

KARINA HALLE



On Every
Street

AN ARTISTS TRILOGY NOVELLA

Also by Karina Halle

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On Every Street

An Artists Trilogy Prequel Novella

∞Karina Halle∞



\m/ Metal Blonde Books \m/

Published by Metal Blonde Books at Amazon Kindle

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First Amazon Kindle edition published by Metal Blonde Books March 2013

Publisher's Note: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Cover design by Najla Qamber

Metal Blonde Books
P.O. Box 845
Point Roberts, WA
98281 USA

Manufactured in the USA

For more information about the series
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For those gamblers who know the secret to surviving
Is knowing what to throw away
And knowing what to keep

CHAPTER ONE

I'd been watching the man for almost a month now, the exotic man with the peridot-colored eyes. From a distance they'd always sparkled like the gemstones, but now that I was in the same room with him, I could see they had an amber tinge to them, rendering them almost reptilian.

That should have been my first warning, that this was all a horrible idea. It was too risky and I was too emotionally involved. But I felt I didn't have a choice. The man with the yellow-green eyes was just feet away from me, representing the first step toward freedom. Vengeance was a terrible prison.

"Can I help you, miss sunshine?" the balding clerk at the counter asked cutting into my thoughts. I tore my eyes away from the man, who was now sitting with a cup of tea in the corner, and looked at the clerk with an awkward smile. I felt a flush heat my cheeks, knowing I'd been caught staring. What had Gus taught me again? Never let your thoughts drift. Guess at the time I hadn't known I'd be stalking a Latino heartthrob.

"Yes, sorry," I replied dumbly. "Can I get a medium latte? Please?"

He nodded, flashing me a warm smile as I handed over the exact change. I stuffed a dollar into the tip jar, making sure he saw it before he started on my coffee. People in Mississippi were as friendly as they ever were, way friendlier than back in California. It felt like I was visiting the state for the first time, despite having lived here for a few years when I was a child. But I suppose life colors how you see the world, and the Mississippi I knew back then was completely black and white. Now there was a hue, that dangerous citron I could feel on my back.

I took in a deep breath and resisted the urge to turn around. Instead, I pulled up my long blonde hair that was sticking to my sweaty neck and glanced out the door of the coffee shop. My rusted Chevy truck was sitting just out of view. I wondered if I was getting too ahead of myself. I'd been following the man from his house to his, well, work, nearly every day, and

there was a huge chance that he'd recognize me or my truck. I had been careful, remembering everything that Gus had drilled into my head, even remembering what my parents had once taught me, that there was no room for error in a con. But this was unlike any con I'd done in the last few months. This was the big one. This was the one that meant something. This meant having my life back.

I could still feel his eyes though, burning into me, like my back was as flammable as parchment paper. I had to remind myself it didn't mean he *knew*. I was wearing my most ass-supporting jeans and a tissue-thin tank top that showed off my tan. My hair was naturally blonde, but I'd gotten a few layers cut in and champagne highlights added just the other day. My makeup was as natural as I could muster without being boring. I'd prepared for today because I wanted the man to stare at me. I wanted his attention because he sure as hell had mine.

The clerk handed over my coffee, and I took a quick sip before gathering my courage. This would go down a hell of a lot better with whisky in it. I slowly turned around and let my gaze do a sweep of the room, as if I was looking for somewhere to sit. The man was no longer staring at me—perhaps he never was—and was relaxing in the wicker chair, flipping through a magazine. He held his cup of tea in such a way that it exposed his large watch. Even from where I was standing, I knew the thing had probably cost a fortune. When I was younger, my parents taught me how to spot the real ones from the fake ones. They'd also taught me how to steal them.

The man was the epitome of the word *debonair*. The watch, combined with his smooth linen shirt and clean, dark jeans, suggested understated elegance, a man from money. But his pose, the way he held himself, reminded me of a lion on this down time, relishing his relaxation, knowing he still ruled the land. I'd had such thoughts about him before, but now, up close, I could just feel the power vibrating off of him, filling the room.

I wasn't the only one to notice this either. Men in the café shot him curious glances, as if they should know who he was, while the women timidly tucked their hair behind their ears, eyes darting to him and back again. I couldn't blame them. The man wasn't stereotypically handsome

and yet you couldn't stop staring at him. At least I couldn't. And that was going to be a problem.

I spied a couple getting up from the couch nearest to him and took the opportunity. I walked slowly over, and gently, ever so casually, took my seat on the couch. I placed my coffee on the table that sat between us, taking a moment to let my eyes feast on him. He was so close now, just a couple of feet between us. I felt like I was at the zoo, the glass between me and the beast suddenly removed.

He was even more striking from this distance. His eyes moved back and forth as they scanned the page, sparking with intelligence, the color of budding leaves. His mouth was wide, twisted in a smirk, and his nose looked slightly too wide for his face and had obviously been broken a few times. His skin was golden and so smooth that I had to recalculate how old he was. Perhaps he was closer to my age than I had originally thought. Still, he didn't look like any twenty-year-old. He didn't look like anyone I'd ever seen before.

He brushed his shaggy dark hair behind his ears, his palm grazing his cheekbones, and I had the chance to look away. To not get caught gawking at him. To save myself. But I couldn't help it. I was naïve and young and caught in the spark that would create the flames.

He looked up from his magazine and our eyes met. I've never believed in love at first sight. I barely believed in lust at first sight. I didn't believe in anything except righting all the wrongs in my life. But at that moment, this man saw me. The real me underneath the bombshell mask. I felt like he must have seen everything.

And that's who his smile was for. It reached through me and did something to my heart, to my lungs, to my nerves. It pulled at me, tugged somewhere deep inside, like a window shade being drawn open. It was dangerous to love that feeling, but I did.

"Hello," he said, his Mexican accent light and melodic. His teeth were white, his smile captivating, and it took every brain cell to remember why I was there and what I was doing. And that my name was no longer Ellie Watt. It was Eden White. And I had a job to do.

I gave him a pretty smile and knew that damn flush was coming back on my cheeks. I had inexperience written all over my face.

“Hi,” I replied, leaning forward to pick up my coffee, hoping that he’d get a good look at my chest. I didn’t have the biggest breasts, but they looked downright perky in this top, and I was certain that I could poke his eyes out with my nipples. Thank god for air conditioning.

But his eyes never strayed from mine. Either this man had manners or he wasn’t into women. I’d never considered that scenario in the last couple of weeks. Perhaps my attempt to get to know him would backfire. What use was having womanly charms if he preferred the cock variety?

“I’m Javier,” he said, extending his hand with the watch on it, the rich brown leather gleaming under the lights.

Javier. He now had a name. And from the way his eyes were still cutting into mine, how his grin lit up his face like he’d just won the lottery, I knew Javier wasn’t immune to women after all.

I ignored the butterflies in my core and placed my hand in his. His shake was strong and warm with confidence.

“I’m Eden,” I said, trying to feed off his self-assurance. I *was* Eden now. It had taken me a while to get used to my fake name, but now it was slipping on like fine silk. Maybe pretending to be someone else would be easier than I thought.

His thumb rubbed against my knuckle, softly and sweetly, before he let go of my hand. I fought the urge to bite my lip. The young schoolgirl shit probably wouldn’t jibe with him, even though that’s really all I was. I wasn’t in school, but around men I was as green as a young filly. And this man’s touch was igniting something in me that I’d never felt before.

“Nice to meet you, Eden,” he said smoothly. I watched his mouth as he talked, feeling a blanket of warmth coat me as he pronounced my new name. Shit. I was supposed to be seducing him, wasn’t I? Not the other way around.

“So what brings you here?” he asked, leaning forward on his knees, his hands clasped together.

I swallowed hard and raised my cup at him. “Coffee?” My heart began to beat louder, whooshing in my ears.

He smirked. “I can see that. It’s just that I’ve never seen you here before. I come here every day and I think I’d remember someone as beautiful as you.”

Oh, this Javier—he was *good*. It didn't surprise me, considering the way I'd seen him acting at his "job." Or, to put it better, the way his colleagues acted around him. I should have known he'd be a smooth operator with the ladies.

I quickly recalled my story. "I just moved to Ocean Springs and thought I'd check this place out. Seems to be one of the more popular coffee shops."

The corner of his mouth twitched and his eyes narrowed deviously as he appraised what I said. I swear, my heart could have replaced the drummer for Slayer at that moment.

"Interesting," he commented.

Interesting, I think I've seen you in your truck, sitting outside my boss's house all day? Interesting, I think you've used a fake name? Interesting, I think you're lying through your teeth? I was prepared for him to elaborate by saying any of those.

But he tilted his head, a small gold chain necklace nestled in his shirt collar catching my eye, and said with a lowered voice, "Do you believe in fate, Eden?"

Well that caught me off guard. Maybe that was his intention. I frowned and straightened up, unsure how to placate this strange animal.

"Sometimes I do," I managed to say, trying to keep the breeziness in my voice.

"I think it was fate that brought you to me today," he said. The hairs at the back of my neck stood straight up and I knew I couldn't blame the air conditioning on that.

"You do?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

He nodded, cool and confident. He sat back in his chair and drummed his fingers on his leg, watching me so closely, too closely.

"I think you'll look back at this in a few years and you'll know what I know."

"And what's that?" I asked, forgetting everything I'd been planning to do, just so completely and utterly enthralled.

"You'll have to find out for yourself. Better yet, I can get you started. This Friday."

My face must have looked blank because he went on with a wry smile, "I'm going to take you out on a date."

Shit. That was fast. That was easy. And extremely cocky of him.

“How do you know I don’t have a boyfriend?” I asked him, wondering if my singledom and virginhood was stamped all over me.

“Because I don’t believe in accidents,” he said, licking his lips. “But I do believe you’ll say yes.”

I had half a nerve to make my lie worse, to tell him I had a boyfriend and that I didn’t want to go out with him, a total stranger. But that would defeat the whole purpose of the long con, the reason I had sought him out. Besides, those lips and those eyes, that swagger in his lilting voice, was igniting a fire in me where I’d never been burning before.

I was doomed.

