he said nodding in Cameron’s direction, “was very young. Too young to be in this business. Your brother relied on him quite a bit. The boy’s smart, but I always thought it was more than a kid like that could handle.”

Pops eyed me, like he was waiting for a sign that this part of his discourse had mattered to me. He didn’t need to wait long for me to falter. Cameron glanced to check on me again, and our eyes locked for a split second. I motionlessly signaled that I was okay. I was starting to recognize

Cameron's subtle changes in demeanor—and he was definitely angry with me. I would have to deal with this later. I had bigger fish to fry for now.

It had pleased the old man to spy us silently communicating. “He’s a quiet young fellow. Impossible to read. He seems lost, as if he’s already in the spirit world. We don’t like to do business with crows who don’t have any roots in this world,” he qualified. “But he’s a good businessman and has always been fair to us. I’m glad to see that he’s human after all.” His smile was telling.

I wasn’t threatened by Pops, but that didn’t mean I wanted to gossip with him about my relationship with Cameron—even if I had understood anything about our relationship.

“What’s in those plastic bags?” I garishly blurted out again.

Pops didn’t draw back at my insolence. “What do you think is in them?” he asked with amusement. He hadn’t been fooled by my pretend ignorance.

“Drugs?” I said, taking another glance at the plastic bags of multicolored pills and powders.

He neither confirmed nor denied. “What do you think about that?”

I’m fine with it, seemed like the appropriate response. The truth was that, as much as I loved Cameron, what he did for a living did bother me. It didn’t lessen my love for him in any way. I had been able to tuck this small disturbance in a locked compartment inside my head. But I found myself unable to lie to this complete stranger.

“It just seems awful to think that these drugs might end up in the hands of kids,” I tried to put nicely.

“I don’t sell to kids,” he quickly replied, his brow furrowing.

“But you can’t control what happens to ... the product once it leaves here,” I said apologetically. “I mean, at some point, some street thug will try to push drugs on kids.”

Pops crossed his arms over his belly and crossed one leg over the other. “Kids don’t decide to start taking drugs because of some pusher they don’t know on the street. They’re convinced through peer pressure, through family and friends. You know, children are more likely to start by looking through their parents’ medicine cabinet for drugs that won’t cost them anything.”

It sounded a little rehearsed. I quickly realized that Pops was looking for a sparring partner on the topic. I didn’t know if I could deliver. I wished that

I had paid better attention in my high school political-science class when the issue would have probably been debated.

“Yes, but drugs lead to violence,” I argued.

“Violence in the media has been the leading cause of violence. Illegal drugs might cause bad people to do bad things, but so do alcohol and licit drugs,” the old man argued back.

“But drugs do increase crime.” I had no idea if they did, but it definitely sounded good.

“Most of the drug crimes relate to the sale of drugs. If selling drugs wasn’t illegal, then you would free up the court system and jails.”

Pops waited with delight for my next claim.

I searched for something, anything. “Drugs are just really bad for you. People can die if they take drugs.”

“People do all kinds of things that are bad for them, like eating fast food and smoking,” he said with satisfaction. “You know heart disease is the leading cause of death in America. More people die from fast food and cigarettes than they do from anything else.”

Cameron and Hawk looked like they were about to come to fisticuffs. Whatever Cameron said had set Hawk on another vulgar dissertation, and both were angrily facing off. I looked at Pops for his intervention, but he just smiled at me.

“My son has a hot temper,” he explained. “He doesn’t trust the crows. Though ... I think his opinion may change about this one after today.” He winked at me and then he glanced back at the businessmen and got up. “I’m afraid there isn’t much that I will be able to do with the one they call Spider. There’s something false about that boy.”

Pops made his way to the barking men and calmly put his hand on his son’s shoulder. “Give him what he wants, Hawk,” he ordered in English.

Hawk was incredulous. “What? Why would I do that?”

“Because I said so,” Pops answered with authority.

Cameron was just as surprised as his sparring partner, but took advantage.

“And the plants?” he asked Pops, glancing at me from the corner of his eye.

“Only the best ones.”

Cameron and Hawk stood there. I imagined that their jaws would be agape, if they had been like normal people. Everyone in the grotto had gone silent at this development. All I could hear was the swishing of the stream's current.

Pops broke the tension and turned to Cameron. "If there is nothing else, then I suggest you take this young girl home. I'm afraid I have taken enough of her time, and she will soon grow tired of me."

Arm in arm, Pops and I made our way back through the underground maze, with Cameron and Hawk now quietly, reflectively in tow. I could feel Cameron's eyes hammering into me. We walked through the stinky greenhouse, and I permitted myself to make a casual comment.

"Your electricity bills must be insane," I said, surreptitiously eying the torrent of fluorescent sunlight substitutes.

Pops caught my meaning. "Hidden solar panels on the surface," he clarified with a warm grin.

We left Hawk and Pops at the elevator doors, but not before Pops whispered in my ear, "I hope we will see you again, young Emily."

I didn't look at Cameron's face as we stood in the elevator. I already knew that I was in really big trouble. We headed back where we had come from and met Griff at the top of the barn stairs.

"Have a good day, sir. And madam," Griff added with emphasis, bowing with a grin on his face.

Cameron walked at a quicker pace, his shoulders tense and erect. I figured that I couldn't get in much more trouble than I already was. I genially grinned back at Griff before sprinting to meet up with Cameron at the motorcycle. He handed me my helmet without looking at me. I snuggled in behind him on the bike, but the trick didn't work its magic this time. He remained on edge as we sped off in a cloud of dust.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Broken

We rode without a word, and I was conflicted: distressed that Cameron was angry with me; yet happy—even a little smug—that I had pulled off my first business meeting with distributors without getting us killed.

We pulled into a small parking lot where a stationed school bus had been converted into a fast-food stand. It was mid-afternoon. I was starving. The smell of greasy fries was the best thing I had ever smelled by that point. Cameron barely looked at me while we waited in line. The extent of our conversation was limited to “What do you want to eat” and “Veggie burger with extra fries.” Cameron asked for mayo for my fries. I didn’t need to say anything.

I followed him around the back of the converted bus through a band of trees. I could hear crashing water as we neared the end of the trail. Fifty feet above ground, a waterfall plunged in an almost perfect line down the face of the rock and into a gurgling bath of water. People, sporadically spread about the trees and grass, picnicked and took in the breathtaking scene. Cameron dug a blanket out of the backpack and spread it on a tiny patch of grass as if he had been there before. We were mostly hidden in the brush.

While he ate and brooded, I threw my helmet-hair back into its cozy ponytail. This caused Cameron to smile, which he tried to hide from me. I wasn’t sure what, exactly, I had done to make him angry. There was no doubt in my mind that nothing about the meeting had gone according to his plans, and that I didn’t do anything that I was supposed to do—like stay quiet.

With a bit of food in my belly and Cameron’s mood seemingly bettered, I figured I would get it over with, whatever was bugging him.

“You’re angry with me.” I was really good at stating the obvious.

“Uh-huh.” Cameron was lying on his back with his legs crossed one over the other.

Apparently I was supposed to guess what I had done wrong—which I wanted to do as much as a serial killer wished to confess every crime he had ever committed to the rookie cop who had just stopped him because of a broken taillight.

“Can you tell me why?” I asked.

“Things could have gone really wrong in there.”

“But they didn’t,” I replied.

“They *could* have,” he reiterated, with emphasis. “I had no idea what was going on.”

“Welcome to my world,” I mumbled, spearing my straw through the plastic lid of my cup.

Cameron half-smiled. “Emmy, when I don’t know what’s going on and can’t understand what you’re saying, I can’t react.”

“You don’t have any faith in me.”

“It has nothing to do with my faith in you and everything to do with my mistrust of them. These people aren’t angels. This isn’t a game. As far as I knew, the old man was threatening to put a knife at your throat as soon as I wasn’t looking.”

“He never threatened me.”

“I had no way of knowing that,” he griped.

“Considering the circumstances, I think I made the right decision.” I was convinced of this.

Cameron exaggeratingly rolled his eyes at my cockiness. “I should have known that you’d be able to charm yourself out of trouble. Must be in your genes.”

I wasn’t sure if he’d meant that I had charmed myself out of trouble with the distributors or with him. It didn’t matter in the end. I had taken his change in demeanor as a signal that I was on my way to being forgiven. I decided to swoop in for the kill and snuggled up against him. He didn’t recoil.

“I got you everything you wanted, didn’t I?” I said with a sigh.

“Yes, Emmy,” he conceded, also with a sigh. “You made me a lot of money today. But it’s just money. I would have preferred it much more if you would have stayed out of their grasp.”

Something moved within the trees. Cameron abruptly pushed me off and sprang up. An old lady strolled by, shakily leaning on her cane. She was

about ninety years old and maybe eighty pounds soaking wet.

“Sorry,” Cameron said awkwardly to me. He laid back down on the blanket. If I hadn’t been aware of his paranoia, I would have been insulted by his fear of being seen in public with me.

I propped myself up on my elbows and looked at Cameron.

“What’s going to happen when things settle down?” I wondered.

“What do you mean?”

“What happens to me when the danger is gone?”

“You go home,” he said instinctively. He hadn’t changed his mind, after everything.

I tried to keep it cool. “And then what?”

“And then nothing. You go back and live happily ever after,” he said, refusing to look at me.

“What about us?” My voice was shaking.

Cameron was silent.

“I could just stay with you,” I offered.

He laughed, but his tone was tight. “Em, you get yourself in more trouble when you’re bored. Do you really think you could just stay home and wait around for me while I go to work? I mean, don’t get me wrong, it’s a nice fantasy, but we already tried that, and it didn’t work.”

I was flustered. “I could go to work with you. Turns out I’m pretty good at it. You said so yourself.”

“Absolutely not! I won’t allow it.”

“Why not?” I exclaimed with unnecessary whininess. “Carly does it.”

“Carly can’t do anything else. You ...” He took a breath to calm himself and his voice. “You have a life, school, a family, friends. And you would be much more at risk than Carly because of my position.”

“I’ll take my chances,” I grumbled.

“Well, I’m not willing to take any chances. Not with you.” His voice was icy. “Besides, it’s not just up to me. You become a risk to the whole organization if you get caught by rivals. The leaders would have our heads before they let any of that happen.”

“So promise them that you won’t do anything if something does happen to me. That you’ll let me die if I’m dense enough to get caught.”

Cameron stared at me vacantly. “That’s the stupidest thing I ever heard. Don’t ever say that again.” He briskly stood and started packing everything

up. “We need to go before it starts getting dark.”

I did what I was told and struggled to keep up with him as he stomped back to the bike.

It started raining about one hour left into our trip home. By the time we drove up the gravel driveway, it was dark, we were soaked, and Meatball was anxiously waiting by the cottage door, waiting to get out of the rain. Cameron immediately got a fire burning in the cast-iron stove while he was on his cell phone, dictating numbers to Spider. He smiled at me on occasion, particularly when he repeated the day’s purchase prices to a flabbergasted Spider. He was keeping busy, throwing paperwork into the fire as he went through them one-by-one with Spider and making supper for the both of us while he replayed the day’s events over the phone. He stayed on the phone the whole time we were eating, talking about what I assumed to be business, though I didn’t understand any of it. Eventually his phone died, and he had to reluctantly hang up. He insisted that I sit, or even better, go to bed, while he did the dishes.

I didn’t want to believe it. But while I continued to watch him, while he tried his best to pretend that everything was okay, something was creeping inside of me. A remembrance of my former life—the one that I could never go back to. I was aware of the sharp stab in my heart, like the stitches on an old wound were coming undone.

Things inside me were shattering, falling to pieces. It was the look on his face that gave him away.

I had seen it played out in front of me a thousand times. It was the look that my brother had given me the last time I saw him. It was my mother’s pressed smile on the day she had come for a surprise visit in Callister, right before she came up with a lame excuse as to why she needed to leave, quickly. It was the avoidance of eye contact that the inconsequential boys had when they were getting annoyed with my lack of affection ... Cameron was getting ready to leave me. I wanted to latch onto him, hard, so that we would never be separated. At the same time, I wanted to run away, so that perhaps I wouldn’t feel the pain when he found a way to let me go.

Whoever said that love hurts was wrong. Love is excruciating, especially when you can feel it slipping through your fingers and there is nothing you can do about it. Like someone was playing tug-of-war with my limbs, ripping to shreds whatever was left behind. What it would feel like when

love was lost ... I wouldn't survive that. I closed my eyes, willing the tears to stay hidden behind my eyelids and focusing on breathing in and out instead of the pain that was ramming in my heart.