“Okay,” I said shyly. He gave me that prize-winning grin again and pulled out a business card from his full wallet, handing it to me.

I turned it over in my hands, feeling the grooved paper.

“Javier Bernal,” I read out loud. “Consultant.”

And that was it. Just his phone number.

“Who do you consult?” I asked, looking up at him.

I could have sworn his face went rigid for a second, but maybe because I was looking for it. Maybe because I knew he wasn’t a consultant. Maybe because I knew who he really was, part of a drug cartel, working as a henchman for one of the most powerful drug lords on the Gulf Coast. Maybe because I knew he had more secrets to hide than I did.

But he just shrugged and said, “People who need it.”

He got out of his chair with all the ease of a panther and tapped the card with a well-manicured finger. “Call me. Soon.”

Then he left the store, tossing his tea in the wastebasket without looking.

It took a good few minutes for me to calm down and get my heartbeat back to an acceptable level. Ever since I left California and came here, I knew what I had set out to do. I had prepared for it as much as I could. I was going to find Travis, the man who scarred me as a child when my parent’s scam went wrong. I was going to get to him by seducing someone close to him, someone who could get me in close. Then I was going to have my revenge, the only thing that had kept me going over the years.

It's just when I chose Javier as my mark, I never thought my mark would choose me. Because that's what Javier had just done. I wanted to win over his heart so I could get what I wanted. But I had a feeling he was about to get to my heart first.

CHAPTER TWO

Four Months Earlier

“So where do you think you'll go next?” Uncle Jim asked me as I shoved my suitcases into the back of my truck. I wished the cab had more space—it was going to be hard adjusting to living out of it again instead of Uncle Jim's house. His place wasn't spacious, but for the last eight months it had been mine.

I shrugged, even though I knew exactly where I was going, and gave him a breezy smile. Uncle Jim was standing at the end of the tiled driveway, still in his house robe, looking at some of the browned lavender that was slowly dying in his rock garden. He'd suffered a heart attack last year—the reason I came all the way back to Palm Valley—and he still wasn't one hundred percent. He certainly didn't look like he could run his date farm all on his own, but he was adamant that he could. And, well, a girl can tell when she's not wanted.

To be honest with you, a large part of me wanted to leave this town behind. Right after high school I took off and headed east, determined to leave my old life in the dust. But then he told me about his heart, and since my parents were still on the run somewhere and good for nothing, it was up to me to take care of him. Uncle Jim had been insistent that he didn't want my help, but I could tell that's why he called me in the first place. He's a proud man and would never directly ask for it.

But everyone overstays their welcome. If he thought he could handle the farm by himself, he was probably right. Or, I was right to let him try. Still, I'd grown comfortable here. No, I didn't like living back in the town I went to high school in, the town that held all of my terrible memories, but Uncle Jim felt like home.

“You’ll be careful, won’t you, little Hellie?” he asked, using my nickname. He was now poking the edge of a cactus with his toe. Like me, he wasn’t very good at goodbyes. “And you’ll call?”

I slammed the door shut and I swore I heard something breaking inside. The rusted old Chevy was officially packed to the gills. This was it.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead as the relentless California sun beat down and turned to face him. “Of course I’ll call you.”

Now my uncle was looking at me, squinting in the sunlight. “I’d feel better if I knew where you were going.”

“Texas,” I answered truthfully.

“And what’s in Texas?”

I pursed my lips, wondering if I should tell him the truth. The truth always seemed like a bad idea.

But he knew anyway. “You’re still going to see that Gus fellow, aren’t you?” His features grew stern and shadowy under the harsh desert light. I knew he wouldn’t approve, but it was time to do things for me.

“He’s a family friend,” I explained.

“He’s a con artist.”

“Well, most of Mom and Dad’s friends are con artists,” I said, wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans. “What, you think con artists hang out with moral people? Besides, he used to be part of the LAPD. He could teach me a thing or two.”

“About giving the middle finger to the law?” he asked, brow raised.

“About life,” I said, throwing my hands up. “Look, I’m practically an orphan now. You’re busy with the farm and I get that. But Mom and Dad are nowhere to be found. Don’t you think I should hang out with people who have some ties to the way things were? I mean, I remember Gus from when I was a kid.”

“Ellie,” he said slowly. He eased himself into a crouch and plucked a yellow flower from the garden, twirling it in his hand. “You don’t need ties to the past. You need to create your own future. Go create your own family. Don’t hold on...”

Oh, but I was doing so much more than holding. I had the past grasped firmly in my hands, ready to squeeze it to death.

Those thoughts must have shown up on my face because he walked toward me holding out the flower. “I know how it is. I really do. I just don’t

want to see you get hurt more than you already have.” His eyes trailed down to my leg and back. “I just want you to be a better person than the person you’re trying to become. That’s all.”

“That’s all?” I said with a laugh. Still, I took the flower from his hand and tucked it into my ponytail holder. “How does it look?”

He smiled sadly. “Beautiful. You look beautiful, Ellie. You always have. You’re going to break hearts out there.”

I smiled back, happy that his tone was lighter. “As long as they don’t break mine, I’m good.”

I quickly embraced him before I got all weepy and hopped into the truck. I revved the engine for fun, then gave Uncle Jim a wave. A few of the workers came out of the rows of date palms and waved as well. I’d been working alongside them on the farm, harvesting dates and helping out, and I was going to miss them all. But I was done with this life here, the safe and simple one. It was time for me to head out on the open road and find myself.

I knew exactly where to start looking too. Biloxi. That’s where I was going to find the new Ellie Watt and bury the old one.

If revenge was a dish best served cold, then I needed to stick mine in the freezer for a while. The fact is, I was totally out of my element for what I needed to do, and with every mile that my truck and I covered, my emotions were burning along with the tires. This was exactly why I needed Gus, why I had to stop in Texas before hitting up Mississippi.

I just hoped Gus would help me and give me what I wanted—what I *needed*. I’d been in email contact with him over the last few months, slowly trying to put my plan into action. He’d been kind and friendly, at least with the written word, and seemed happy to connect with someone from the Watt clan. The last time I saw him, I must have been six years old or something, back when my parents were smart con artists and I was their little instrument. I never once mentioned becoming one or wanting help with it—that was something he was about to find out.

My plan seemed simple enough at times, and at others, it was completely over my head. Terrifying. Sometimes I wondered where I got the nerve to even attempt this, but then again, I figured I had nothing to lose. I was twenty-years-old and waiting to live my life. Until I got my revenge, until justice was served for what was done to me, I'd have to keep waiting. I couldn't get past all the wrongs in my life; I couldn't accept them. To accept it, to live with it peacefully, that was like saying it was all okay. And what was done to me...that could *never* be okay.

Working for Uncle Jim and staying at his house in Palm Valley free of charge meant that I'd saved up enough money to get me to Mississippi—after that, I didn't really care what happened to me. I was also counting on Gus letting me stay with him while he showed me the ropes. For the next few nights while I blasted through Arizona and New Mexico, I stayed in cheap motels and ate out of gas stations. I'd calmed down a bit, getting used to being by myself again, a vagabond, a gypsy. I had time to think, to figure out what I needed to do and how I was going to do it. I tried to remember some of the stuff my parents had taught me when I was growing up, everything *before* the accident.

But even with all that time to let my thoughts fly and the flat, khaki-colored scenery of Texas zooming past my open window, I was reduced to a thick syrup of nerves when I saw the looming skyline of Dallas approaching. Gus lived just outside the sprawling mess of a city. He was close, which meant revenge was closer. I barely made my way through the crazy drivers and congestion before my heart tried to leap out of my throat. If Gus said no, what would I do? There was no school for grifters. I was inexperienced and raw and I wouldn't stand a chance in the big bad world.

Just after noon, I pulled the Chevy down a lonely street in cattle country, the smog-covered buildings of Dallas in the distance. There was only one house down this way, a dark brown one-level with a wrap-around porch. A small fishing boat was parked on the groomed lawn, a red pick-up truck in the driveway. Behind the house I could see a few rustic barns, and beyond that, the rust and white dots of Hereford cattle. A sea of waving grass did a 360 around me.

I took in a deep breath, made sure the makeup on my face was still acceptable, and got out of the car. It was hot as fuck and stunk like manure, yet somehow it was comforting and homey. I took that as a good sign.

Gus was quick to answer his door. I supposed he'd been waiting for me.

"Holy horseshit," Gus said as he leaned against the door, a wide grin breaking his face in two. "You certainly don't look like the wee Ellie Watt that I remember."

The funny thing was, even though I'd been quite young the last time I saw him, he looked completely familiar. He had a jovial face punctuated by a bulbous nose, small dark eyes, and hairy as hell eyebrows. His hair was completely grey, on the long side and pushed back off his forehead. He had one hell of a mustache that hid his upper lip, something he always had. He looked shorter now that I wasn't a kid, but he was still a good height with a fair amount of paunch on his stomach. Whatever work he had done for the LAPD had apparently been replaced with beer and donuts.

I held out my hand for him, feeling a bit shy. I wasn't used to strangers, even though he was anything but.

He took it, giving me a quick and sweaty shake, before pulling me into him and slapping me once on the back.

"Good to see you, kid," he said, holding me at arm's length and looking me up and down. "You've got your mama's eyes, that's for sure."

His voice was low and rough, like he ate cigarettes for breakfast. I had a sudden flash of being a girl and running on the beach in California, he and my parents relaxing on the sand and laughing about something, sharing a bottle of wine. Had that really happened? Did I really possess a normal childhood at some point, or were all my memories a lie?

"Well, come on in, sweetie, I've been expecting you." He held the door open and I gingerly walked in, brushing my memories aside. The place was well-kept but had all the earmarks of a bachelor pad. There were muddy tracks through the linoleum-tiled kitchen, the art work on the walls consisted of landscape portraits that were probably painted in the 1970s, and the air smelled stale, despite high-powered fans in every room desperately trying to combat the heat.

We ended the tour on the back porch where a shiny barbeque and a few patio chairs stood among beer cans and ashtrays. Cattle called in the distance, the fields of tan spreading out for miles over gently rolling hills.

"How about we get you settled and I'll start up some steaks for lunch," he said, gesturing to the grill. "We'll need to get our bellies full

before we start getting to the bottom of this.”

I raised my brow, caught off-guard. “Bottom of this?”

“Sweetie,” he said with a grin, “I know there’s a good reason why you contacted me and came here. I’ve been waiting some time now to find out what it is.”

Ah shit. I guess I wasn’t very good at being subtle. Here I was, trying to learn to be a con artist and I was already failing before I’d started.

He slapped my shoulder. “Hey, I wouldn’t have been a very good cop if I wasn’t suspicious of everyone. You learn to spot the signs. You go get your stuff and make yourself at home. I mean it. I’m not going to kick you out, no matter what you’re going to tell me. If you’re honest with me, I’ll be honest with you. Hell, I’m being honest right now. I don’t get a lot of company—you’re doing me a favor, too.”

And with that assurance, I headed out to the truck and started unpacking my stuff into his small spare bedroom, settling down into my next transitional life.

When I felt like I’d put just the tips of my roots into the room, it was time for lunch. He piled my paper plate with a thick, juicy ribeye and baked beans, food I’d missed out on over the last few days on the road.

“Don’t mind the paper plates,” he said, settling back into his chair and resting his feet on the railing. “Some days I don’t have time to do dishes, so I find this to be a hell of a lot easier.”

“I’ll have to remember that,” I told him, and cracked open a beer from the six-pack he’d just put on the table.

We munched and drank in silence, enjoying the stiff breeze that occasionally came through, lifting my hair from my sticky shoulders. When I couldn’t handle working through any more gristle and my belly was full, I tossed the plate away and we got to talking.

“So, Ellie,” he began, belching unapologetically. “What’s your story? Why are you here?”

What was my story? How did I begin?

“Well, you know about what happened to my parents,” I started. “How they took to the road again.”

“Yes. I sure do. Though I wouldn’t have if you hadn’t emailed me. I haven’t talked to your parents since...well...”

His voice trailed off and I knew what he was thinking. He was thinking about the accident. I think my parents lost a lot of friends around that time. Hell, they almost lost a daughter.

I went on, feeling it was too soon to dive into it. “So after high school was over and I left Palm Valley, I found out my uncle had a heart attack and I went back to help him on the date farm.”

“Where were you before?”

“Colorado,” I said.

“Doing what?”

I shrugged. What the hell had I been doing? After high school was over, I just drifted around from state to state, working odd jobs. I didn’t have a real life or a real purpose. Nothing seemed tangible until I realized what I had to do.

“I was just trying to survive.”

He cocked his head and gave me a curious look. “And what are you doing now?”

I pursed my lips in thought. “I’m going to try and make the best of it. I want to do more than survive. I want to live.”

“And that’s why you’re here. You think I can help you live, is that right? And what is living to you? What life do you want?”

Though Gus’s voice had a hard edge to it that made me a bit nervous, I could tell he meant well. I could also tell that this might end up being harder than I thought. He was already sounding fatherly, and I had that problem with Uncle Jim. I didn’t want someone to look out for me, I just wanted them to help me.

“I want to let go of my past. I have things I need to get over.”

“Like what?” he asked, but from the way his tone softened, I could tell he knew.

I looked at the cows in the distance, under the wide Texas sky that made everything feel so free. “I want to hurt the man who hurt me. I want to destroy him for destroying me. And I won’t be happy, I won’t be free, until I do so.”

A thick silence came over us like a cloud moving in front of the sun. I’d never admitted any of that aloud before, it had always stayed locked up in my head. As scary as it felt waiting for his answer, for his judgement, it felt *good*.

Gus studied me for a few moments with those dark eyes of his. “I see. I figured as much, Ellie. What happened to you was terrible and you never had any kind of support to get you out of it.”

That was an understatement. What had happened was something out of a movie, except it wasn’t a movie. This was real life. I was only ten years old when I was robbed of my youth, my innocence, my confidence, my love. My parents had used me in a con to get money from a dangerous man. When the man found me trying to rob him, he retaliated by throwing acid on my leg. He scarred my leg for life, scarred me for life. He took away all the good in my past and robbed me of a future. I never became the person I was meant to be. Instead, I had to become someone else. And I didn’t know who she was yet.

I kept my eyes focused on the cows, trying to keep the tears from spilling. “What did you know about what happened?”

He sighed and ran his hand through his silver hair. “I know only what your father told me. That they made you rob Travis Raines, a man that has more enemies and allies than anyone I know. That your father knew it was a bad idea. That you got caught, because you were only a fucking child. That you nearly lost your leg. That child services was sniffing around. That your parents were going to quit being con artists. That they wanted to give you a better life.”

I couldn’t help but let out an ugly laugh. “Yeah, a life that lasted about a year. I was only in Palm Valley for *one year* before they pulled another scam and left me there.”

I could feel him watching me, feel his sympathy. I hated it.

“Your parents,” he began, then looked down at his beer. He gave his head a quick shake. “One of my biggest regrets was walking away from them, you know that? I just didn’t want to get involved. I should have supported them. When I found out they were moving you to California, I should have been there for you, and for them. But I couldn’t. I regret that, you know?”

“I don’t blame you,” I admitted. The sun was baking my jeans, but to remove them and put on shorts or a skirt would reveal the criss-cross of ugly scars on my leg, something I always kept hidden. “They obviously would have brought you down with them somehow.”

“But I feel guilty,” he said roughly, and I looked at him in surprise. His eyes were shadowed from his furrowed brow. “Because maybe I could have talked some sense into them. Maybe I could have prevented them from leaving you.”

As damned selfish as it sounded, it felt nice to have this older man feel so much on my behalf. After my parents nearly got caught with their scam and had to leave Palm Valley, I was put into Uncle Jim’s care. But as much as I loved my uncle, his care had been reluctant. I was more of a burden to him than anything else—at least I sometimes felt that way.

“That’s why I’m going to help you get what you want,” Gus said. “Even though what you want won’t make you happy when you get it.”

I swallowed hard in disbelief. “I think you’re wrong.”

“I’m right, Ellie. You want revenge. You want vindication. And I hope you get those things. But the relief will be fleeting. Because you can never right the external wrongs until you fix what’s wrong inside you.”

“Seeing Travis Raines with a face full of acid will give me my life back,” I sneered, feeling an inky hatred swarm through my blood, saturating me. “To watch him suffer will fix everything.”

“Is that what you want from me?” he asked point blank. “Do you want to burn him as he burned you? Perhaps even worse? Do you want to kill him?”

The casual way that Gus said those last words gave me a start. A strange feeling spread inside my chest. “No, I don’t want to kill him.”

I’d been dreaming about revenge since I was ten years old. I never once imagined killing the man—I’d never thought of killing anyone. Death wasn’t revenge; it was the easy way out. I wanted to make things as hard as possible.

Still, it made me second guess going to Gus for help. I’d known he was with the LAPD at some point in his life, maybe when I was very young. I knew that at the time of the accident, he had gotten fired or quit and had taken to helping people like my parents out, with what I didn’t know. I’d been under the impression he had turned into a con artist, just like my parents, only with a few more tricks and connections because he had been on the “inside.” But maybe I had totally underestimated him here. Was killing people just something he did?

He was watching me carefully and nodded. “Take it easy, Ellie. I’m not saying you need to kill him. Or that you should. Or that you should do any of this. I just want to know what you want. Specifically. So I can help you get it.”

I took in a deep breath and steadied myself. The conversation had my heart racing. “I just want what I said. I want an eye for an eye. And I need you to show me how. How to get close. And how to disappear.”

“How to be a con,” he mused, taking a sip of his beer. “Yes, I think I can do that.”

CHAPTER THREE

I spent the next two weeks with Gus, barely leaving his side. In the mornings we’d let the cows out, in the evenings we’d let them back in. I shoveled hay, I shoveled shit. I cleaned up his house, I made dinner. I helped whenever I could, because whenever he could, he was helping me. He was teaching me to become a con artist like my parents, but hopefully better.

We went through all the steps. In order to get close to Travis, I needed to infiltrate his crew. Because I didn’t know anyone in the whole drug cartel line of work, I was going to have to make do with what I had. Which basically was the fact that I was a vagina with legs. The easiest way for me to get close to anyone on Travis’s side of things was to stake him out, find a man who was close to him, someone who could succumb to my charms, and go after him.

The only problem with that meant I’d have to seduce someone, and I’d never seduced a soul in my life. Luckily Gus and I never talked about this; I would have died from mortification. But I was a virgin, and aside from some weirdo boy I knew back in high school, I hadn’t really been kissed before. It’s kind of hard thinking about being naked with someone when you’re terrified to let them see your damn leg. And yet, somehow I

was going to have to get to know some man in some way if I was going to get what I wanted.

Of course, in order to do all that, I had to create a new identity. Well, actually Gus created it for me. He taught me that I could choose any name as long as the initials corresponded with my own. I chose Eden White. With my tan and long blonde hair, I was hoping a sexy name (aka triple x video store name) would give me that extra edge. He then went about making me a new driver's license, social security card, even a fake passport. Everything had to be absolutely perfect in order for any of this to work because Travis and his men were the type to sniff out your lie before they caught a whiff of your perfume.

"Your con is a long con, one that will take a lot of time," Gus said to me while we washed my truck one sweltering Sunday. "Long cons are the most dangerous. The longer the con, the more likely you'll screw up."

"Oh great," I said, wringing the cloth into the bucket.

"Sweetie, no one said this would be easy. Not to mention you're conning for all the wrong reasons."

I threw the rag on the hood and put my hands on my hips. "The wrong reasons?"

He peered at me from above his sunglasses. "You're conning over emotion, over a feeling. Con for money, it's tangible. When you con for revenge, you might not know when you've won."

"Oh I'll know," I told him, and went back to wiping.

He scratched thoughtfully at his mustache. "For your sake, I hope you will."

By the time I was ready to leave Gus and put my plan into action, he'd taught me everything he could about conning. Thankfully, because my parents had brought me up to be a scammer, I was already pretty adept at lying. I knew all the basics of most cons...I'd just been out of practice for so long. When I was eight years old, it was like a second nature to steal from collection plates at church or lie to rich folk to get money. I was going to have to find that deception and manipulation that had once come so easy to me. I supposed my days of innocence weren't so innocent after all.