Cameron finished the dishes and turned the tiny kitchen light off. With the only light coming from the shimmering flames that shone through the square of the stove window, my tears were safely out of sight.

"We should get some sleep. It's been a long day," he said with a fake yawn and a bogus stretch of the arms.

I noiselessly followed. It didn't matter that the tears blurred my vision. I wouldn't be able to see anything anyway. But Cameron caught my arm as we climbed up the stairs.

"Are you crying?" he asked with utter surprise. "Emmy, what's wrong?"

"You're going to leave me no matter what I do, won't you?" I sobbed. "I won't go back without you, Cameron. I can't. You're all I have."

Cameron laughed softly. "Is that what you're crying about? That whole thing about you going back home?"

He wrapped his arms around me, pinning my arms to my sides, whispering through my sobs. "Em, I'm not going anywhere. We'll make it work, I promise. Whatever it takes. Please don't cry."

I stood in his arms until the sobs finally subsided into sniffles. He let me go and gently lifted my shaking chin. He kept my eyes for a bit while sadness swelled his darkened features. "I never knew you were this broken."

"Only when you're not there." I sniffed and let him wipe the remaining tears.

"You'll probably die if you stay with me," he told me.

"Then I'm dead either way, because I won't survive without you." There was nothing that he could say that would convince me that being without him was the better option.

He sighed and shook his head. "Whatever I do just makes everything harder. Worse for you."

It was in the flickering light of the fire that I noticed that familiar sparkle in his eyes and suddenly I understood. The rush to get everything done, the fake yawn, the attempt at getting me into bed, early ... Cameron was right. I was broken. Probably beyond repair. But, in that moment, and all those other moments, when it was just us, and especially when he looked at me

like that, smoldering, as if I were all he needed, I didn't feel broken. Like a shattered coffee mug that had been superglued back together—with him, I could barely feel the cracks. I felt whole.

I latched onto him. He kissed me and carried me to bed. The other stuff—life—was left behind for another night.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Deadly Risky Business

Cameron was sitting on the edge of the bed. The day had come, the one that we had both been dreading. Today was Rocco's funeral. Cameron had tried to avoid it as long as possible, waiting until they found the rat—or at least until things got a little better. But it couldn't be pushed off any longer. Rocco needed to be put to rest, and we needed to move forward. The way that Cameron was hunched over, his shoulders carrying the guilt of his little brother's death, this day was going to be difficult, agonizing for him.

In a movement that had become ours, I scrambled behind him and wrapped my arms around his shoulders. There we sat, mentally preparing for what lay ahead, becoming one skin once again.

Dressed in black, we ascended the car. Cameron had shaved off the growing beard. I had missed his face, but now I also missed the stubble. He was wearing a black suit and a tie, more handsome than ever. I managed to find a wrinkled skirt that I had never worn and black flip-flops to match. My duffle bag options were limited.

As we drove away, Cameron's hand was squeezing mine so tight that my fingertips were going numb.

"Tell me what you and the old man talked about back at the distribution plant," he asked. His voice was unsteady and his eyes never left the road in front of him.

I was content to provide his distraction. "His name is Jerry, but he likes to be called Pops," I started. While I gabbed, Cameron listened—or looked like he was listening. Perhaps he just needed the noise. Although his hand never left mine, his grip slightly loosened after a while—and I was able to feel my fingertips again. I told him everything, even shared Pops's perception of Cameron—but I did leave out his view on Cameron's previous appearance of inhumanity. This, I knew, would hurt him too much.

Cameron found my reiteration of our debate over the pros and cons of drugs to be particularly interesting.

“Does it bother you what I do?” he wondered.

I couldn’t lie to him, but I definitely did not want to tell him the truth. “It’s not ... ideal,” I said, treading very carefully.

“It’s okay for you to be bothered by what I do,” he said quickly. “In fact, you should be bothered. It would be abnormal for you to think it was okay.”

Cameron paused in hopes of an answer, but I just shrugged my shoulders and remained silent. I wasn’t about to fall for that one: the “it’s okay for you to tell me the truth as long as it’s what I want to hear” trap.

“The old man whispered something to you as we left,” he continued with curiosity. “What did he say?”

“Pops,” I corrected, “said that he hoped to see me again.”

“Absolutely not!”

“I know,” I sulked, “But you asked, so I told you.”

Cameron glanced at me and quietly chuckled at my lapse in maturity. After getting a small taste of Cameron’s work, I was still convinced that I would be able to do some of what Cameron did. But I could not fathom what it would be like to make those other decisions. My mind turned to Griff.

“How did Griff end up working for Pops?” I kept my eyes on the road, tried to keep my voice as unconcerned as possible.

“I needed to get rid of him, and they needed a guard. They owed me a favor anyway,” he explained. Then he eyed me. “You thought I had him taken care of, didn’t you? Even after I told you I didn’t.”

“The thought crossed my mind,” I admitted. I looked at him, trying to decipher his mood. He didn’t look upset.

“I wouldn’t lie to you,” he reminded me.

“But you were also really upset the night he was caught climbing down from my room. Maybe even a bit jealous?” I raised an eyebrow, testing.

“Maybe a lot jealous.” He chuckled embarrassedly. “But I knew it would have hurt you too much if I had done anything to him.”

“Would you have had him killed if it wasn’t for me?”

Cameron glanced at me meaningfully in response. A chill went up my spine. I didn’t want to think about the alternate ending and needed to change the atmosphere.

“You’re rich, right?” I indiscreetly blurted out, trying to shock Cameron on purpose. From the look of astonishment on his face, it had worked. I continued, “Where does all the money go?”

“Lots of places,” he answered vaguely.

“Like?”

Cameron looked uncomfortable with my forthrightness, but, with an elongated sigh, went along with it. “Like stocks, bonds, property. I have a bunch of bank accounts in different places around the world.”

“So ... you don’t just bury the money under the mattress like they do in movies?”

He laughed. “Actually, I do have some money buried in different spots, but none under the mattress.”

His answers only made me more curious. “Don’t people get suspicious when you walk into a bank with a stack of cash?”

Cameron looked at me like I was from another planet. “I never actually walk into a bank, Emmy. Everything is done electronically. I carry very little cash on me.” From the tone of voice that Cameron had chosen, I could tell that his explanation had been meant to explain everything. But I didn’t understand. Somehow I couldn’t see drug users using their bank cards to buy whatever it was they bought. As Cameron searched my face, he must have found complete confusion. He pulled over to the side of the road and turned to me. He was procrastinating, mostly for his own purpose, I guessed.

“Aren’t we going to be late?” I asked him.

“They won’t start without us,” he said. “You want to know how it works, don’t you?”

I nodded, and I could feel my cheeks getting warm.

“When we get the product,” he started, “it’s divided among all the leaders. They distribute it within their gangs, and it’s subdivided several times like that until it actually hits the streets. When it’s sold, the money is passed by the dealers through small businesses that deposit the money into their bank accounts. Sometimes dealers will also open bank accounts in their friends’ and family’s names and deposit small amounts there too. Where the money goes from there gets really complicated—property, shares, and other stuff gets bought and sold. The money changes hands so

many times that, by the time it gets to us, it's virtually impossible to trace back to the product."

"Aren't you afraid of getting caught?"

He looked away. "I'll be killed before I ever get caught."

I instantly regretted asking the question.

We pulled back onto the road. Cameron didn't volunteer anymore information and I definitely didn't ask any more questions. Blissful ignorance would have been better on that last point.

When we drove into the church parking lot, there were only a handful of cars parked. I asked Cameron whether we were too early or too late. He explained that these events had to be kept intimate so as to not attract too much attention.

The church was small and simple, with a white exterior and broken bricked pathway. It was located off of a country road in the middle of nowhere. Mature trees surrounded the lot and a perfectly manicured cemetery flanked it. It was a beautiful summer day. Somehow, this church, this day was, to me, just right for our last good-byes to Rocco. Before the tears could rise, numbness protectively swelled inside me.

I was surprised to find Cameron grab my hand as we walked up to the handful of people who had gathered outside the door, some of whom, like Tiny, I recognized as the high-ranking guards from the farm. Most of their names escaped me in that moment.

Everyone respectfully acknowledged Cameron right away and side-glanced me with curiosity as we passed them, hand in hand, and entered the church. Once we stepped through the threshold, the guards followed us and my fingers were going numb again from Cameron's squeeze. I clenched my teeth, trying to keep cool for the both of us.

Inside, blue and white flowers overflowed in the middle aisle and at the front of the church. Among the petals, Rocco's framed picture was smiling at us from the front. I had to look away. Cameron avoided looking ahead too. There was music playing somewhere in the church.

Between the rows of wooden benches, Carly and Spider slowly walked up to us. Spider somberly shook Cameron's hand. Carly's eyes were bloodshot and puffy.

"Everything looks great, Carly. Thank you for making all the arrangements," Cameron said softly, affectionately putting his hand on her

shoulder, as my brother had often done with me.

Carly smiled weakly back at us, but seemed at a loss for words. She scooped her arm into mine, while Cameron and Spider led us to our seats in the back of the church. We slid onto the bench—Carly and I sat next to each other, and Cameron and Spider protectively sat on our sides. The rest of the back benches were filled with the remaining guards. Silence fell among us, each lost in thought, trying to make sense of something that was senseless.

The church was practically empty, except for the front pew. I recognized the bleached-blond back of one of the women's heads as Cameron's mother. She was sobbing loudly while simultaneously yelling at three children who were running back and forth between the benches. It all seemed surreal.

And then Spider suddenly shot up and glared to the lane.

"What's she doing here?" he muttered bitterly. Carly, Cameron, and I turned our heads and followed his gaze. Frances had made her way down the aisle and awkwardly stood by the bench in front of us. Carly tugged at Spider's sleeve and forced him to sit back down.

"I invited her," she half-whispered. And then, in answer to our surprised faces, added, "Rocco really liked Frances. He would have wanted her to be here, with us."

Frances continued to uneasily glance at us, until Cameron finally motioned her to sit down. She quietly slid into the bench in front of us and stared ahead while Spider huffed and Carly threw him a disapproving eye. I felt horrible for Frances. I remembered what it was like to be the outsider who wanted nothing else but to be accepted by them.

A big man in front walked out on stage at the front of the church. His hair was crew-cut in a bowl, and he looked lost in his robes. He was young, really young—like puberty had forgotten about him. He seemed too young to be a deacon, or a pastor, or a priest, or whatever he was.

The man in the big robes commenced his sermon. Though he spoke English, I had no idea what he was talking about. Chapters, verses, commandments—these were as cryptic to me as Cameron's business documents. I was sure that the holy water was boiling in a basin somewhere in the church as these thoughts ran through my head.

I was trying to be strong for Cameron and managed to gulp most of my tears back down. But this was becoming more and more difficult as I was forced to sit there with no distraction from my thoughts. There was

something haunting about the large man-child's spoken voice ... and I was being forced back to the wicker chest. I could hear the angel voice whispering in my ear. I watched Rocco fall to the ground. These relentlessly replayed in my mind.

It came to me in a rush—not only was Rocco gone, but he wasn't coming back. His picture at the front of the church had become just another image of a boy who would never grow up. Brewing inside of me was an intense hatred for the ones who had taken his life. I wanted them dead, but first I wanted them to pay, suffer for what they had done. I was not a vengeful person, yet I felt strongly about how they should be tortured. The tears were now gushing down—I couldn't stop them anymore. They were tears of pain and anger, the kind that burned my skin as they slid down my cheeks and plunged to my lap. Without looking at me, Cameron clasped his fingers into mine and brought my hand onto his lap, squeezing. My attempt at being his strong counterpart had failed, miserably. Once again, Cameron had to take care of me.

While the big man who was lost in his robe broke out into a ritualistic hymn, one of the guards had tiptoed down the aisle and stopped at Spider's side. He whispered something in Spider's ear and waited while Spider leaned over Carly and me and addressed Cameron in a murmur.

"Shield's boys are here. They want to talk about a truce and a merger. They say there's a lot of money attached to this deal."

Cameron swore under his breath as he turned to Spider to spit his words. "I'm at my brother's funeral. Whatever they want can wait till tomorrow."

Spider looked offended at being spoken to in this way, but with a nod of the head, motioned to the guard to follow the boss's orders. The guard ran out of the church, but returned a few minutes later. Whatever he had whispered in Spider's ear had made Spider's face go hard and his brow furrow.