"Now you remember what I taught you," Gus said to me as I sat in the truck, idling outside of his house. He leaned on the open window, arms folded, deep in thought.

“I won’t forget,” I promised.

He seemed to ignore me, his eyes focused on the dirty dashboard. “Once you drive out of here, you won’t be Ellie Watt. You’ll be Eden White. You’ll scam for money, steal for survival. You’ll be giving the world a proverbial fuck you. You’ll be a con artist, just like your parents and just like their parents before them.”

“So I guess there’s no turning back, huh?” I joked, but his eyes sliced into me.

“You can always turn back, Ellie. No matter how far you go, no matter what you’ve done. You can always turn back. You *can* give up your ghost.”

I nodded, beads of uncomfortable sweat forming on my forehead.

“But if you do,” he went on, “make sure you’re doing it for the right reasons. You’re the only person who should cause your regrets.”

I had no idea what that meant so I merely smiled and nodded, eager to get going, to start my new life.

He didn’t budge, his head still in the truck, eyes locked on my face. “The minute you’re in trouble, the minute you think you might even be in trouble, you call me. You email me. You come here. Revenge is sweet, but it’s a sweet poison. Stay smart, never let your thoughts drift, and don’t involve your heart, no matter the cost. You got that?”

“I got that,” I said hoarsely.

“That’s my girl,” he said, giving a satisfactory slap on the roof of the truck.

And so for the second time that month, I had to drive away from a rare breed—someone who cared and looked out for me. Let me tell you, it doesn’t get any easier. Hot tears coated my cheeks through most of Texas. I cried tears of fear and tears of loss. I cried just to cry. I cried my last tears as Ellie Watt.

Unfortunately, there was a huge learning curve when it came to being Eden White. It wasn’t just the name change, with a new birth date to remember

and a whole new history. It was the conning part. I was planning to get a legitimate job when I got to Mississippi, maybe in a restaurant or something, especially since I didn't want to draw any suspicion to myself. But until then, I was going to be a grifter. I figured if I had to be lying to people anyway about who I was, why not take it further? Besides, it was something I could stop doing at any time. I could quit and go legit with the snap of my fingers.

Plus, I was a natural. I was born to lie, born to scam. Okay, well maybe I used to be a natural—like I said, huge learning curve here. I spent a good two months running cons through Louisiana and Arkansas, doing exactly what Gus had taught me. Well, almost. I made more than a few mistakes—mistakes I only got out of by riding on my youth and rapidly deteriorating innocence.

The one time I actually got busted it was over trying to do the right thing. I had been at a diner, scoping the scene for someone to scam. I'd been going after disheartened men: road weary truckers or local boys who were on a bender. My smile was wide, my hands were quick. It was easy to get a free meal from them and even easier to take their wallets. Don't get me wrong, I wasn't that heartless. I usually took their wallets, excused myself to the ladies room, helped myself to some cash, and returned it with them being none the wiser. I knew what a pain in the ass it was to have your wallet stolen—cash and credit cards were easier to replace than business cards, driver's licenses, and keepsakes. I just couldn't see myself turning into one of those con artists that didn't have a heart or soul.

Hence why I had to do the right thing when the opportunity came up. Maybe I was already trying to bend karma in my favor. While I was casing a diner just outside of Little Rock, I noticed one of the waitresses giving me a sketchy look. I certainly didn't look suspicious considering my hair was perfectly curled, my jeans neat, and my v-neck shirt clean, but she was giving me the stinkeye like I was already on *America's Most Wanted*. I decided to play it safe, even though there was an overweight and drunk dude in the corner with the world's messiest beard, trying to eat a slab of steak that might as well have been mooing. He would have been a perfect target, but I wasn't about to chance it.

However, after I had paid for my food and got up to go, ready to hit up another joint that wasn't so paranoid, I noticed a wallet had been left

behind on the table next to me. An elderly woman had been sitting there by herself and I could see her walking slowly across the parking lot outside. I snatched the wallet up from the table and ran outside to stop her. I was just touching her shirt, my hand brushing the back of her bucket purse, when I heard the words, “Stop, thief!” behind me.

I froze as the elderly woman spun around, suddenly spry. She stared at me and the wallet in my hand as I was holding it out for her, coincidentally near her open purse.

I smiled quickly as her eyes widened. “You left this behind.”

Suddenly the waitress from the restaurant was beside me. “You stole it, I’ve been watching you.”

I turned and glared at her. “Well you couldn’t have been watching me very closely or you would have seen me pick up the wallet from the table and try to return it to her.”

The waitress narrowed her eyes, already making up her ignorant mind about me. Behind her I could see one of the cooks coming out of the restaurant, a cell phone in hand. All the diner patrons were at the smudgy windows, peering out at the scene like it was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to them.

“Do you want me to call the police?” the cook called out, gesturing to his phone.

I rolled my eyes, feeling the anger rushing through me. “Why would you call the cops when I’m just returning this woman’s wallet!” I yelled at him.

The waitress’s eyes somehow narrowed even more, drowning in hate and clumpy mascara. “I said I was watching you. I know your type.”

I shook my head in ironic disgust and tried again to give the wallet back to the lady. The old woman snatched it out of my hand and shoved it in her purse, and now I had two people trying to kill me with their glare.

“Look, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, taking a step away from them. My truck was only a yard away. “I ate my meal, I paid for it, and I saw the woman had left her wallet behind. I came outside to return it. You can go and watch the video playback if you don’t believe me.”

They obviously didn’t believe me because the waitress yelled over her shoulder, “Call the cops, Bill.”

And I took that as my cue to run. I turned on my heel and sprinted to my car, hearing people call out behind me. After my key nearly broke off in the lock after a few panic-inducing seconds, I jumped in and started my engine. The cook was now running toward me, on the phone, as if he could do something to stop me.

The fact was, they would go back and review the footage and find out I did nothing wrong. But I wasn't about to stick around and try and clear my name. Gus had told me to stay as far away from the cops as possible, no matter what the situation, and I had to believe him on that one.

I roared out of the parking lot, almost clipping the cook on the hip, and sped off down the road. I was going to have to change my license plate now at the next stop, the first time I'd be dipping into the stack of fake ones that Gus had given me. California was seriously over, another tie to the person I was snapped in half.

After the Arkansas incident, I laid low for a while before I built up enough nerve to try grifting again. I decided to forgo the usual money-snatching and tried pigeon drops on the rare post-Katrina tourists in New Orleans and change-counting scams on convenience store clerks in Baton Rouge. I was slowly but surely getting better at it, never taking too many risks and getting out early while the getting was good. Kenny Roger's "The Gambler" played over and over in my head.

Finally, I realized that it was no longer about becoming a better con but about avoiding what I set out to do. The long con. The one that would bring me close to Travis, that would bring me my peace. I was getting cold feet.

I got over it by trying to meticulously plan what I was going to do to Travis. I had a small bottle of chemical solution in my glove compartment, ready to go at a moment's notice whenever I found that little window of opportunity.

I realized how crazy I must have sounded, planning to throw acid in the man's face. This was America, not the Middle East. There were saner, cleaner ways of getting one's revenge. I could figure out a way to out him to the police and get him arrested (something I was sure that Gus could help with). Maybe I could tip them off to a rival drug cartel. I could blackmail him, ruin his life, run him broke and to the ground. Maybe with enough planning, I could do all of that.

But I just wanted to disfigure him the way he disfigured me. I wanted him to face a lifetime of feeling different, of feeling unpure, disgusting, and unlovable. I wanted him to know what it was like to have people stare at you, to have them wonder what had happened. I wanted him to be as lonely as I was. I wanted him to wear his ugliness on the outside, the way he had forced me to. As I told Gus, I wanted an eye for eye, his scars for mine.

And with all of that in mind, I eventually bit the bullet and made my way to Gulfport, the place where my parents and I had lived for a few years while they were trying to go legit. I drove past the casino where my dad had worked, the weed-strewn park where I used to play, the downtrodden neighborhood that had become my home. I pushed back the memories like a slideshow of someone else's life and moved on through.

Eventually I found my way to the northern suburbs of Biloxi where the mansions and manicured yards mocked the refinery smoke and broken pieces that Hurricane Katrina had left behind. I spied Travis's sprawling house, looking less sinister than the one I saw all those years ago. Gus had done a little digging for me and I was surprised when I found out that Travis still lived in the same place, the very one I had broken into, the one that held the basement where he caught me. I guess that said a lot about him—he was so cocky and sure of himself to hang onto a house where a child's life was ruined that he'd never see me coming.

It was lucky that his house was right next to a gated community with lots of traffic coming in and out. I was able to park on the side of the road, a few palms blocking his view of my truck, and watch him through binoculars, completely unobserved.

For the first few days, I didn't see much going on. Some people coming in and out of the house who looked like gardeners or housekeepers. It wasn't until I slipped on a dark wig and a sun hat and went for a walk down the road, big sunglasses blocking my eyes, that I finally saw Travis.

He was leaving the house, striding confidently toward his Cayenne parked in the driveway. My memories had been wrong, distorting the truth until I remembered an emotion, not the reality. I had thought he was a short, gruesome monster with missing teeth and beady eyes, but the man I was watching, though I knew he was Travis, did not look like that at all. He looked like a regular, albeit handsome, rich man. He had shiny salt and

pepper hair with a sharp widow's peak, a thin face with discerning eyes, and a long and extremely lean build. A slight mustache made him remind me of actor David Niven—if David Niven had ever played a complete psychopath.

At first I froze to the spot, paralyzed with hatred and fear. If he had cared enough to glance in my direction toward the end of the driveway, I would have been seen. I was in disguise and there was no way he'd recognize me even without it, but I had to be as unmemorable as possible. Luckily he got into his car, while I gathered up my wits and kept walking, making myself promise to never be caught so emotionally compromised again. Just seeing him in the flesh, knowing he was so real, so alive, and doing so damn well for himself, made me feel like my guts were bleeding out on to the ground. If one glance was already unraveling me, how was I going to survive the long con?