"They came here without Shield knowing. They want to change their alliance and work for us. They're willing to take Shield down themselves to make this happen."

Spider looked at Cameron, waiting for a response, but Cameron remained silent and continued to glance ahead. His cheeks were flushed with anger.

Spider spoke a little louder. "Cameron?"

“I heard you,” Cameron skewered back. He tapped his foot and considered.

He turned to Carly, “How much money would we be talking about?”

Carly turned her eyes to the ceiling as she calculated invisible numbers in the air. “I don’t know,” she absentmindedly responded. “It depends on what kind of merger they’re proposing. I need more details before I can give you a figure on a reasonable settlement.” She pondered a few more seconds and then looked back at Cameron. “If we make this deal, it would give us control over all of the Northeastern factions. Might even bring peace—end the war. That would be worth a lot for the bosses. This could be the break we were looking for to make them forget about everything else that’s happened.” Carly quickly glanced at me as she said this.

Cameron went quiet again and vacantly stared ahead. I could see that his mind was running full speed.

But Spider grew impatient again.

“We don’t have a lot of time. There are over thirty of them out there. They’re armed. We can’t stall them much longer.” Spider leaned further toward Cameron, his worried voice was now audible only to the four of us. “Cameron, if we don’t go talk to them, they’re not going to let us live to tell Shield about their betrayal. We don’t have enough men to cover us.”

Cameron turned and quickly whispered something to Tiny, who was sitting behind him. Hushed shuffling ensued on the bench behind us, and Tiny produced two shortwave radios that he handed to Cameron. Cameron turned back to me. He looked sickly.

“Take this,” he said, handing me one of the radios. He latched the other one onto his belt. “You call me if there’s anything. I’m going to be right outside the door.”

I could hear the guards clicking the latches of their guns as they slowly filtered into the aisle. At Spider’s low command, they hid their readied weapons under their shirts, tucking them into the waistbands of their pants. They waited for Cameron.

He looked at me for a long minute and then turned his eyes to Frances. With an urgent whisper, he called her name. She jumped and turned around. She looked terrified. I figured that I must have looked much the same, except with fire-engine red hair and a lot more freckles.

Cameron ordered Frances to come sit by me, which she immediately obliged. As she glided her way to the bench behind her, Cameron turned back to me, his eyes unyielding. He leaned in. “I’m right outside,” he repeated, though I didn’t know if this had been for my benefit or his own. He forcefully kissed me on the forehead. Frances warmly smiled at me as she spied us, but her eyes were saddened.

Cameron walked to the lineup of guards, and they quickly encircled him into a cocoon of human protection. As I saw Carly leave with the rest of them, I wanted to yell back and demand that he take me with him, but I knew that now wasn’t the time and that his mind had already been made up. Nothing I could say would change it. I definitely had no accounting skills to bring to the table. The only thing I was good at was distracting Cameron and getting him in more trouble. I forlornly watched them leave us.

The deacon, who had barely glanced in our direction during the commotion and departures en masse, pursued his sermon without skipping a beat. I was a tumbleweed of emotions—terrified that Cameron was out there, devastated with my loss of Rocco, angry that I had been left out, again, and perplexed as to why Cameron would ever want to make a deal with those who might have contributed to his brother’s death. As if she sensed my need, Frances slid closer to me and took my hand. She seemed pleased with having been given a purpose. Even she had been assigned a job, I silently griped. I then smiled to myself. Rocco and I had so much in common.

During my reverie, someone had slid in the bench behind us.

“Emily,” a hoarse voice whispered.

I turned around and hardly believed what I was seeing. He was older now—deep wrinkles mapped his forehead and his blond hair had grayed at the sides, like he had grown wings.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Old Emily

“Uncle Victor?” He wasn’t really my uncle. Not by blood anyway. He was my brother’s uncle, but I had always called him Uncle Victor, and, even though I was kind of an adult now, it seemed weird and maybe a bit disrespectful to say his name without the word uncle preceding it.

“What are you doing here?” I asked—almost accused—him.

He was nervously glancing around the church, and his voice was hurried. “I’m here to get you out.”

“How did you find me?” Even I didn’t know where I was.

“Your parents—” He jumped as one of the rambunctious children dropped or threw a book or a bible on the floor out front. “It’s a long story. We need to leave now.”

“What? No, I’m not leaving,” I yelled, louder than I intended.

The deacon stopped his sermon. And then, with a look of annoyance, he continued.

Victor was beside himself. “What do you mean you’re not leaving? I’m risking my badge to come rescue you!”

“There’s nothing to rescue me from. I want to stay here.”

He grabbed my shoulder as he leaned in and hurriedly whispered, “Kid, in about five minutes the DEA is going to come storming through here and shoot anyone who gets in their way. They won’t ask any questions first. If you’re lucky, they’ll just arrest you, but I won’t be able to help you then.”

Frances looked like someone had just sucker-punched the air out of her lungs. “They’ll take Daniel away from me if I get arrested,” she distractedly whispered. Her face was pale and terrified as she turned to me. “Em, I can’t get arrested. I’ll lose my boy.”

Victor looked at both of us and impatiently sighed.

“I’ll take her too,” he conceded, “but we have to leave now.”

“Take Frances with you,” I ordered. “I’m not leaving. They can arrest me if they want. I don’t care.”

“I promised your mother I would get you out of here unscathed. If I come back without you, she’ll have my head and my badge. Either you both come, or we all get arrested or killed.”

Frances’s eyes were pleading with me. My thoughts were a mess—express decision making was not my forte. I looked toward the door that Cameron had exited, hoping that if I stared at it hard enough, he would walk back in. He didn’t ... but I knew how to make him come back. Without glancing down, I pressed on the red button of the shortwave radio and guilelessly turned to Victor.

“Uncle Victor, let me talk to them,” I said with my voice just loud enough for Cameron to, hopefully, hear me but not enough to arouse Victor’s suspicion.

“Who?” Victor looked confused.

“The FBI ... or the DEA,” I almost yelled, but recomposed myself. “I’ll tell them the truth. That I’m fine. There’s no need for them to come here.”

I was a horrible actress. But, thankfully, from behind the bench, he couldn’t see my hands or the fact that I was trying to send a message to Cameron. This I was sure of. What I hadn’t planned on was a naïve Frances curiously looking down at my hands—and Victor following her gaze. I thought the pulsating vein on Victor’s forehead was going to explode when he caught me.

“What the hell are you doing? I could go to jail for coming here, and you’re warning them?” he shouted as he knocked the radio out of my hands. It went crashing to the floor, and this time everyone in the church was looking back at us. Cameron’s mother noticed our presence for the first time.

I was thinking, readjusting my strategy when a loud pop was heard from outside.

The stained-glass window at the front of the church exploded, and the deacon fell to his knees and covered his face to shield himself from the shards of glass that had come flying down around him like a cutthroat blizzard.

Gunfire then erupted outside, and everyone at the front of the church was screaming.

“Everybody get down!” Victor yelled with experience and authority. He adeptly jumped over the bench. “Emily, keep your head down and don’t stop running.” He grabbed me by the shoulder of my shirt and forced me to run with him. Frances had grabbed my other hand and followed us out to an emergency exit at the side of the church.

Outside, an empty white sedan was waiting. Victor forced me into the front seat, ordered Frances to get in the back, and climbed into the driver’s seat. As he sped away through the cemetery road, I was frantically glancing back, trying to locate Cameron. I couldn’t see anyone, but could still hear the gunfire that was bursting on the other side of the church. My heart was thumping so hard that my vision was thumping with it, causing the passing graves to pulsate like neon signs in video-store windows. I was trying to talk, yell, but couldn’t catch my breath.

We turned onto a dirt road, and Victor slid the car into high gear.

“Turn back,” I finally shouted, using up the miniscule amount of air that I had managed to accumulate.

“There’s nothing you can do for them now,” he said coldly.

My cheeks were wet. I could hear Frances whimpering in the back.

Victor looked over at me, and his face faintly softened. “If it’ll make you feel better, I promise to bring you to the DEA as soon as your parents see that you’re okay. You can tell the police whatever you want them to hear. I won’t interfere.”

This didn’t make me feel any better. There was no doubt in my mind—I had abandoned Cameron, on one of the worst days of his life. Talking to the police would never change that. I tried to tell myself that maybe my warning had come soon enough. Maybe he had been able to escape on time. But then there was all that gunfire ... all of a sudden I found myself actually hoping that he would get arrested. It seemed like the safer alternative. The mere possibility of the other alternative made me want to throw up. I put my head between my knees, willing myself to focus on keeping the vomit down, and figure out how I was going to help Cameron.

The car came to a stop. I looked up. Victor had pulled the car up to the sidewalk. We were in a small town outside the city. The town consisted of a stop sign, four corners, and a cluster of tiny houses with big yards—the kind of place nice parents wanted their nice children to grow up in.

Victor peered at Frances through the rearview mirror. “There’s a convenience store around the corner. The bus comes every hour on the hour. It’ll take you back to the city.”

Frances looked embarrassed. “I dropped my purse in the church. I don’t have any money.”

Victor was growing impatient. He huffed and aggressively dug out his wallet. He emptied it of its cash content and gave it her. Frances got a lot more than she needed for a bus ride. As soon as she closed the door, Victor sped off, not waiting to ensure that she knew where she was going.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“My place,” he explained. “Your parents are waiting there.”

I had no idea where Uncle Victor even lived, though we had lived in the same area for over a year now.

We turned a corner and came to a stop sign. I had been wrong about this one-stop-sign town—apparently there were two stop signs. Victor impatiently tapped on his steering wheel as a man slowly crossed in front of us. The man was wearing a suit that was two sizes too big for him and walked with a strut. I couldn’t see his face, but I was on high alert. Not just because he didn’t fit in this town for nice people—but he was purposefully avoiding eye contact.

Please keep walking, I internally begged. He was taking a ridiculous amount of time to cross the street, or was I just imagining that he was? Time had seemed to stop. I started to shake ... I knew. But what I didn’t know was that he had just been a diversion while his cohorts approached the car from behind. The back doors opened, and I yelled ... didn’t I? An arm grabbed me from behind and held my body against the seat while a burlap sack was being thrown over my head. I couldn’t breathe, and I started flailing my hands, scratching the skin off the arm that was suffocating me. Something pricked my neck. There was a rush of warmth. My heartbeats slowed. Was I still breathing? A gurgled moan in my throat, and then it was all nothingness.

Surely I was dead. My eyes were open—I had to bring my fingers to my face to confirm this. Yes, they were open. But I couldn’t see a thing.

I groaned, but the sound that came out was not my own. It was the sound that a sixty-year-old chain-smoker would make. My head was pounding

against my skull. My clothes were drenched with what I assumed to be my own sweat. Spit had leaked out the corner of my mouth and dried on my cheek.

I was lying on something soft.

There was a slit of light streaming in a few feet ahead. Good. I wasn't blind either.

I struggled to turn my body on its side—everything was numbed. I was a marionette, with my brain pulling on strings to make my body move. I rolled to the ground in a thump. There was carpet, but it was too rough and cheap, the kind that was sold by the acre. I could feel the coldness of the cement seeping through it. I was suddenly thankful for the numbness—the tumble would have hurt otherwise.

I dragged myself across the floor like a rabid dog toward the light. My breaths were shallow.

It took a few minutes for my eyes to adjust to the light. My elbows were too weak to hold me up. I had to slump to my side, with my cheek against the smelly carpet. All I could hear were the cymbals that were clashing between my ears.

Through the slit under the door, there was nothing to see but a white wall and an expanse of more bargain-basement carpet. I willed myself back onto my elbows and used the door to hold my weight while I struggled to sit up. The blood rushed to my head. With a dozen deep breaths and my back against the door, I inhaled and exhaled the nausea away, while clumsily fingering above for a door handle. I hit something cold—the door was locked. I was focusing on breathing ... but the panic was slowly setting in. I needed to move. Crawling on my hands and knees, I slid my hand against the wall and felt my way around. Wherever I was, there wasn't much to it: a square room of maybe ten-by-ten feet with a bed—nothing else.

The room was so hot. There was no exit. I was having difficulty breathing, and I was sweating buckets. I started to dry heave and finally threw up on the floor next to me. I rested my head on my wobbly knees.

I must have fallen asleep or passed out. When I awoke, I was curled up in a ball on the cold floor. Someone had opened the door and pulled on the string that hung from the ceiling to turn the single lightbulb on. It was still swinging back and forth when I looked up. The light hurt my eyes, but a bit of air had strewn in from the opened door.

A man stood in front of me, staring with his arms crossed and his legs spread in a guarded stance. His head was shaved to the skin, and a pistol hung on a holster across his chest—like a soldier awaiting his marching orders.

“There’s a bed right next to you. You don’t need to sleep on the floor,” he said, his voice robotic.

I sat up at a snail's pace, rested my elbows on my knees, and held my head in my hands. My lips were quivering uncontrollably.

“Eat,” the man commanded. He kicked over a tray of food that was on the floor: a juice box and a sandwich with what appeared to be bologna. The nausea hit me again. I brought my trembling hands to my mouth.

“I’m a vegetarian,” I said coarsely through my fingers. A lie.

“Eat the bread then,” he grunted impatiently. “It’s the only thing that will make the nausea go away.”

“What did you inject me with?”

“Just a mild sedative.”

I pulled my right hand away from my mouth and held it flat in front of my face. It was still trembling, more than a mild sedative should make me tremble. I scowled at him. He didn’t flinch. I noticed the scratch marks on his arms. This made me grin—at least I had gotten a piece of him.

“You’re Shield, right?” I asked with a matter-of-fact tone.

“I’m not leaving here until you eat.” His stare was unrelenting.

“Where’s my uncle?”

He looked at me strangely. “You mean the guy who was in the car with you?”

I stared in response. “He’s fine. Now eat,” he said.

I couldn’t tell if he was lying, but assumed he was.

“I want to see him,” I said with difficulty. The room was spinning, and a bead of sweat was forming on my forehead.

“Eat,” he commanded again.

“I’m not ... eating till I ... see ... my ... uncle.” I leaned over and threw up.

The soldier-man swore. The walls of the room shook as he slammed the door behind him. I heard the lock on the doorknob click. His footsteps echoed down the hall and eventually dissipated into silence.

Afraid of passing out in my own vomit, I climbed onto the dirty mattress, turned to my side, and brought my knees into my chest. I was worn out.

The door burst open. The hanging lightbulb was still on. I had no idea how long I had been out. The soldier-man was holding Uncle Victor by the collar and, with frustration and impatience on his face, pushed him into the room. The door slammed and locked as he exited again, leaving Victor and me alone.

Victor ran to my side and held me at arms' length. "You look terrible, kid," he said, inspecting my face.

"I'm so sorry I brought you into this, Uncle Victor," I sobbed. I was everybody's bad-luck charm.

Victor shushed me while I cried on his shoulder. But I didn't have enough energy to cry more than a minute.

"Did they hurt you?" he whispered and did a quick glance of the room.

"I think I'm okay. They drugged me. You?"

"I'm fine," he said distractedly. Victor looked down at the tray on the floor. "Is this what they brought you to eat?" he asked with disdain. I nodded.

He picked up the tray, stuck the straw in the juice box, and handed it over to me. "Here," he said, "you need some liquids." While I gluttonously slurped the juice, he investigated the sandwich, smelling it first and pulling it apart. Satisfied, he ripped the bread into pieces and handed them to me one by one, like I was a child or a bird.

"Have you eaten?" I asked.

"I'm fine. I don't need to eat."

I glanced over his face. He did look fine. A lot better than me, I assumed.

"Do you know where we are?" he wondered. I was just about to ask him that question. At least he had been outside the room.

I shrugged. "No, but I have a good idea who's behind this."

He searched my face. "Who?"

I lowered my voice so that it was barely audible. "This guy named Shield. A sleaze-ball drug dealer."

"Drug dealer? How do you know this?" Victor's voice was alarmed.

I realized how much life had changed for me in the matter of a few months. The old Emily would have never known about drug dealers named

Shield.

“Cam ... the people I was with told me.”

“What else did they tell you?”

I hesitated. Cameron had told me things in confidence—and definitely would not have wanted me to share any of these things with a police officer, even if he was my almost-uncle.

Victor, sensing my uncertainty, leaned in. “Emily, I need to know everything if I’m going to get us out of here.”

I knew he was right, but I decided to keep Cameron out of it. “Bill had gotten himself involved in drug trafficking. Shield thinks that Billy stole his business. He’s after me because he wants the money that Billy left behind when he died.”

“You think all this is about money?”

“I know this is about money.”

Victor seemed interested by this. “Where’s the money?”

I couldn’t see how I would tell Victor about the money without bringing Cameron into the picture. I had to improvise. “I don’t really know. I haven’t seen any.” This was technically the truth—numbers on a pendant were all I had seen.

Victor looked a little disappointed but continued, “What about the people you were with?”

“They had nothing to do with us being here.” I said this too quickly. Victor caught scent that something was not right.

He raised an eyebrow. “How involved were you with these people, Emily?”

The way he was blankly staring at me made me feel like I was in his interrogation room back at the police station. I could feel the bead of sweat building on my brow again.

“Barely knew them,” I lied.

From the look on Victor’s face, he didn’t buy it. “Were they involved in drugs?”

“I don’t know. We never talked about that,” I lied again.

Uncle Victor was getting angry. “Come on! You can do better than that!” He wasn’t whispering anymore. He was the interrogator. I was the criminal.

“Uncle Victor, I don’t know what you’re asking me. You would know more than I would from talking with the DEA.” I could feel the tears

surging.

His face went pale. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. Yes, you’re right. I do know what they’re capable of. I was just afraid of what they might have put you through. That’s all.”

“They’re not bad people, Uncle Victor.”

This made him angry. “How can you say that? They’re lowlifes. Thugs. Mere children.” His voice was harsh and loud. I was taken aback.

He then recomposed and smiled. “These people have no class, Emily. Not like you and me. We’re from a different world.” He reached over and stroked my cheek with his thumb. “You look so much like Isabelle.”

It was the way that, unlike me, his head did not have one hair out of place and his clothes looked freshly ironed. And it was how he looked right through me, as though he saw someone else, that made something flicker at the bottom of my gut.

“How was my mother when you saw her?”

He smiled dreamily. “She was very worried about you. She cried when she found out that those thugs had taken you.”

This was my first hint. My mother wasn’t the crying type. It ruined her makeup. “How did you know I was missing?”

“Your mother called me after she had been to your place. All your stuff was gone, and you weren’t there.”

Second hint: my mom would never go to my place unless she was dragged kicking and screaming, and she would definitely have no idea where my stuff was, or what my belongings would even look like. “How long have you been looking for me?”

“A few months now.”

Nope, she was still in France then—and barely thinking about me. My dear Uncle Victor was lying through his yellowing teeth.

Cameron had told me that Shield could not be killed because of his connections, because someone like him could not turn up dead or go missing without too many questions being asked—as would be the case with a police officer. I then understood that Shield was just a nickname for the police badge that he used to shield his crimes.

I glared back at my uncle Victor, who had abused our family ties to lure me away from Cameron, and who I now understood was also called Shield.

Tears were building up in my eyes. I cleared my throat in an effort to keep them at bay and not arouse his suspicion that the game was up.

“How are we going to get out of here?” My croaking voice betrayed me.

Shield’s eyes twinkled. His hand had moved to the top of my head and he was petting my hair, lovingly.

“Did you know that I saw Isabelle first? Before Burt even knew that she existed?”

I was shaking. He smiled.

“We were all at the same party. One of those work parties that your father used to drag my sister to. Isabelle came through the door, and all eyes were on her. She was a stunning woman. Still is. But, out of all those people, she smiled at me first.” His face then turned grim. “Back then, your father had a lot more money than me. I was just a beat cop. I couldn’t compete. But things are different now.”

He snapped out of his daydream and winked at me. A chill went down my spine. I yanked his hand away. The tears were rolling down my cheeks but my glare was unyielding.

“You’re still a cop,” I reminded him spitefully.

“Yes,” he said, like his treachery had been a major feat. “And you’ll make me rich again.”

I knew the minute I admitted to the money, I was no longer going to be of use to him. “I don’t have my brother’s money.”

His eyes were on fire. “That money was my money, not Bill’s. It should have been given back to me when he died,” he said harshly. “I taught Bill the business, treated him like my own son. Together, we were going to rule the underworld. Then that ungrateful bastard stole it all from me and joined forces with those motherless street kids. Bill owed me a lot more than the dollars he left behind.”

And then he half-smiled. “But none of that matters now. With you here, I will get all that back, and more. We’ll do great things together.”

“I’m not doing anything with you,” I spat back.

This amused him. “I thought you had a penchant for drug dealers? No? Well, seems they like you a lot.” He laughed and shook his head in disbelief. “I couldn’t have planned this better myself. We can use this to our advantage. With the pull you have over that boy, we’ll control the leaders, the distributors, the shipments, everything.” He added with a sickly smile,

“Though I wish I would have stuck around to see you blossom into your mother before that boy ever got a chance to pull you in. We could have been much further along by now.”

He reached over to stroke my cheek.

The nausea was coming back, but it had nothing to do with the sedatives. I got up and, turning my back to him, glanced around the room looking for a way out or a weapon. Apart from a plastic tray and a juice box, I didn’t have much to work with. I walked to the wall and turned around, sliding my back down the cold surface and sitting on the floor with my knees curled into my chest. For the first time, I noticed that he had a gun tucked into the back of his pants. I felt like an idiot for having missed that earlier—but there was no time for beating myself up. Something that Victor had said had piqued my interest.

“So, he’s alive then.” My voice was steady and uninterested, like I had heard Cameron do so often.

“Who? That Cameron boy? Yes, he’s fine.” He searched my face. I was a statue, though my insides were churning at the sound of Cameron’s name being attached to the word fine.

Victor’s eyes were smoldering. I needed to keep him talking ... and away from me.

“What do I need to do for our partnership to work?” I asked with a businesslike tone.

He was excited. “Well, by now I’m sure the kid has figured out that I won and that I have you. We’ll let him think about that for a few days, then start the negotiations for sending you back. It’ll take a while to convince the leaders to let me take control again, so I’ll control the business behind Cameron until the change in management is made official.”

“What if the bosses don’t agree to you taking over?”

“You’ll make sure that Cameron does a good job at convincing them when I send you back to him.”

My heart leapt at the thought of seeing Cameron again, but my face remained unchanged. “What’s in it for me?”

He chuckled. “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. I’m impressed, kiddo. I thought you’d gone soft on me. But your parents taught you well, I see. People like us have to stick together.”

The fact that he was putting me in the same basket as him and my parents made me want to scream.

Victor continued, “Once I gain full control again and get rid of the boy, you and I can live happily ever after together.”

The partnership was starting to sound more like a one-sided business deal—he would get to lead the underworld, and I got to live and become his Isabelle-look-alike concubine. I undetectably shuddered and cheerfully responded, “Sounds great.”

Victor strolled over to me and, pulling me up by the shoulders, made me stand in front of him. With his rough hands, he drew my face into his, whispered my mother’s name and forced his leathery lips against mine. But I couldn’t kiss him back. My lips automatically squeezed together, shutting him out. Victor pulled away and eyed me. He was slighted.

“Kiss me,” he ordered as he tried to kiss me again. No luck—my lips were uncontrollably pursed again. I was quickly losing his trust and had to think of something before he caught on to my game and my complete and utter revulsion of him.

“I need to use the washroom,” I said, and, leaning close to him, I whispered in his ear, “I threw up earlier. I would really like to rinse my mouth out before I kiss you.”

He examined my face, and I gave him my sweetest smile, one that I had learned from my mother. I was relieved to see him return it.

“Oh yes, of course,” he said. He elatedly walked to the door and knocked three times. The latch clicked as it was unlocked and the door opened. Soldier-man guardedly peered in.

“Escort the young lady to the washroom,” Victor commanded.

I batted my eyes at Victor. “I really don’t need an escort. I think I’m old enough now to find the washroom by myself.” My voice oozed like honey.

Victor looked thrilled with my attention. “Yes, you’re certainly not a child anymore,” he said, and then added as he gently rubbed my arm, “But I want to keep you safe, so please humor me and let Mickey walk you to the washroom?”

“All right,” I agreed softly.

Mickey the soldier-man and I walked down a white hallway. Up ahead was a wide open space. We were in a warehouse, I realized. The cheap carpet came to an end and was replaced by concrete floor and concrete

walls. The empty warehouse was dimly lit, with the light of day coming in from the dirty, frosted windowpanes up above. There were more armed guards standing by exits, and more were playing cards, with empty boxes as their game table. Our footsteps echoed as we made our way to the washroom. The picture on the door indicated that this was a men's washroom. I glanced along the cement wall—no women's washroom. Mickey confirmed my suspicion as he opened the door to the men's washroom.