After I saw him, I went back to the tiny apartment I had rented in Biloxi and drank myself into a coma, questioning if I was really cut out for this. But the answer, which I found somewhere in the fifth can of Miller Lite, was yes, I was. I'd come too far to give up. I had seen my mark today. And I had to get started on my other one.

The next day, I resumed my amateur stakeout, parking farther down the road and hiding out in the wild tangle of bushes that ran between the gated community and his house. I saw a few men pulling up to the house in a dark SUV. There were three of them, all obviously bad news. None of them seemed like someone I could even imagine seducing, but I knew that it didn't matter in the long run. I thought about turning away and giving up my ghost, but I couldn't do that either.

Finally, a few days later, I spotted the man with the haunting eyes. The man in the sharp linen suit, the mix of casual elegance. I saw him visit day in and day out, and when I saw him and Travis together, I knew he was someone with potential. Travis seemed both enamored and frightened of him. That's all I needed to know.

So I started following that man, who drove off in his vintage Pontiac GTO, a car that only added to his burgeoning sex appeal. I followed him to his beautiful white house on the beach of Ocean Springs. I sat outside his house at night, wondering when I'd lost my mind. I sat outside his favorite coffee shop, wondering when I'd gather up the nerve.

And then one day, I did find the nerve. On that day, I met Javier.

CHAPTER FOUR

It took a good forty-eight hours of staring at Javier's cream-colored business card before I decided to call him. In that forty-eight hours, I'd managed to throw up several times from stress, found a job down the street as a bartender (hey, Eden White is of legal age), and watched several porn movies on my computer. Yeah, I know, porn's not exactly the best teacher of sexual skills, but I was going to have to get comfortable with the idea of sex and seduction somehow.

Actually, in a weird way the porn helped with my mindset. The actresses were fake to the teeth and faking everything. That was their job and it wasn't any different from my job. I had a fake name and a fake life, and I was probably going to have to spread my legs for someone to get what I wanted. They wanted money and I wanted revenge, but our reasons didn't matter, only what we had to do to get it.

Only I wasn't going to be seducing just anyone. It was going to be Javier Bernal, a consultant for things that I could only imagine. Part of me was disgusted that I was trying to win over a man who might be hired to pour acid down other girls' legs, a man who could make the cons I pulled look like child's play. The other part of me was intrigued, excited and awash with newfound lust. When I watched a girl with fake tits getting done against the wall by some Spanish lothario, I touched myself, imagining I was doing the same with Javier. I'd only met the guy once and already he was getting under my skin, and in more ways than one.

I was just about to start my first shift at the bar, named Hogan's Heroes for some strange reason, when I decided I was already nervous enough for that, so why not add to it. With twitching fingers I entered in his phone number and brought my cell to my ear.

It barely rang before it was snatched up.

"Hello." His smooth voice came over the line.

I nearly choked on my nerves. “Hello, is this Javier?”

There was a pause. My heart thudded once.

“Yes. Is this Eden White?”

I couldn’t help but smile. It felt traitorous. “You recognized my voice.”

“I could never forget your voice. You sound like an angel who’s gotten her wings dirty.”

I bit my lip, almost laughing at what he said. How forward he was. How *right* he was.

He went on. “I’m glad you called. I was afraid you weren’t going to. I thought maybe I’d scared you away. I don’t normally pick up women at coffee shops.”

“You’re not scary,” I found myself saying, and the odd thing was, he suddenly wasn’t. I was the scary one here. I was the one with the plan.

“I’m glad you feel that way. I must admit, I felt like a bit of a jackass just giving you my business card and asking you to call me. A real man would have pursued you.”

“I have no doubt you’re a real man,” I remarked coyly, dancing from foot to foot. Who was this person suddenly flirting with this stranger?

“And I have no doubt I won’t stop pursuing you after this. So, Friday night. That’s tomorrow. Why don’t we bump it up a day and I’ll see you tonight?”

I rubbed at my forehead. “Well, I work tonight. It’s actually my first shift.”

“You’re too pretty to work.”

“Yeah well, pretty doesn’t pay the bills.”

“I bet it could. And so where is this new job of yours?”

I sat down on the worn couch that came with the apartment. The whole thing had come furnished, and everything that was mine was still in my suitcases, afraid to become permanent.

“It’s at Hogan’s Heroes,” I said with a hint of embarrassment. “It’s just some bar downtown.”

“Ocean Springs?”

“Biloxi.”

“What were you doing in Ocean Springs the other day?” he asked. He sounded curious, not suspicious, but it didn’t stop me from nervously

sliding my feet on the carpet.

“Checking out the area, that’s all.”

“Checking out the men?”

“That was lucky,” I said breezily.

“Very lucky. For both of us. When do you get off your shift?”

“I don’t know, I think it’s just from eight till close. But I don’t work tomorrow, so you know, I’d love to see you.” I realized how desperate I sounded so I added, “You know, if you still want to go out.” Man, I was so bad at this.

Another pause. He made an agreeable little sound.

“I do. And I will see you tomorrow. I’ve got your number now and you can bet I’ll be persistent. So good luck on your first day, Eden.”

“Thank you,” I said breathlessly, then hung up. My heart was racing and my blood was on fire. Adrenaline made everything feel alive. I was almost...giddy. But whether it was because I was one step closer to my goal or because I was talking to Javier himself, I didn’t know. All I did know was that I went into my bedroom and started unpacking my suitcase, hanging things in my new closets for the first time.

I’d worked as a waitress for a few months in Colorado once, at this small mom and pop-style Italian restaurant. I actually did do some bartending for them on the weekends, which meant I knew how to make some drinks, even though I was underage. Of course, my resume now said I had worked at a whole slew of places that didn’t exist, with Gus acting as a fake reference for when the time came. But Eden White got lucky with Hogan’s Heroes. It seemed all I needed to work there was breasts, ass, and sass.

It was a bit intimidating at first. The other bartenders were wearing mini-skirts and stilettos, both things I could only dream of wearing because of my scarring and nerve damage in that leg, and they seemed to know everything. They poured their drinks fast and neat, knew the names of almost every customer, and handled the men’s ogling with ease.

Me, well I messed up a lot of the first drinks I got and did a silent prayer of thanks every time someone ordered something as easy as a beer or a glass of wine. My feet, clad in wedge boots, were sore after two hours and I kept blushing and stammering awkwardly whenever some rowdy man tried to hit on me. Yeah, I had been hit on a lot before, but there was a reason I avoided clubs and bars.

Thankfully, as the hours ticked past and last call was approaching, I sort of got the hang of things. The good thing about having the men lusting after you like a bunch of drunk idiots was that they never noticed if you messed up and put Smirnoff in their top shelf gin martini or skipped the Triple Sec in their margarita. They just wanted to get drunk and then they wanted you.

“Hey, sugar tits,” I heard someone slur from behind me while I was putting cash in the register.

I rolled my eyes and took in a deep breath. I turned around to see some slobbering, ruddy-faced douche in typical collegiate gear: a burgundy and white striped polo shirt, light jeans. His hair was blonde and spikey. His eyes were glazed, complimenting his jerk face.

He was leaning over the bar, waving his hand like he was trying to grab at me. It made me uncomfortable and I backed up till my back hit the register.

“Can I help you?” I asked, deciding to ignore the sugar tits comment. He had a few buddies beside him who were chugging back beers and laughing like morons. At the other end of the bar Julie and Deanne were busy helping customers. I eyed the clock on the far wall. Last call wouldn’t come soon enough.

“Yeah I want another drink and your number.”

“You’re not getting both,” I said quickly, remembering what the manager, Steve, had told me about cutting off people who were too drunk. Hogan’s Heroes attracted the rowdies from Thursday thru Sunday, but it was still a respectable joint where lots of regulars came to relax after work. I was fully in my right to refuse him and was expected to do so if people got out of hand.

The guy’s face grew redder. “What? You can’t refuse me a drink!”

Now his buddies had stopped laughing and were looking at me with a dumb expression, which wasn’t too far from their usual one.

I glanced down the bar again but Julie and Deanne were still busy. I was going to have to handle this on my own.

“I didn’t say I was refusing you a drink. I’m refusing you my number.” I tried to hide the shaking in my voice. It was ridiculous how out of my element I felt. Conning, sure, sometimes I had nerves of steel. But bartending? Dealing with drunk dickheads? I was shaking like a leaf.

“Listen, bitch,” the guy said harshly, leaning even more now, his hand no longer reaching for me but for the bottles of alcohol underneath the bar. “Just because you’re new here doesn’t mean you’re too good for me. I’ve been coming here for years.”

I swallowed hard and straightened up. “And I’ve been here for a few hours. But guess what, now you’re not getting a drink, either. You’re cut off. Funny how that goes.”

“Aw, what?!” one of his douche-y friends said, spilling beer onto the counter. “Way to go, Tom! You’ve pissed off our bartender.”

Tom grabbed a bottle of vodka in his hands and brought it up from out of the bar. I reacted, reaching forward for it but he snatched it away, shoving me back with one hand. He poured the drink in his empty glass and slammed it back.

“Hey, you fuck!” I yelled, forgetting any pretenses. “That’s stealing!”

He wiped his disgusting mouth and reached into his pocket. He took out a wad of twenties and threw them over the bar and onto the ground.

“It’s not stealing, I’m just helping myself because the service here sucks!” he yelled back, pouring himself another glass.

“I’m reporting you!” I said, finally snatching the vodka away from him.

“Oh yeah, good luck with that,” he said, laughing. “No one’s going to back you up.” His friends started laughing with him, slapping him on the back like he’d just said the most clever thing in the world.

Tom slammed the vodka, then slid it down the counter, away from me. “Thanks for the drink, sugar tits.”

Oh, I was mad. I was so mad. And what made it worse was that Tom was still standing there across from me, watching me with morbid lust, like I was his next meal.

“Excuse me,” I heard a familiar voice say. A voice that made my insides fizz like happy champagne, bursting away the anger. Maybe the wrong voice to make me feel that way, but there was no denying it.