“Get out,” he ordered a guard who was standing by the urinal. The guard quickly zipped up and rushed out.

The washroom was everything I expected a men's washroom to be—disgustingly dirty and smelling of urine, among other things. Mickey followed me in while I quickly fled into one of the stalls. There was no point in asking for time alone to think—this was all the privacy that I was going get. Up to that point, I'd had a faint hope that the bathroom would have had a window and that I would be able to ruse soldier-man away long enough to escape. That was what usually happened in the movies, right? But there were no windows—just yellowing, staggered subway tile and someone's inscriptions as to who to call for a good time. If Victor had his way, my name would soon be added to the stall's wall of fame.

I was out of options, and I had to prepare myself for what I would have to do next. I let a few tears silently drop from my eyes as I prayed to the gods on the stained concrete ceiling. At soldier-man's urging to hurry up, I wiped the tears, put a smile on, and bounced out.

I couldn't look at myself in the splattered mirror. I was too afraid of who I might find staring back—for the next while, I would have to be anybody else but me. I splashed water on my face and rinsed my mouth out, as I had pledged to do. When we walked out of the washroom, my teeth were tightly clenched into a smile, and I was breathing short shallow breaths—just enough to keep me standing. In my head I was signing a tune from *The Sound of Music* to keep myself from crying.

Doe, a deer, a female deer. We walked past the staring card players.

Ray, a drop of golden sun. We reached the threshold of ugly carpet.

Me, a name, I call myself. We were back in the office that had been converted into my prison—where Victor was eagerly waiting. As he approached me, he ordered Mickey to close the door and give us some

privacy. My only means of escape slammed behind me, taking the cheery show tune with it. There was nothing in my head now but inescapable fear. I wished that Victor would turn the lightbulb off. This, I thought, would make it easier for me to imagine that I was anywhere but here.

Victor was smiling, benevolently. I was shaking uncontrollably.

“You don’t have to be scared. I won’t hurt you,” he whispered as he wrapped his hand around my ponytail, pulling my head back, forcing me to look up at him. He looked like a much older wrinkly version of my brother. This thought only made things worse. I started crying. I knew that I wouldn’t be able, under any pretense of willingness or otherwise, to go through with it.

His face was coming closer to mine.

“Uncle Victor,” I pleaded, “I can’t ...”

This made him smile. “I’m not really your uncle. You know that, right? This would be wrong if we were actually related. But we’re not. So, it’s okay. Just relax.”

He pressed his lips against mine, but I didn’t respond.

His smile was fading.

“Kiss me back,” he ordered coldly.

I started sobbing. “Please don’t. I don’t want to do this. I’ll do whatever you want me to do, but not this.”

He laughed chillingly and shook his head. “You’re just a tease, aren’t you? You think I’m going to let you go back to that boy without some kind of assurance that you’ll do what I tell you to do? You’ll be mine before I send you back to finish the job.”

He pushed me up to the wall and held his hand at my throat while trying to push his tongue into my mouth.

“Open your mouth,” he commanded.

I was paralyzed with fear. My lips remained sealed. He pressed his hand against my throat harder this time, until my mouth finally gasped open for air. He kissed me, and I continued to struggle. His free hand was everywhere—on my face, in my hair—but as it started inching down my neck and closer to my chest, I went into absolute panic. Instinctively, I kicked my knee up between his legs. The effect was immediate. He fell to the ground on his knees, grabbing hold of himself. But he was enraged and,

within half a second, was back on his feet. He stomped back to me, pulling his fist back. I closed my eyes and waited for the blow.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Giving Up

When I awoke, I was lying between the wall and the floor with my limbs flailed in all directions. I struggled into a seated position; my face was pulsating with pain. I brushed my fingers against it and felt the dried blood under my nose, and a hardening fist-sized sphere of heat took up most of my cheek. There was something salty, blood, against my teeth. I was otherwise intact—and immensely grateful for it. I had escaped Victor, but for how long? I crawled back into my defensive ball and rested my aching head on my knees, crying, sobbing.

The tears hadn't long dried up by the time Mickey slid my tray of food over to me with his foot. I didn't look up, and he didn't ask how I was. We had an unspoken understanding. He closed the door and left me alone again.

This time my meal consisted of processed cheese slapped between two pieces of bread and two juice boxes. I had gone up in the world. I got to my feet and started pacing about the room, drinking my juice box. I stopped in front of the door; ridiculously hopeless, I tried the doorknob ... because you never know.

"Don't even think about it, girl," a cold voice from the other side answered my attempt. "The door is locked, and I'm right here waiting for you if it isn't."

I decided to break the code of silence. "Mickey, is that you?" I whispered.

I heard him shifting about but no answer.

"Mickey, you need to help me get out of here. He's going to kill me." I added after another silent lapse, "There's a lot of money attached to it if you help me escape."

"Eat your food and shut up," Mickey finally answered.

I had no allies here. I finished my juice box, picked at the bread, and sat on the bed, listening for my maker's footsteps.

I didn't have to wait too long. A fresh-faced, clean-shaven Victor walked through the door and sat on the bed.

"Feeling better now?" he asked.

I glared.

He glanced over my face. What he found made him shake his head disapprovingly at me. "I wouldn't have had to do that if you had behaved."

Nothing but silence from me. Victor continued his monologue.

"I brought you some clean clothes. You can have a shower too. Would you like that?"

I didn't want anything that he would give me, but I also needed to buy some time. I nodded—and cringed when I saw that my concurrence had pleased him.

Mickey escorted me back to the men's washroom. I had noticed him slightly wincing as he peered at my face when I had first walked out of the room. I wondered if I would be able to use this, his humanity, to my advantage.

One of the stalls had been converted into a shower; though, from the look of the yellowed floor tile, it seemed that it was also used as an extra urinal. While Mickey stood on the other side of the stall, I got undressed and hung my clothes over the door. I turned on the water, as hot as it would go, and stood under a lukewarm shower. In less than a minute, the water started getting cold.

When I turned around, I saw a pink sundress hanging next to the dirty clothes that I had thrown over the door. I grumbled, grabbing my black frock. Mickey chuckled when I walked out.

"Pink is not your color, eh?"

I ignored him and stood by the sink.

A knock on the door brought one of the guards into the washroom. He handed a bag of ice to Mickey; Mickey handed it to me.

"It'll make the swelling go down," he told me.

I glared at him, took the pittance, marched to the shower, emptied the bag on the tiled floor and handed him the empty bag. I spun on my heels and walked myself back to my cell, slamming the door behind me. The cold shower had re-energized me, and I sat on the mattress, determined to plot my revenge or my escape, whichever would come first. But, as I heard the

door click locked after Mickey had caught up with me, I knew I had nothing else. So I waited for Victor and readied my attack.

Hours seemed to roll by in this cardboard box of a room, and Victor never came. The warehouse went deadly quiet. Perhaps it was nighttime now. Eventually, I turned off the swinging lightbulb, crawled down the bed, fell asleep and rebooted. There were no nightmares while I slept—I was already in one.

Victor was staring at me in the dark the next time I awoke. I shot up and curled my body to the wall, as far away from him as I could. In the shadows, Victor smiled his sickly smile and moved to the bed, sitting next me.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered. I felt his hand graze my hair, pushing it away from my face, like Cameron had lovingly done before him. I was tired of crying, of playing weak. Tears fell anyway.

Victor shushed me. “Lie down.”

I didn’t move. Hypnotized by my fear.

“Lie down,” he shouted. I yelped with fright.

With every muscle of my body shaking, I laid on my back. Victor got up and pulled on the string of the light. I closed my eyes as the light came on. The tears had already soaked the pillow by the time Victor had climbed on top of me. He started to kiss me and didn’t care this time that I wasn’t kissing back. His breath smelled like alcohol or mouthwash. I couldn’t tell the difference. Whatever it was, it made me sick to my stomach.

His kisses became more forceful, and his hands more aggressive. I started to struggle. He grabbed my wrists and with one hand held them over my head. I started kicking and screaming. He put his hand over my mouth and held me down with the weight of his body.

“If you don’t behave, I’ll have you serve your time in one of my whorehouses. Or maybe I’ll just kill you. I don’t need you to be alive to make that boy lose control.” He stared me down. “Now, will you behave?”

I nodded yes. As soon as he let go of my mouth, I spat in his face. “Go ahead and kill me then, because I will never do what you want me to do. I won’t betray him no matter what you do to me.”

He slapped me across my already bruised cheek. Tears of pain leaked out of my eyes. I winced, but I had stopped crying. I continued to try to wiggle away from him, but this only seemed to egg him on. His breaths became

excited. He started fumbling with his belt buckle; I started kicking and screaming as hard as I could. I managed to unclench one of my hands and scratched his face. He screamed in anger and in pain and slapped me across the face again. The door burst open. Victor looked up. I used his momentary distraction to struggle away from him and run to cower into a corner of the room.

Mickey was in the doorway.

"I said to stay away," Victor screamed at him.

Mickey quickly eyed me and turned to Victor. "I'm sorry, sir. I heard you scream. I thought—"

"You thought nothing. Get out of here and don't come back in!"

Mickey eyed me again. "Sir, there's someone here to see you."

I heard short footsteps, and a man I recognized as Rocco's killer walked through the door. It took everything I had not to jump at Norestrom's throat to choke him. But, from the battered look of his face, it looked like someone had already beaten me to it. One of his eyes was swollen shut, his nose was bloody and crooked, and he was missing several teeth.

"What happened to you?" Victor asked him.

Norestrom turned all of his attention to Victor. "I got caught by one of Spider's boys. They tried to beat the location out of me. But I didn't tell them a thing and escaped before they could kill me."

Victor half-smiled and absentmindedly said, as he glanced back at me, "Well, it's good to have you back, son. We'll need you around for the takeover. Go get cleaned up and make sure that the young lady and I get our privacy."

"Sure, Shield." Norestrom had a smug look on his face as he turned to soldier-man. "Think you can manage to follow those orders, Mickey, or do I have to draw you a picture?"

Mickey looked furious, but nodded his head in obedience. The men walked out and locked the door behind them. They gave us our privacy. Victor immediately stood up and swaggered toward me like he had already won. I got up and met him with my fists up. I threw a punch that fanned him. He found this hilarious.

"You and your brother have always been fighters. I never understood what you were so angry about. Bill, I guess, had reason to be upset, what with your father leaving my sister like that. Can't blame your father though.

Your mother was quite the catch.” He laughed again. “Poor Billy. He came to me, thinking he would find an ally against his father. But my sister was nothing but a weak-minded woman. I was ashamed of being related to her. She didn’t deserve to have her honor defended by me or Bill.”

Victor pulled my fists down and brought his smiling face to mine. “Are you still a virgin?”

“No. Cameron already took care of that,” I said spitefully.

His smile was gone. This gave me little comfort. He grabbed me by the shoulders and dragged me to the bed while my limbs flailed in dead air. He quickly resumed his position on top of me and proceeded to fumble with his belt buckle. I thrashed about while he loosened his pants and I wished that I would have found pants to wear instead of a skirt for the funeral—at least it would have delayed him a bit more. As Victor struggled with me and his pants, I felt something cold fall close to my thigh. Suddenly, everything changed for me. I grew calmer and stopped struggling, which mildly pleased Victor.

“There. Now that’s more like it,” he said softly. His grasp on my hands loosened as he took advantage of my change in humor to pull the rest of his pants down. I pulled my hand free and grabbed the revolver that had slid next to my thigh. I brought it to his head.

With the feel of a cold barrel against his skull, I had Victor’s full and undivided attention. But he just laughed.

“You even know how to use that thing?” he teased.

I pulled back the lever, removed any doubt. He flinched when it clicked next to his skin. His eyes grew as big as the bottom of a shot glass.

“Get off me,” I ordered.

He clumsily rolled off the bed and stood in front of me in his underwear with his arms up and his pants around his ankles.

“Just relax,” he said fanning his hands. “Don’t do anything foolish. One scream from me and twenty guards will be running in here.”

“And you’ll be dead,” I added. I got up and demanded that he turn around. I placed the gun against the back of his head and made him walk to the door. He was a lot taller than me, so I had to stretch on my tiptoes to keep the gun pressed at his head while he walked. We got to the door, and, not trusting him to give the right signal, I reached my free hand around him

to knock on the door, three times. After a few seconds, I heard someone fumble with the lock and open the door.

Mickey reached for his gun as he saw Victor with his hands laced behind his head and me peering behind him.

“Don’t even think about it. You touch that thing and your boss is dead,” I yelled, surprised by the force of my own voice. I was completely calm. I told him to slowly remove his gun from its holster using his opposite hand—I saw this in a movie once—and hand it to me. Mickey kind of chuckled as he followed my orders. Equipped with two guns, I ordered Mickey to walk ahead of us with his hands up. Victor was hopping and tripping over his downed pants, and I followed him.

With the two large men in front of me, I couldn’t see anything ahead. I looked at the floor and saw that we had reached the end of the carpet and the hall into the warehouse.

I heard hushed voices as we walked out.

“What’s going on here?” Victor exclaimed.

I tried to peek around him, but Mickey was blocking my view.

“Mickey, get down. I can’t see anything,” I whined. I then remembered that I was the one who was holding the guns.

Mickey chuckled and got down on his knees with his fingers still behind his head. Victor did the same, without my order. The view finally opened up, and my knees almost buckled under me. I was trying to confirm what I thought I had seen, but my vision was being blurred with tears. I couldn’t wipe the tears away because my trembling hands were still holding onto the two revolvers.

“Emmy!” I heard Cameron say with exasperation. I didn’t need to see that it was indeed him.

I heard hurried footsteps and through the blanket of my tears saw Mickey and Victor being brought down to the ground by a group of large figures. I couldn’t move beyond the uncontrollable trembling of my hands. My legs were as stiff as a board now, and my head was swimming.

I was still pointing the guns ahead of me, at Cameron’s guards who were cowering away from my trembling aim as they tried to drag Mickey and Victor off. But I was looking at Cameron, who was standing next to me.

“We got them. It’s okay,” he said softly in my ear as he tugged my arms down and took the weapons away from me. He wrapped me in his arms,

and I started weeping. I was bringing my hands to my eyes, trying to keep up with the tears so that I could see his face.

He was joyfully, and at the same time sadly, laughing in my ear. "I came to save you, but I guess you didn't need me to save you after all."

I wanted to tell him that I did need him, always, but nothing but tears came out. I gave up trying and brought my face to his and pressed my lips against his, grimacing when his lips brushed the cut on my mouth. Cameron pulled me away and glanced over my face, passing his hand over my lip and bruised cheek. His faint smile was replaced with anger.

"Did Shield do this to you?" he shouted, shooting his arm straight out and pointing at Victor, who was on the floor face down. Suddenly Cameron noticed the pants around Shield's ankles. His face went pale. "Jesus, did he —"

"He hit me. That's it. I got to him before ..." I couldn't finish. Before what? The could-have-been was too hard for me to admit.

Cameron was enraged. He lunged for Victor, spinning him around, mounting him, and punching him in the face, over and over again. Victor cowered in a ball, covering his bloodied face with his hands. Spider came running up behind them, yelling.

"Cameron, stop! You're going to kill him!"

"Good!" Cameron yelled back.

With Spider's order, the guards pulled Cameron off of Victor. It took four of them to finally manage to get him away from Victor. Spider made the guards drag Victor away from Cameron's sight, while a seething Cameron watched from the sideline. I rushed to him and threw my arms around his neck. I whispered that I was fine over and over while I held on.

He calmed down after a while and crushed me in his arms.

"How did you find me?" I asked, trying to wiggle out enough to look at him.

He smiled, almost to his eyes. There were bags entrenched under them. He looked twenty years older. "The guards caught Norestrom a couple days before Rocco's funeral. We were going to sell him back in pieces to Shield for what he did to my brother, but when you went missing, I tried to beat the location out of him ... before we killed him. He wouldn't talk fast enough. I let him escape, knowing that he would be stupid enough to come find Shield and lead us to you."

His eyes were locked on mine, but mine started tearing up again. “Cameron, I didn’t mean to abandon you at the church. Uncle Victor convinced me to go with him. They started shooting outside. The window exploded. I thought—”

“One of Shield’s men shot at the church window when he heard you warn me through the radio. They weren’t shooting at us. They couldn’t. If they killed us in an ambush like that, the leaders would have hunted all of them down. It took us a little while to figure out that they were shooting at anything but us. They were warning Shield. I should have known it was a trap and never left you. I completely screwed up.”

He held me, and then pushed me away, holding my shoulders in his hands. “I had no idea Shield was your uncle. If I did, I would have warned you.”

“He was my brother’s uncle.” I really didn’t feel like explaining my family’s history at that particular time, but Cameron didn’t push for more.

“That explains a lot, like where Bill got all his ideas from and his extreme dislike for Shield,” he said. “Though, I wished Bill would have told me.”

I smiled up at him, and he gently kissed me, on the good side of my mouth.

When we turned around, the warehouse was practically empty, except for Spider and Tiny, who were standing by Victor. Tiny was holding Victor up by the shoulders while Spider was waving his finger at Victor and speaking to him with a low voice. Victor looked terrified.

We made our way toward them. Victor glared at me, and I glared back.

“Let him go,” Spider, who had his back to us, said to Tiny.

“What?” Cameron yelled out. “Tiny, keep hold of him.”

Tiny held onto Victor and looked confusedly from Spider to Cameron.

“We’re letting him go, Cameron,” Spider said as he turned on his heels to face us.

“After everything he’s done? No, he’s a dead man.”

“We’re letting him go, Cameron,” Spider repeated with more force.

Cameron dragged Spider away from us, and, in arguing whispers, they decided Victor’s fate. I watched Cameron’s face turn ashen in the midst of their argument. After a while, Spider was doing all the talking, and Cameron was listening with his head bent in defeat.

“Let him go,” Cameron said dejectedly to Tiny when they had returned. He was blanched. I swallowed hard.

Tiny held onto Victor for a few seconds, to see if Cameron was going to change his mind. When he didn’t, Tiny let Victor go. Victor’s knees buckled under him as he fell back to the ground, and he rushed out of the warehouse. Spider meaningfully glanced at me and Cameron, and then he walked out with Tiny at his side.

“Why are you letting him go?” I wondered accusingly as I turned to Cameron. What I saw in Cameron scared me more than anything Shield could have ever done to me ... tears had welled up in Cameron’s eyes.

“Cameron ...” I had lost my breath.

He grabbed me in a hug and whispered, “Emmy, you need to run. Now.”

I pushed him away. “What? No. I’m not going anywhere without you.”

He was in agony. Pain had carved deep fissures in his forehead.

“Tell me what’s going on. Right now,” I demanded and bit my lip, trying not to cry, trying to fight the dread that was swarming in.

“Please,” he begged, “you need to go. Don’t look back. I love you.”

I took a step toward him, my arms reaching out. He stepped back and turned his face away from me.

“Cameron, don’t. You’re scaring me.” I wasn’t just scared; I was petrified. “Tell me what’s going on. Please.” I lunged into his arms before he could react and latched my arms around his neck. I heard him sigh, and he held me for a few seconds. Footsteps came from behind us. He unhooked my arms and pushed me away. I followed his frightened gaze. Spider and Tiny were standing a few feet away.

Spider had his gun pointed at us.

“What’s going on?” I asked, my voice shaking with the rest of my body.

Spider was staring coldly at Cameron. “You said your goodbyes, now we finish this.”

Cameron turned to Tiny. “Get her out of here.”

Tiny nodded and started walking toward me.

I pleaded to Spider. “Please don’t do this, Spider. We’ll leave. You can have it all, and you’ll never have to see us again. You don’t need to do this. Please ...”

Spider kept his eyes on Cameron. Tiny came to grab me from behind and started to drag me away.

I screamed through my tears at Cameron. "Cameron, do something! Don't let them do this. Please."

Cameron glanced at me with eyes of pain, and then he took a breath, his jaw tightened and he looked away. His face became expertly unaffected as he stared back at Spider's gun, waiting. I was in a nightmare. I needed to wake up. But the throbbing in my chest was too real for this to be a dream.

By the time Tiny had dragged me to the door while I kicked and screamed, the first shot rang out. I watched in horror as Cameron fell to the ground. Tiny had jumped too and momentarily let go of me.

I ran back to Cameron and crouched to the ground, putting myself between him and Spider's gun. I looked down. The shoulder of Cameron's shirt was already soaked through with blood. His eyes found me, but they were dulled. Life was sapping from him and dragging me with it.

"Get out of here, Emmy," he said too calmly, like he didn't feel the gushing wound in his shoulder.

"I won't let him do this to you. I'm not leaving you. Why are you letting them do this?"

"I have no other choice," he said. "It has to end this way."

"I won't say good-bye to you," I resolved. "You can fight. Why aren't you fighting?" I was furious that he was giving up so easily. "Don't let him win, Cameron."

I could feel him vanishing. I put my hand over his wound and turned his face, forcing him to acknowledge me. Tears were burning my cheeks.

"I love you," I told him in a desperate whisper. My eyes homed in on his, but Cameron had squeezed his eyes shut. It, love, was no longer enough.

Cameron pulled my hands away and yelled, "Get her out of here!"

Tiny had come back and, this time, picked me up off the ground, threw me over his shoulder, and carried me out.

The last time I saw Cameron, he was staring at the ceiling and a tear had rolled out of the corner of his eye.

I was still screaming and crying uncontrollably when Tiny finally set me down. He wiped the sweat off his forehead and held onto me with one arm while I continued to fight him off.

"There's nothing you can do, Emmy," Carly's shaking voice said. She had been standing next to us outside.

Three more gunshots successively fired from inside the warehouse and then all was quiet.

Carly put her hands to her face. I lost myself and fell to my knees.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: The One Who Holds the Gun

In that moment, when the last gunshot rang, I felt Cameron leave me. I snapped, like a wishbone. Cameron was the lucky part that was broken off; left behind was the unlucky part, just hollowed marrow, sucked dry. There was so much pain around me. It was as if someone were stabbing me and slashing my skin open. I wanted to be dead. In a way, I already was—without Cameron, there was nothing left.

My face was damp. My hair was sticking to my cheeks. I was still screaming, wailing. But inside I felt and heard nothing. My voice was not mine. In my head, everything had gone silent and black, a dark hole that I would never crawl out of. The old Emily had gone down with Cameron; what emerged from the hole was some sinister thing.

When I looked up, when the Shadow-of-Emily looked up, I saw Carly. She was staring at me, her waterlogged eyes terrified. She had reason to be scared—I was going to kill her, and the rest of them. Hate and vengeance had spread through my veins, my heart, my brain, my skin, like a cancer.

I lunged for Carly. Tiny was holding me back, with difficulty. Carly stood still in a stupor. I was the caged animal waiting for any opportunity, and she was the prey that stood by the bars, entranced.

“How could you do this?” The voice that escaped my mouth was hard and violent. “How could you betray him like that?”

Carly was pale. She was shaking through her tears. “This wasn’t my decision. I didn’t want this to happen. Not like this.”

“Spider worships you. One word from you and he would have changed his mind,” I yelled.

She started sobbing, and I hated her more for it. She had no right to cry for Cameron. She had caused his death. I wanted her to suffer.

“Is that what you did to my brother? You had him killed when he found someone else? Someone who was prettier and nicer than you? He fell in

love with Frances, and you and Spider couldn't control him anymore, so you had him put down like a sick dog."

Carly's face turned to despair. "Emmy, please don't—"

"Don't call me that! You have no right!" I spat.

Spider had calmly made his way back to us. He glanced at Carly who was sobbing uncontrollably and angrily turned to me. "Carly had nothing to do with this. None of this is *her* fault."

The man who had been holding the gun had conveniently decided that I was to blame for Cameron's death. A fury of adrenaline raged through my body, and I lunged forward, evading Tiny's grasp. My fist connected with Spider's face, and he stumbled back from the blow. I managed to throw another punch, though with less force, before Tiny grabbed me by the shoulders and lifted me from the ground. I kicked my legs, and one of them caught, clipping Spider's shoulder. He swore. Carly stood by his side, between us, in a panic.

"Put her in the car!" he ordered Tiny.

While I continued to fight off Tiny, Spider turned to Carly, pinching his bleeding nose and making stretch circles with his injured shoulder. "Go back inside. Make sure the mess is completely cleaned up." They glanced at each other for a half-second, and Carly made her way back into the warehouse. In the meantime, Tiny had called for reinforcements, and three men forced me into the back of a black car. I was made to sit in the middle, with my seatbelt tightly strapped to my waist as extra backup, while Tiny and another guard flanked me. Spider sat up front in the passenger side, and the third guard jumped into the driver's seat.

"I want to see Cameron," I demanded whipping the never ending tears.