That someone tapped on Tom’s shoulder and the giant slowly turned around. There was Javier, just behind him. Compared to the frat boys, Javier wasn’t very tall, maybe 5’10” while the rest of them were over six feet. They looked like ogres, blundering beasts, while he remained cool and collected, lithe like a lizard. He shot me a quick look with those sharp eyes of his and gave me a barely perceptible nod, before fastening his gaze on Tom.

“Excuse yourself,” Tom said to him, obviously immune to his golden eyes. What Javier was doing here, I had no idea. The last thing I wanted was for him—for my mark above all things—to catch me doing my legitimate job, fumbling fruitlessly, and looking like I’d been covered in smoke and booze all evening. But that didn’t matter because here he was, and the look he was giving Tom, the look the dumb idiot wasn’t picking up on, was one of the deadliest things I’d ever seen.

Javier smiled politely, no teeth, and gently pressed his palms together. “There seemed to be a bit of a problem over here.”

Tom snorted. “There’ll be a problem if you don’t get out of my face.”

Javier’s smile tightened. I watched him, utterly fascinated.

“I’m afraid I can’t get out of your face. I’m drawn to fucking assholes like yourself like moths to a flame.”

My eyes widened. One of Tom’s friends let out a low whistle, as if this was a regular occurrence, their nightly entertainment.

“You’re nothing but a piece of shit immigrant,” Tom said, his veins pulsing on his reddened forehead. “Now fuck off.”

I expected Javier to explode at that ethnic slur, but he did nothing. It was like he didn’t even hear it.

He spoke, calmly and smoothly. “I just wanted you to know that I’m here to back this woman up since you seemed so adamant that it couldn’t be done. I’d happily help her get you banned from this place. Didn’t your mother ever teach you some manners? Or was she too busy screwing your dog?”

“Fuck you,” Tom said, shoving Javier backward. Javier barely moved, just dusted off the front of his white shirt like he had dandruff.

“This is an expensive shirt,” Javier said with one eyebrow raised.

“You’ll be glad I’m not curb-stomping your face,” Tom said, taking a step closer, spittle flying out of his mouth while he talked. Julie was now at my side, eyeing the fight that was about to break out. I wanted her to get Steve, to put a stop to this before it got started, but part of me wanted to see what this man was capable of. I wanted to know exactly who I was dealing with.

Javier lowered his chin, staring up at him venomously. He watched Tom for a few moments, long enough for the tension to become palpable, a living, seeking thing that coated us all.

“What the fuck you staring at?” Tom cried out, his fist now raised. But it was shaking and so was his voice. He didn’t know what to make of Javier, and now, in his drunken stupor, he was finally scared.

Javier kept on staring, giving his lips a lick before shooting a glance in my direction. “You need to apologize to this woman. For calling her a very misogynistic name. And then for taking the bottle of vodka from behind the counter and helping yourself. After she cut you off.” He raised his voice over the last phrase enough that Julie heard it. I could feel her eyes on me, but I couldn’t tear mine away from him.

Tom looked completely dumbfounded.

Javier smiled quickly. “What, you don’t know what misogynistic means? It means I’m about to break your nose.”

At that threat, Tom lunged forward with his fists primed, ready to clock Javier in the head. I gasped out loud like some damsel in distress but my worry was unwarranted.

Javier moved like a cat. One minute I was sure he was a goner, the next, he was springing upward with his palm open. It connected with Tom’s nose, shattering the cartilage with one quick and nasty hit. Blood and pain exploded everywhere, everywhere except Javier’s pristine shirt.

Tom cried out, clutching his face in agony, doubled over like a dying grizzly. Javier got down in his face. “That doesn’t sound like an apology to me,” he teased.

He looked up at Tom’s friends, who were standing around with their mouths open.

“Perhaps one of you can make him apologize. Are all of you misogynistic dogs as well? Huh?” He cracked his knuckles.

They exchanged a nervous glance with each other, no one wanting to be on the receiving end of Javier’s palm. In the back of the room I could see Steve approaching, shoving people out of the way. In the last few seconds, quite the crowd had gathered.

“What’s going on here?” Steve bellowed over the noise.

Javier ignored him, still focused on the frat boys. “Well. Do you all want to be banned from here or what?”

Finally one of the guys kicked Tom lightly in the side and hissed, “Tom, come on bro, just apologize.”

Tom made a moaning sound and slowly got to his feet. His hands still covered his face, the collar of his shirt stained with blood. I spied one of his eyes under his fingers, watering like hell, and it looked right at me.

“This is your last chance,” Javier whispered to him, like a confidant. He didn’t need to add an “or else” to the end of it.

Tom muttered a totally dejected, “I’m sorry” just as Steve walked up to them. He looked Tom up and down then glared at Javier.

“What happened?” Steve asked. He looked to me and Julie.

I found my voice and pointed at Tom. “I cut this guy off because he was being drunk and rude to me. He then took the vodka from me anyway and drank it. This man here was sticking up for me.”

“I paid you, you stupid bitch,” Tom wailed. Big mistake. Javier looked ready to bite his head off, but Steve beat him to it, grabbing Tom by the collar. Steve was thin and wiry but he obviously knew how to handle the idiots.

“All right, buddy, that’s all I needed to hear. You’re banned from here. For good. Your pals too.”

In unison they all cried out in protest while a few people in the crowd clapped and cheered. I guess they’d had this coming to them for quite some time.

“Do you need me to assist you?” Javier asked Steve, carefully rolling up his sleeves.

Steve eyed him suspiciously. “No, I think you’ve done enough.” He paused before hastily thanking him.

He dragged Tom a few feet and pushed him, his friends following behind, shooting me and Javier sharp looks.

Julie bent over and scooped up the twenties that Tom had littered on the ground. She stuck the sticky wad in my jeans pocket and patted it. “Those guys have made this place hell. I’ve never been able to get them banned. You deserve this.”

I smiled awkwardly and looked to Javier who was taking a seat at the bar, wiping down the counter with a napkin. “Well, actually, I think this man does.”

She looked between us and gave me a wink. “His drinks are on the house then. And whatever else he wants.” Then she sashayed down the bar to help Deanne with the remains of the crowd.

“Did you hear that?” I asked him, suddenly feeling nervous as all hell. “Free drinks for you.”

Javier neatly folded up the napkin and stuck it in an empty glass before looking up at me. He waggled his brows. “And whatever else I want.”

Please for the love of God, stop blushing, I told myself. I cleared my throat. “So, what would you like to drink?”

“Aside from you?”

I laughed anxiously. “You can’t drink me.”

He leaned forward, his eyes running up and down my body, causing my skin to heat. “Yes, I believe I can. And I believe I will. But for now, I’ll just have a Bombay and tonic.”

I gulped down his words as they penetrated hotly. This was going far too easy, far too well. I expected to have a challenge in getting to know this man, to get close to him, and here he was coming after me. It made things much easier and much more dangerous, in ways I couldn’t even pinpoint.

I quickly made him his drink, trying hard to look cool and confident as I did so, knowing his eyes were on me the whole time.

I handed over the drink then grabbed a slice of lime for a garnish as an afterthought. I was about to place it on the rim, but he reached out for my hand and took the lime out of my fingers. Then, while his eyes held mine, hot and hard, he placed his lips on my fingers and sucked the lime juice off of them. Tingles pricked at me from the inside, running from my fingertips to my heart.

My jaw unhinged for a second before I snatched my fingers away from his warm mouth.

“You taste as sweet as I imagined, angel,” he said, his eyes dancing with intensity. “Of course, when I said I’d drink you, I was hoping for a bit more privacy.”

What could I say to that? I couldn’t even find the words. So I switched the subject.

“Thank you for that.”

“For licking your fingers?”

I smiled wryly, conscious of how wet they still were. I didn’t want to wipe them off. “For saving my ass back there. I…”

“You handled him just fine,” he said quickly. “I didn’t mean to just show up and save anything. You, my angel, don’t need any saving. I just wanted to put the boy in his place. That is all.”

I felt an unwanted thrill at his use of the word “angel” again. Particularly when he put “my” in front of it. His angel. My mark.

“You look like you put a lot of boys in their place,” I remarked, aware that I was skirting dangerous territory.

He shrugged and sipped his drink. “Perhaps I do.”

“So why did you come here?”

He smiled lazily. “I told you. I’m persistent. I don’t like being told no.”

“To be fair,” I said, consciously wiping down the bar and counter so I didn’t look like I was slacking off, “you asked me out on a date for Friday night, not Thursday night. I only said no to your second offer.”

“I hoped I could show you what you were missing.”

“And that is?”

“You’ll find out. I’m planning on staying here until you’re off your shift.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I told him. “I don’t think those boys will be back.”

He lowered his chin. “You are misreading me. I am staying here so I can talk to you. Look at you.” His eyes seemed locked on to a place at my bare neck, where it met my shoulders. “Be with you.”

I swallowed hard. “You’re very forward, Mr. Bernal.”

“Please,” he said, waving his hand dismissively. “Mister, that makes me sound so old.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-three.”

I did a double-take. “No way.”

He stroked his face. “Do I look older? Younger? I hope you think I’m handsome, no matter what the number is.”

“You are handsome,” I blurted out stupidly. “I mean, I thought you were older. You act older. I don’t know many twenty-year-olds who dress so well.” I was going to say expensive, but I didn’t want him to think I noticed his wealth.

He took another sip of his drink and folded his hands on the table. “And you. How old is Eden?”

“Twenty,” I said automatically then realized my terrible mistake. “I mean, twenty-one. Man, I guess I’m just hanging onto that golden age.”

My heart was racing so fast in my throat over that error I was certain it was showing up all over my face, like I had a big neon sign blinking above my head that said, “Liar, Right Here.”

But Javier just gave me a slow smile, gradually showing his white teeth. “You have the face and body of a twenty-one year old, I can see that very well. But your eyes. No, you have a story in your eyes. You lived in this world a hundred times over. You’ve seen some things that no one else should see.”

A shiver ran down my spine and I channeled it into putting empty glasses away. What else could he see? I gave him a polite glance and then turned my back, trying to get my thoughts under control.