"You're in no position to be making any requests," Spider said nasally, his head leaned back on the seat and a bloody Kleenex stuffed up his nose.

He was right. I was squeezed into the seat between two very large, armed men who were nervously watching my every move. I had no energy left to fight them off—the adrenaline had boiled out of me.

We peeled away from the warehouse. We were somewhere in an industrial zone outside Callister. There were gravel pits and rusty abandoned bulldozers, half-submerged. The car was dangerously speeding on a sandy road with the shocks threatening to sever every time we hit fissures in the uneven road. So much sand was being kicked up from the

speed that we were enclosed in a fog of our own dust. I turned back toward the warehouse, where I imagined Cameron's body still lying on the cold, cement floor; I could see nothing but a cloud of brown dirt. My throat was collapsing into itself, like a trash compactor, squeezing the air out from each end. I could barely breathe—but then again, breathing was by that point overrated, just another luxury that I didn't want.

"Where are you taking me?" I managed to croak out.

No response.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked again with more force.

"Shut up," Spider said with irritation. He had removed the tissue from his nostril, and his nose started gushing blood again.

"Are you going to kill me?"

"Can't you keep your mouth shut for two seconds?"

"I don't care if you kill me," I blurted.

Spider swore. "If you don't shut up I will kill you, with my bare hands, in this car. Keep quiet."

I started sobbing. I wanted it to be over.

He sighed. "I won't kill you, all right?"

"Why not?" I asked him, looking for a different answer.

"Because I can't kill people like you without other people like you noticing," he said angrily.

Spider's words had hit me like a gunshot through the heart. Cameron died while I cruelly had to outlive him, for no other reason than the circumstances I had been born into, which had put me in a different world than him. Yet Spider, who belonged in no one's world, was still sitting there, alive and mostly unharmed. There was something despairingly unjust about that. Hate boiled in my veins.

"You must be happy now that Cameron's out of your way," I surmised.

Spider fleetingly glared to the rear before turning his eyes to the road ahead of him, without offering response. Everyone in the car was stifled.

I had a captive audience, so I continued, "Looks like there's conveniently no one else left alive but you to take over the reins. First my brother, now Cameron. How many people do you have to kill before you figure out that you're not smart enough to lead anything or anyone?"

Spider's jawbone protruded as he clenched his teeth together. Even if he coolly tried to ignore me, I knew that he was listening to my every word. I

was on a path to self-destruction—if he wasn't planning on killing me, I would make him change his mind or make him regret his decision to let me live.

"What you did won't change a thing. You'll never be anything like Cameron or my brother. You're just another power-hungry street thug with more gunpowder than brains." My voice was acidic.

Spider's lips were stretched thin. "You've got a pretty big mouth for a little girl stuck in a car with four guys who aren't afraid of using their guns."

"I'm not afraid of you." There was nothing else that Spider could ever do to me that would change this. "I won't let you control me like you did Cameron."

Spider huffed crossly. "Control Cameron? No one controls Cameron except for you. You're a parasite. If it wasn't for you, none of this would have happened. Things started going wrong from the day you got here. You took Cameron's focus away—and the business started suffering because of it. If we didn't do this, you would have gotten all of us killed."

"We?" I asked incredulously. "I only saw one person holding the gun."

Spider turned and pointed his finger at me. "You didn't see a thing. And if you know what's good for you, you'll keep your mouth shut and stay the hell away from us. Or I swear to God, I will hunt you down and squeeze the life out of you myself—rich girl or not. I'll take your whole prissy family down too if I have to. None of this ever happened. Forget we ever existed."

I wasn't scared. There was a hole in Spider's plan, and I was happy to bring this to his attention. "What am I supposed to do when Victor comes knocking at my door? Pretend I've never seen him before?"

"I don't care what you do," he spat back coldly. "Besides, Shield won't come back. You're no longer useful to him now that Cameron ..." He didn't finish his sentence.

I looked at him carefully. I had noticed something change in his face as he had said this. He was hiding something.

"You and Victor were in on this the whole time," I said.

When Spider uneasily shifted in his seat and turned his face as far away from me as possible, I knew I was on the right track. I thought back at that day, in the church, when Spider had finally convinced Cameron to leave me behind. This had provided Victor with the perfect opportunity to take me.

The Shadow-of-Emily pounced. “You were setting Cameron up to fail so that you would have enough to take him out without getting in trouble with the leaders. This was your plan, wasn’t it? To force him to come after me and show that he was a risk because of me. That’s why you let Victor go today.”

Spider chuckled nervously, but refused to look at me. “You don’t know a thing, girl. That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. Cameron was becoming a risk, but it had nothing to do with me and everything to do with you. We had to recruit other gang factions because you were stupid enough to get yourself caught by Shield. With half our fleet dead, it was the only way that we would be able to overtake Shield’s guards and get you out.” After a moment, he added, “As far as I know, you and Shield were the ones who were playing all of us. He was your uncle, not mine. I had nothing to do with Shield.”

I was far from being convinced. Spider would have been ecstatic to have Cameron show his weakness by going to other gangs and plead for their help in order to save a girl. This had only enhanced Spider’s chances at getting Cameron out of the picture and taking his place at the head of the table without too much huff from the leaders. I glared at the back of Spider’s head. If looks could kill, Spider would have had a stake through his neck by now.

“I’m going to kill you,” I promised. The coldness in my voice left nothing to doubt that I had meant this with every fiber of my being.

Spider didn’t look back. “I’d like to see you try.”

It took me a while to realize that the car had stopped. The third guard had pulled up next to the unleveled sidewalk in front of my house. I had no idea how I had gotten there—everything had been a blur up to that point. But looking at my house was like the nightmare had suddenly poured into my reality, or at least the reality of the old Emily.

The new now being connected with the familiar had only heightened the pain—Cameron hadn’t been just a dream. He had been a real person whom I loved and who had, inexplicably, loved me. Now he was gone because of love, because of me. I was the one who was supposed to die. Not him. There was no waking up from that nightmarish feeling of pain and utter desperation.

Tiny slid down the seat, grabbing my arm, and dragging me out in the process. The breeze as I stepped out of the car chilled me to the bone. My face, hair, and clothes were still drenched with my tears.

Spider opened his door and peered at me without getting out of his seat. “We’ll have your things delivered to you,” he said in a businesslike manner, like nothing had ever happened. “Keep your mouth shut and stay away from us.”

I had expected him to threaten me profusely, like maybe dragging his index finger along his throat or pointing a fingered gun at his head, pulling the thumb trigger. But there was none of that. They left without another thought. I stood on the sidewalk shivering, watching them drive away.

Chapter Thirty: Passing on the Crazy Torch

It was a while before I could muster up the courage to walk up the walkway that led to the house. For the longest time, I was a statue on the sidewalk, afraid of what I was going to find beyond. After being plucked out of my former life and thrown into someone else's reality, after making that reality mine, going back to normal was an impossible option. Though I still had no idea what normal meant.

There was an old lady in our neighborhood who spent her days pushing her rickety walker forward while mumbling to herself and making her rounds around the same block. She did this every day, like clockwork. She had become the local legend with my roommates. Rumors about her past were conjured up over bottles of beer and pizza boxes. The better story was the one where she was hunting for stray cats and hiding them under her flowered muumuu. She would take them home and train them for the day when she was going to take over the neighborhood, but first sent them back into the world to await the hiss of her orders. The sleeper-cell cats got fat off our garbage in the meantime.

When the crazy lady passed by me today, she looked at me like I was the crazy one. She wasn't far off target. I wondered what gossip would be made up to account for my madness. Whatever the stories were going to be, I was sure the red hair would make them all the more imaginative. The lady's glance at my expense had been meaningful, but swift. She went back to her psychobabble and pretended I was never there. People in these parts were ingrained to keep to themselves, lest they be dragged into their neighbor's misery. They had enough of their own troubles.

By the time I decided to move forward, the lady had already inched her way down my street and disappeared around the corner. Holding my breath with dread, I turned the doorknob and pushed on the front door, almost wishing that it would be locked. It wasn't.

Walking into the house felt like I was walking into a sarcophagus. The dusty curtains were pulled shut, casting an eerie shadow on the mismatched furniture, and the air was stifling. The house was as dead as I felt. This was a slight comfort to me. When I heard the sound of kids playing somewhere outside, I slammed the door behind me, shutting out all signs of life.

I stood in the darkened entryway, unsure if I was going to fall down crying, start screaming at the top of my lungs, or both. I did neither. The only thing I wanted to do was get Victor's spit off my skin, as if his touch had left behind his microscopic bugs to crawl and find refuge within my pores. I robotically went upstairs to draw a bath, not even bothering to touch the cold water faucet. I would burn him off me.

The washroom quickly filled with steam. Water droplets from the rolling vapor attached themselves to all surfaces, like the first snowfall of the season. I was now free to roam about the bathroom without fear of catching a glimpse of myself in the fogged mirror. When I got undressed, that's when I spotted it: all the blood. My hands and forearms, which had grabbed onto to him as I begged him to fight for us, were covered in Cameron's blood. And while I had leaned over him and he had looked up at the ceiling with defeat, my kneecaps had also been doused in his blood.

Water was raging up to the surface.

With my hands shaking, I hurriedly took my clothes off and stepped into the tub before I could fall apart. I sat in the water, barely feeling the burn against my skin. I was careful to tuck my knees into my chest so that my hands and knees stayed out of the water. The red stains on my skin were a reminder of everything I had lost.

I was rocking back and forth, numbed, staring at the palms of my hands while tears washed my face.

This, his blood, was all I had left of him ...

I sniffled and, with every muscle of my body resisting my brain's orders, struggled to bring my knees down into the water. I was sobbing, deep convulsing sobs. I brought my arms and hands down next and watched his blood swirl in a haze, dissipating into my bathwater. I lay down and ducked my head underwater, silencing my cries.

My skin pruned and a towel wrapped around my torso, I zombie-walked to my bedroom. Standing dazed in the doorway, it took me a few minutes to clue in that my room was completely empty. Apart from the sheets on my

bed, there was no trace of me left in there. I remembered that my stuff was somewhere out there being hastily packed so that no traces of me were left behind as evidence of my dream and nightmare.

I yanked the curtain closed and walked away. It would take me a while before I would be able to go in there again. I rummaged through my roommate Cassie's room. Midway through the last school year, Cassie had decided that she was a vampire. Of the few clothes that she had left behind, all were black—good enough for walking around in my coffin.

Dressed for mourning, I went downstairs, turned on the TV, and lay on the couch. I hid under the blanket that I had dragged off of Cassie's bed and closed my eyes. I would stay in that spot, waiting for someone to come identify the body.

The pain had localized to my right hand, which had crunched when my fist had connected with Spider's face. I'd spent my time watching the two middle fingers slowly grow black and blue. I couldn't bend them anymore. By the second morning, they were so swollen that the inflammation was starting to spread to the other fingers. All I wanted to do was sleep and forget. But the throbbing was keeping me up now. Grudgingly, I used some of Cassie's pale Goth makeup to cover up the nasty bruise that Victor had left on my cheek and neck and headed for the school medical clinic.

The X-rays confirmed that one finger was dislocated and the other had a hairline fracture.

"How did this happen?" the doctor asked, scanning my face over the edge of his glasses as if he could see the bruises showing through the pound of makeup.

"Kickboxing," I said without flinching. I had planned my excuse ahead of time.

"Hmmm," he said, disbelief coloring his tone. "One more day and gangrene would have cost you a finger or two."

He grabbed hold of my dislocated finger and, without warning, snapped it back into place. It didn't hurt as much as I thought it would, but the awful sound of bones cracking into place brought a wave of nausea. I pushed the doctor away on time to puke in his garbage can. He rushed out of the room. A first-year medical student came to finish the work.

Though I had to painfully sit still while the nervous student wedged—tried to wedge—my throbbing fingers into metal loops, at least there were no more questions. He needed to put all of his attention on his patient ... his first patient ever, apparently. He would probably remember this for the rest of his life—and I would try very hard to forget.

I trudged back to the house, looking down, avoiding eye contact with those that I passed on the street—like these strangers knew everything, like they were judging me for having survived Cameron. My pace quickened with every person that walked by. When I got back to the house, I almost slammed into Tiny on the walkway. He ignored me and went back to the truck for more boxes.

Carly was standing by Spider's truck, directing foot traffic. She warily walked over to me and pulled me to the side so that the guards could finish their job and get out of there.