“You’re very beautiful,” he said from behind me, his voice like a soft blanket. “But you know that. I can see you know that. And I’m glad. It means people have been brave enough to tell you. We need more bravery in this world.”

“You’re just saying that because I called you handsome,” I joked self-deprecatingly, not willing to face him yet. I concentrated on a sticker on the register that said “Mississippi Does it Better,” my focus going in and out like a camera on macro.

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” he remarked. “At least with me. How about with you?”

I took in a deep breath and finally turned around. “It will get you another drink.”

“I can live with that.”

And so Javier sat there and had a couple of drinks until it was time for me to leave. He wouldn't have more than two, since he said he was driving, something I found somewhat admirable since so many people in the south drove drunk. We didn't talk much about him, but we discussed neutral topics like music. It turned out he was into some of the same bands as I was, which was always the way I bonded with people. He asked a few questions about me, but I was so prepared with my answers that I handled them with ease. Eden White grew up in Bixby, Arizona. She went to college in Phoenix for two years, wanting to take veterinary medicine, but dropped out because she couldn't handle the thought of animals dying on her. She came to Mississippi because she had a cousin in Florida she wanted to visit and she ran out of money halfway through the trip. She didn't plan on staying in Biloxi for long, unless she found a good reason. So far, her good reason may have been drinking a gin and tonic.

When I was done working and had collected my first tips from the tip jar and said goodbye to Deanne and Julie, Javier walked with me out of the bar. After the way we had been chatting like old friends, you'd think I would have felt comfortable with him walking beside me as we stepped into the thick and heated night air. But I was anything but comfortable. I was hyper-aware of my body, of every gesture of his, of the second when his wrist lightly brushed against mine. I felt like I was on one never-ending panic attack that looped and looped as we walked toward my truck.

“Well, this is my ride,” I said, banging the hood. It groaned in response, all chipped paint and rust. He gave it a glance and raised his brows at me.

“Beautiful girl, ugly truck. You're a high contrast woman,” he said. “I like it.”

A stupid grin broke across my face which I quickly recovered from. I thought I was a good con artist, but apparently you put a hot man in front of me and all my instincts go to shit. I could barely remember to breathe a sigh of relief at the fact he hadn't noticed my truck lurking outside Travis's. Instead, all I could think about was how he had just taken a step toward me, very little space remaining between us.

I instinctively held my breath as he reached up and brushed a strand of hair behind my ear. His fingers were precise and warm, soothing and invigorating all at once. I closed my eyes, enjoying the foreign sensation. How little I had been touched in my life.

I felt him lean in, catching a whiff of his cologne that smelled like musk and tea and made my insides glow. He placed his soft lips on my cheek, letting them linger there for one hot, wet moment, before trailing his mouth over to my ear.

“Good night,” he whispered slowly, deliberately, in my ear, his breath making the hairs on my neck stand up.

Then he pulled his lips away, gave me a polite nod and said, “Get home safe. I’ll call you tomorrow morning.”

I watched, stunned and surprisingly turned on as he walked confidently away to his GTO that was parked at the other end of the lot. He got in, beeped his horn, then roared out of the parking lot.

This little angel was definitely going to get her wings dirty.

CHAPTER FIVE

My sleep was restless. I tossed and turned all night, my brain thinking those non-thoughts” that existed between dreaming and consciousness. I kept seeing images of Javier, the feeling of his lips on my fingers, his mouth at my ear. I saw Tom and his ugly face. I remembered fear. I recalled conflict. When I drifted off, my dreams were all the same. I was falling and falling with no one to hear my screams.

It was eleven in the morning when Javier called me and I felt like I’d just gotten to sleep only a few hours before. In my half-awake state, I almost balked when he called me Eden over the phone. But everything came back to me with a hit of clarity. The lie. The con. The fact that it didn’t matter how Javier had made me feel so far, the point of all of this was to use him. I couldn’t forget that.

Our conversation was brief and I wondered if he picked up on my aloofness over the phone. I had to tread a very fine line between protecting

myself and leading him on. I needed to do both and I wasn't too sure how. But if I was acting different, he wasn't. He was as sharp and suave as before and told me he'd be picking me up at three. It was kind of early for a date, but I hadn't been on too many, so I wasn't one to question it.

Still, the whole situation was making me feel off-balance which in turn made me feel uncomfortable. I need advice and guidance. I quickly rang Gus.

"Everything okay?" were his first words.

I breathed a sigh of relief at his familiar voice. It grounded me in this apartment that still felt so strange and cold.

"Yes, everything is fine. I just wanted to check in."

Pause. "Oh, well I'm glad you did. That makes me feel good. So everything is fine?"

"Well yeah. So far anyway. I got a job!"

"A legitimate one? I never got the reference check."

I walked over to the window and opened up the blinds. It was a gorgeous, sunny day; it's too bad the surroundings were so urban and boring. I was starting to miss the open desert.

"It's legit but I guess they didn't need to make the call. I looked hot enough, that's all you need. Though you also need balls of steel."

"Rough night?"

"Yeah, my first shift." I went on to explain what happened, conveniently leaving out Javier till the end.

"Um," I started, peering down absently at my scarred leg, the pink and red welts looking extra ugly in the harsh daylight. "And so the guy at the end who beat up the other guy, well...that was my mark."

Silence filled the air. I could hear a cow mooing somewhere on his property.

"Gus?"

"Your mark? I don't understand."

"I met my mark. The man closest to Travis. Or at least I think he is. He at least works for him. We're going out on a date tonight."

"Who is he?"

"His name is Javier Bernal," I told him, his name sounding thick on my tongue.

"Mexican?"

“Yeah, so?” I was feeling slightly defensive over his disapproving tone of voice.

“Ellie...I don’t know what to say, this is not sitting well with me.”

“Well you knew what I was coming here to do.”

“Yeah, but those Mexicans—”

“Well aren’t you being a little racist!”

“Ellie,” he barked, and I clamped my mouth shut. “This isn’t being racist. My ex-wife was Mexican. I don’t really care. But if he’s Mexican, he’s probably directly linked to the cartel.”

“Again, so? We know that Travis is the head of one of them.”

“He’s the head of an off-shoot cartel. They control the south. This Javier might have ties to another, the ones in Mexico, where they get their supplies. The Loz Zetas, Sinaloa. This is much more dangerous. You’ve heard of the beheadings on the news. These people mean serious business.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m aware of that. Hello, you don’t think what Travis did to me wasn’t serious business? And just because he happens to be Mexican...”

“You better watch yourself.”

“I am. And I will. And you know what, yeah maybe he has some ties to a cartel somewhere, or maybe it’s just Travis’s. But he’s only twenty-three. How much damage can a twenty-three year old do?”

The words hung in the air. I felt like I was tempting fate.

The twenty-three year old showed up at my apartment in his GTO, calling my cell and letting me know he was downstairs. I was relieved that he didn’t ask to come up and see the place. I had nothing to show for Eden White at the moment, unless he wanted to browse my internet history which consisted of Mexican drug cartels and more porn.

The porn didn’t help me at all. All it did was turn me on, and when I was turned on it seemed my brain cells went out the window. I’d wanted some pointers in seduction but it was pretty obvious I didn’t have to do

anything to seduce Javier; now it was just overkill that made me squirm against the seam of my jeans.

Even so, I came prepared. I had a couple of condoms in my purse and I'll also admit I watched a YouTube video of how to put one on. It scared the shit out of me and I decided that though I'd push the condom usage if it came to that point, he could handle the mechanics of it all himself.

The air was muggy despite the clear sunshine and I was glad I swapped my usual jeans for a pair of A-line linen pants. I wore a coral-colored tube top that showed off my tanned shoulders and matched my new lip gloss. Spending your teen years in jeans and boots meant I had turned into somewhat of a tomboy, so it felt a bit weird to get dolled up for someone. Weird, but surprisingly good, like a taste of a new dish you could see yourself getting addicted to.

I spied his car by the road and he immediately got out when he saw me. He was just wearing a white t-shirt and black jeans; on his feet were dark boat shoes. It was a casual look that still managed to look elegant on him. Perhaps it was the way he walked, effortlessly, like a stalking tiger. It was the first time I got a good look at his body too and was surprised at how muscular he was. His forearms were pleasantly large, his chest toned, the rest of him very trim and lean. He looked athletic and fast, which shouldn't have surprised me after what happened last night.

"Hello, angel," he said with a grin, his arms spread wide for an embrace. This was the drug cartel leader? I didn't think so.

I laughed nervously and he swept me into his arms, holding me close to him. That familiar smell drifted over me, bringing back the feeling of his lips at my ear. Today though, he didn't kiss my cheek but still held on to my hand.

"You brought out the sunshine, I'm glad," he said, looking me up and down. His lilting accent was creating pleasure waves down my back. "Come on." He gave my hand a tight squeeze. Even more pleasure waves formed. "We should enjoy the weather while we can."

We got into his car and I was immediately in love with it.

"It's beautiful," I said, running my hands over the smooth dash, marveling at how well-maintained it looked despite its age, the perfect blend of polished chrome and retro fittings.

“It has a name,” he said, buckling himself in. He caught my eyes and explained. “Jose. I brought him all the way from Mexico.”

I kept smiling back at him, although my brain was already going back over what Gus had said and what I had learned about cartels on the internet. I hoped the wheels in my head had been hidden from him, but the man was so damned perceptive.

“What, you didn’t know I was from Mexico?” he asked, still smiling, though he slipped on a pair of dark shades that covered up his all-seeing eyes. We turned onto the road and headed toward the highway. The windows were all rolled down, messing up our hair, which made me suspect the air conditioner wasn’t working.

“No, I figured you were from Mexico,” I said. “I just thought it was cute that you named your car.”

He laughed. “Cute? Maybe. Dorky? Yes. But what can I say, I’m sentimental. This old machine has been with me longer than anyone I know.”

I wanted to know how that could be, considering he would have only been of driving age for about eight years or so, but I didn’t press it. I wanted information from him, but I wanted it slowly.

“Well, it’s one hell of a sexy car. I love vintage models,” I said.

He tilted his head down and eyed me over his glasses. “Were you ever a model?”