"How are you?" she asked, her eyes scanning my face. Her voice had almost seemed genuinely concerned.

I glared back and squeezed my unbroken hand into a fist, but a booming bark woke me from the shadows. Meatball was pulling at his leash, which had been tied to one of the pillars of the front porch. The sight of him made me start crying. I was amazed that I had any tears left in me—everything else inside me had seemed to run dry.

"We brought Meatball. He should be with you," she said softly.

I wiped my cheeks with the sleeve of my shirt. She noticed my badly taped-up fingers. "Your hand! Is it broken?"

"It was worth it."

She pressed her lips. "I don't know what you said to Spider in the car, but he was raging mad when he got back. I've never seen him so upset before. He looked like—"

"What? Like he was going to kill someone?"

Carly stood frozen like I had just slapped her in the face. In a way, my words had done just that.

Tiny and the rest of the guards finished bringing in my bins and were waiting for Carly by the truck.

"You can go now," I said with bitterness.

She jumped, suddenly awake. "No, I can't. I have something for you." She pulled a folded piece of paper from the back pocket of her jeans and

handed it to me. I unfolded it, and a business card fell out in the process. Scribbled on the lined paper were some forty rows of jumbled letters, numbers and dashes.

I looked up with a blank expression.

“That’s all of them. Cameron’s bank account numbers,” she said with confidence. “There’s a lot of cash too, but it’ll take me a bit more time to get everything to you.” I was seeing red, but she didn’t notice and pointed to the card on the ground, “That’s got our accountant’s contact information. The accounts are everywhere around the world. It can get complicated. The accountant help you get the money out. You can trust him.”

If my two fingers hadn’t been tangled in metal, I would have torn the piece of paper to shreds. But I settled for throwing it back in her face. Carly adeptly caught it.

“I don’t want your blood money.”

Tiny had started making his way to us as my temperature rose, but Carly bravely held him back with the palm of her hand up. “It’s not blood money, Emmy. Cameron ... would have wanted you to have this. You need the money.”

“I don’t need or want anything from you.” My glare was meant to be demented, but the effect was lost with the angry tears that rendered me pitiful.

“Em, please just take the money.” She tried to hand me the piece of paper, but I knocked her hand away.

“You think that giving me money will make any of this better?” I was sobbing now. “You betrayed him, Carly, all of you did. You were his only family. He trusted you. But like everyone else in his life, you turned your backs on him the minute he showed he was human. I loved him and he loved me. You destroyed that.” My voice was drowning.

Her lips were quivering, but the lingering tears never fell. “Don’t kid yourself, Emmy; I won’t ever forgive myself for letting this happen. I will have to live with this for the rest of my life.”

She glanced over my face for a long second. I could see the pain in her eyes. “When Bill died, I thought I was going to die. Even after all the lies, I didn’t want to live without him. But eventually, things started to get a little brighter again.” Carly gently reached her hand to my arm and I let her. “I know you hate my guts and don’t believe a word I say, but things will get

better for you too. I promise. Life goes on. You need to move on with it.” She forced a smile and then turned to walk away. The tears had finally broken through.

I realized that Carly and I now had more in common than ever—with Bill and Cameron dead, we had both lost our brother and the love of our life. We had both lost Rocco’s light. We had lost so much. But, in that moment, I felt sorrier for her than I did myself. For the rest of her life, she would be stuck with Spider and with the guilt of Cameron’s death. For some of this, I pitied her.

Without turning back, Carly called out as she made her way to the truck, “Keep yourself safe, Emmy, and please, stay out of trouble.”

She proceeded to climb into the truck.

“I’m worried about you, Carly,” I blurted out after her.

She turned. Her head tilted to the side. “You’re worried about me?”

“Spider is dangerous. He’ll stop at nothing to get what he wants.”

This made her break into a smile. “I’m a survivor, Em. You don’t need to worry about me. Just take care of yourself.”

She closed the passenger-side door, and they all drove away. I wiped my face clean. There would be no more tears, I promised myself, even though I had no control over them.

I walked over to my new roommate and looped my arms around his thick, furry neck. He struggled to get out of my bear hug to lick my face. After a few minutes, I sighed, released him from the porch post, and led us into our new lives.

How do you know when you’re *There*, I had once wondered. Maybe you’re lucky enough to notice the moment it’s happening to you. Maybe you’re able to block out all the other stuff that is, in the end, just background noise. But, most often, you don’t know that you were *There* until you lose it, or until it gets taken away from you. When you look back, you clearly see that time, that place, when all the pieces of you had finally fit together to make you blissfully happy, make you your whole self. Like one of those jumbo puzzles that take up your entire kitchen table for weeks, the tiny pieces are just cardboard shapes with colors splashed on them, and they don’t make any sense until you find their rightful place among the other pieces. When you put the last piece into place and the pieces now form a complete picture, that’s when you’re *There*. But while you were

busy thinking about gluing the puzzle together, so that the pieces would never be apart again, someone comes from behind you, destroys the last piece and throws the rest of the pieces away. Even if you could muster up enough courage to put the pieces back together, the picture would never be complete again, because of the last missing piece ... which, as it turned out, was smack in the middle, or in the heart, of the picture.

My life before Cameron was a jumbled mess: some pieces were sporadically linked together—while others, like Bill's death, had no fit. The day I met Cameron, the pieces started to flow into place, and the night that Cameron kissed me, the day that he sat next to me and told me he loved me, that was when the last pieces of me were snapped into place. Every other second, minute, hour that I spent with Cameron after that moment, made the last piece of my puzzle grow stronger, so that it made the damaged, the broken pieces become insignificant—mere background noise.

But Cameron had taken that last piece of the puzzle with him, and a black hole was all that was left in its stead. How do you recover from that? How do you survive? You don't, I resolved. There's no coming back from that permanent void left inside of you. You become a shell, going through the motions without emotion, like a robot, while the rest of me was wherever Cameron was.

In a few days, my other roommates would herd back to the house and school—the cycle, would start again. I vowed to myself that I would play the part until the moment arose when I could execute vengeance on the people who took Rocco and Cameron away from me. Then perhaps I could find Cameron again ...

Epilogue

I was the kid who crawled out of the womb ready to fight, fists up and everything. I lay on the bed reminding myself of this while I breathed through the pain. But bullet wounds were nothing compared to the hole that had been blown through my heart, leaving a big bleeding empty space. There was nothing Dr. Lorne could do to fix that hole. No amount of stitches would put her back in there to fill the space she had vacated.

No, people like me weren't built to deal with matters of the heart. Hell, as far as the outside world was concerned, a guy like me didn't have a heart to start with. I'd lived my life trying to prove them right—until recently.

How do you fight something that you can't see, I asked myself. How do you get rid of the guy who's messing with your business, when that guy is you? You turn the gun on yourself, I resolved—it's the only way to sever the human from the gangster.

"Looks like the bullet went right through," Dr. Lorne announced. He was holding an X-ray image to the fluorescent light of the ceiling. We had equipped him with a full ER in his house a few years ago—everything he needed to patch us up, including an X-ray machine. It was worth every penny. We kept him busy.

After Spider shot me in the shoulder, I let Carly drag me to Dr. Lorne's place. This was more for her benefit than mine. If she doesn't have someone or something to worry about, she goes nuts. Dr. Lorne was the best in his field—Harvard med, one of the top surgeons in the country, medical reviews—which he had thrown all away to follow his true passion: booze. But the best thing about Dr. Lorne was that he sobered up quick, took cash, and kept his mouth shut.

"You're a lucky man," he said.

I didn't feel lucky. Actually, I was jinxed. But I knew what he'd meant and there was nothing lucky about it. Spider was a straight shot, even with

his eyes closed and an arm tied behind his back. This had been methodically planned.

Twenty stitches later and I was as good as new—well, my shoulder was anyway.

Dr. Lorne took out his magic bag of pills, which we also supplied him with, and handed me two yellow ones. I grabbed the bag and took two more. Drugs are great in that way: they fix everything that hurts, inside and out. The good doctor was in no position to judge me on this. He left me the bag and walked out.

Carly, who had been whimpering on a wooden chair in the corner while the doctor did his job, spoke up, “I don’t think I can do this, Cameron. You should have seen Emmy when she heard the shots. It was as if someone were sucking the life out of her. It was ... horrible.”

“I didn’t need to see her, Carly. I heard her,” I said dryly. I knew this day had been hard on Carly. I had heard some of the things that Emmy was yelling to her. So had Spider—his face had looked like it was going to explode. But Carly understood what Emmy was going through. She had been there herself a few years ago. She didn’t hold Emmy’s spiteful words against her—and I loved her more for it. But I also didn’t need Carly to remind me of this day either. When I heard Emmy’s howls outside, it was heartbreaking, like someone was stabbing me with a screwdriver. It was too hard to bear, more excruciating than I would have ever thought was possible. Knowing that I was causing her all that pain ... I had never felt more pain than in that moment. I had begged Spider to just finish me after he had fired the last shots in dead air. “Don’t be stupid,” he had answered me abruptly, and then he quickly turned around and left. I had already glimpsed the tears that had been building in his eyes. Emmy had a way of humanizing the worst of us.

Spider couldn’t kill me. No one could, unless the leaders decided so. With me dead, no matter what Spider and Carly did, they would be next. The leaders left no room for witnesses, no room for revenge. There was no way that Spider was going to let that happen to Carly. And there was no way that I would let that happen to either of them. As annoying as they were sometimes, they were my brother and sister—blood ties or not.

“Why can’t we forget all of this and bring her back?” Carly said teary-eyed. “I promise to watch her like a hawk. Nothing will happen to her

again. I should have never let you and Spider go through with this in the first place.” She remembered how that conversation had gone, “I wished you would have listened to me when I told you and Spider that you were making a really big mistake.”

“It’s done, Carly. Deal with it,” I sighed. There had been a moment when Emmy looked at me in the warehouse, like she was being tortured, like I was killing her, when I thought about forgetting about our plan and keeping her with me forever. But this could never happen. I couldn’t keep Emmy caged up like an animal like the rest of us. She was too beautiful, too free for that. Even if I could lock her up behind three-foot-thick cement walls, ten feet below the ground—a thought that had crossed my mind more than once—someone would always find her. Even if Shield wasn’t around anymore—and I still vowed that I would find a way to make that happen for good without getting the rest of us killed—there were a thousand more behind him who would readily take his place. As long as I was alive, Emmy would never be safe. I couldn’t die yet, but I also couldn’t fight off all the thugs that filled the underworld. Emmy had to be forced to stay away from me. Because of her utter pigheadedness, the only way that we could make that happen was to fake my death, convince her that I was gone for good, force her to let me go and move on.

For a long second, Carly scanned my face in a way that I imagined a mother would. I already knew what she was thinking. “Cameron, you won’t make it through this. I’ve seen the way you are with her. You’re not the same anymore. You can’t just go back to the way things were. This whole thing is going to kill you ... both of you,” she said.

“Drop it, Carly.” I closed my eyes. The stupid pills were taking forever to work their magic.

I heard Carly sigh and get up. She took a few steps and stopped. “You’re nuts to leave those two alone together without adult supervision,” she mumbled. I forced a smile. Spider was as fond of Emmy as she was of him. It was a match made in hell. But apart from Carly, there was no one else in this world that I trusted more than Spider to bring my girl home safely. A shiver still went down my spine as I wondered how the chit-chat in the car was going.

Carly was headed out the door. “Do me a favor?” I called out to her.

“Anything.”

“Get my money to Emmy,” I said, and added before she asked, “All of it.”

“That’s a lot of money,” she said exasperatingly.

“Please?”

“You know she won’t take it, Cameron.”

“You can convince anybody to do anything. It’s your specialty.”

“I’m losing my touch,” she said sourly.

Carly exited. Silence grew around me. I knew I ought to be thinking about how I was going to explain to the leaders everything that had happened in that warehouse, explain all the favors we owed, keep our heads off the chopping block. My mind had to go back to being completely focused on the business again.

But all I could see in my head was Emmy’s bruised and tear-soaked face while she knelt by my side, overcome with pain and grief as she begged me to stay; instead, I forced her to watch me let her go ...

She’s better equipped to deal with this than me, I told myself over and over. She’ll forget about me, move on, get married, have a couple kids, and live till she’s a hundred years old. No bullets will ever touch her skin. Emmy will survive me.

The fact that I wouldn’t survive her didn’t matter. I had already lost my kid brother. I wasn’t about to lose her too.

Knowing that Emmy was out there safe, living her life, even if it was without me, was enough ... it had to be.

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