I let out a loud and rather awkward guffaw. I immediately covered up my mouth, shooting him a sheepish smile. “Sorry, no.”

“I don’t see how it’s a funny question,” he said rather seriously.

“Well, for one, I’m not tall enough,” I rattled off, ticking my fingers. “For two, I’m clumsy as hell. For three, I don’t have the confidence.”

“And for four?”

For four? Well, for four there was no way they’d hire a gimpy, scarred model for anything except the before and after effects of battery acid usage gone wrong, and they’d have to Photoshop the before picture.

“I walk with a slight limp,” I admitted. “It gets worse when I’m not paying attention.”

“I’d say I haven’t noticed,” he said sincerely.

“Well, I’ve been paying attention.”

“Isn’t that tiring? To hide it? To pretend?”

I sucked on my lip and stared at the industrial buildings zipping past. “Yes, it is.”

“Then how about you don’t pretend with me? You’re going to need all the energy you can get.”

I raised my brow and looked back at him. “Is that so?”

He grinned, a stunning smile that lifted his whole face. “You will find out very soon.”

Though he just warned me not to hide anything from him, I turned my head and hid the stupid schoolgirl look on my face. Besides, I was hiding so much already.

We drove past dilapidated buildings and ravished oceanfront, and Javier explained the effects of Hurricane Katrina. I’d watched the whole thing on the news two years earlier, but Javier had been here, riding the whole thing out.

“Was your place damaged?” I asked, almost saying house but then catching myself. To him, I had no reason to suspect he lived in a house.

He shook his head. “I was staying in an apartment at the time; there was just some water damage on the first floor. Many homes were absolutely wrecked, which in time ended up being a good thing. For me, anyway. I bought a seaside home late last year; it was damaged but it was cheap, and I spent a lot of time fixing it up.”

“And that’s in Ocean Springs?”

“I love the town so much more than Biloxi and Gulfport. Blegh. So impersonal. But in Ocean Springs, people know your name.”

“And that’s a good thing?” I asked, totally surprised. I would have thought laying low was rule number one for those involved in illegal activities. At least, that’s what I’d been taught.

His wide mouth twitched with amusement. “Yes, that’s a good thing. In Mexico, where I’m from, La Cruz, everyone knows your name. Everyone is there to help you, to support you. It’s one big family. You get that here in the south, sometimes, but in Ocean Springs it’s just so small and community oriented.”

“It’s kind of a rich place, isn’t it? That’s at least what I gathered.”

“It is and it isn’t. But I feel at home, and to feel you’re at home when you’re so far away from home, that’s very important.”

“So you’re from La Cruz, huh?”

He shot me a sideways glance. “Do you know where that is, girl who has never left Arizona?”

I smiled. “No, actually I don’t. It just has a nice ring to it.”

“Eden White has a nice ring to it too.”

I fidgeted in my seat. “Sounds like home?”

“Yes. It does.” There was a hint of melancholy in his inflection and a hush gripped us in the car until the town of Ocean Springs was upon us.

While he brought the car down the main street I said to him, “Where are we going? Are you taking me out for coffee?”

He laughed. “That would be boring, don’t you think? No, I’m taking you to my house.”

I gulped down the knot in my throat. I knew it was only about four in the afternoon now, but thank God I had brought the condoms.

Soon we pulled up to the very place I had been watching all those weeks before. The whiteboard outside, curved stained-glass windows, and huge porch. I used to sit up the street in the truck and watch him, wondering what his name was, if he had friends, what he did when he wasn’t with Travis. I was lucky I had done most of my staking out at night, otherwise he would have grown pretty suspicious of my truck. How silly to have your cover blown just because of a car.

Now, finally, I was going to get the tour inside. Of course I had to act like I’d never seen the place before.

“This is lovely,” I said, staring up at the house, my hand shielding the late sun from my eyes. “And the beach is all yours?”

“Mas o menos,” he said. He held out his hand for me and I took it with glee. “Come, I’ll give you the grand tour.”

We had parked in the spots that were underneath half the house, the back end on stilts. Javier explained to me that all the support beams had collapsed from the hurricane and the house was slanted. They basically had to raise the thing back up. We ignored the door in the garage area and he took me to where wooden steps led up to the porch up top. Around us, white beach sand was blowing across the driveway and a breeze was rustling the palm fronds and twisted live oak trees. Everything here was glowing in the sunshine, the humidity being swept away.

The porch had a beautiful view of the beach—windswept grass, soft sand, and a driftwood lined path that led from the house to the ocean. But

that wasn't the only thing that took my breath away. There was a table on the porch, set up with an ice bucket and wine glasses.

Javier watched me carefully and smiled with satisfaction. "I thought we could have drinks here and enjoy the view before it gets too dark." He clapped his hands together. "Just a minute. Here, sit down."

He pulled out a wrought iron chair and then disappeared into the house. I took a seat, fingering the fine texture of the tablecloth. It amazed me that a guy of his age had such good taste. Perhaps growing up in Mexico made you appreciate the finer things in life. Perhaps drug money helped too.

When he came back, I'd already poured myself a glass of Sauvignon Blanc, the exquisite taste swirling around my tongue. He placed a tray on the table consisting of prosciutto-wrapped figs in balsamic dressing, prawns and an aioli-type dip, plus perfectly crisp mini taquitos and fresh verde salsa.

He sat across from me and poured himself a glass.

"Did you make all this?" I asked.

He smiled politely. "Yes, I did. So if you don't like it, I'll be horribly offended. I didn't know if you were a vegetarian or not, so the taquitos are filled only with vegetables."

My stomach rumbled loudly in response.

"Wow," I said, reaching for one. He quickly handed me a napkin for use as a plate.

The taquitos were divine, the vegetables so fresh, the tortilla just the right thickness. "This is amazing," I said, through a mouthful of food. It was very inelegant of me but I couldn't help it. I stared at Javier as he leaned back in his chair watching me with delight. A butterfly or two flapped its wings in my gut, causing warmth to spread through me. Or maybe it was the wine, which was going straight to my head.

"How did you learn to make these?"

He lifted one shoulder in a half shrug. "My mama, of course."

"She sounds like quite the cook."

He kept smiling though the expression in his eyes changed. "She was. She's dead."

I nearly choked on the remaining bite. I quickly slammed back the rest of my wine and put my hand to my chest. "I'm so sorry."

Another lift of the shoulders, his face turning to the ocean. “Nah, don’t worry about it. That’s in the past. She was a lovely woman and a lovely cook.”

“She’d have to be pretty lovely to raise someone like you,” I said. I didn’t add the things that my brain was screaming at me: a criminal, a drug runner, the man who worked for the man that destroyed my life.

He raised his brows at that, as if he didn’t believe it. Then he looked at the bottle of wine. “Do you like the wine? It’s from New Zealand. I’ve always wanted to go there.”

“Yes, it’s great. Have you traveled a lot?” I asked, picking up on his hint to change the subject.

“I’d say so. I’ve been to Europe once. Spain, of course. Except the Spaniards aren’t too fond of us Mexicans. Been to South America a lot though.”

“Oh really?” I asked, trying to sound casual. “Like where?”

“Venezuela. Columbia. Lots of places in Central America.”

I had to say it. “Venezuela and Columbia...aren’t those kind of dangerous?”

His expression had turned playfully wicked. “Maybe I’m kind of dangerous.”

We watched each other for a few beats, each of us holding cards we weren’t quite willing to share yet, if ever. Then he laughed and said, “Drink up, my angel. We have reservations at six.”

I gladly did as he said, enjoying most of the bottle until I knew I was tipsy, and feasting on the rest of the food. The homemade aioli and the wrapped figs were just as decadent and delicious as the taquitos. Thankfully he hadn’t made too many or I would have totally spoiled my appetite.

While the sun was setting in the west, turning the sky into hazy wisps of coral that complimented my tube top, we roared off in his car, in his Jose, and kept to the coast. About ten minutes later we pulled up to a tiny restaurant on the beach.

I guess I was expecting him to take me to some fancy restaurant, but this was nothing more than a beach shack. There was a neon sign out front with the picture of a dancing crab, and the H was burnt out making it read “Crab ut.” Inside there were old wood floors, plastic tablecloths, and vintage movie posters on the wall. The kitchen was loud and boisterous,

some of the steam filtering into the dining area, which only had about ten small tables.

A man appeared, double-chin, dark olive skin, happy eyes. He clapped Javier on the back, greeting him enthusiastically, and then appraised me with approval.

“Another new woman, Javier?” he said. “She’s a keeper, this one.”

Another new woman? I couldn’t help but look at Javier, who was shooting this man the deadliest of his golden green-eyed looks.

“Eden, this is Rod,” Javier said, pointing at the man with disdain. Rod didn’t seem to pick up on it at all. He just smiled at me, and I spotted a gold tooth somewhere in his mouth. “Rod, this is Eden.”

I gave him a quick nod, keeping a fake smile plastered on my face while trying to hide the sinking feeling I felt in my heart. It shouldn’t have surprised me at all to learn that Javier was a player. I mean, how could he not be? Look at how god damned suave he was. He certainly dressed like he was doing so to impress the ladies. Even though he was still wearing what he had earlier, he had slipped on a silk dress jacket that somehow pulled everything together in one luxurious and sexy bow.

“Come, I have your favorite table all set up,” Rod said. I was barely listening. Javier put his hand at my back, guiding me, and it warmed my whole spine.

His favorite table was by a large bay window that had a beautiful view of the ocean, waves crashing in the twilight. Chinese lanterns lit up the outside.

After Rod left, Javier reached over and placed his hand on mine. It made me jump slightly.

“Rod doesn’t know what he’s talking about,” he said, chin lowered, peering up at me underneath his brows.

I tried to sound as breezy as possible. “He seems like a nice guy. You must come here often to have your own table.”

“I practically own this place,” he said. “When it’s doing well. When it’s not, I disavow all knowledge of its actions.”

I smiled and picked up the menu. My eyes couldn’t focus though. I kept reading the same thing over and over again while my thoughts wanted to think about me being “another new woman.” What bothered me the most was the fact that this whole thing wasn’t in the bag like I had thought. If he

had a lot of women and I was just another new one, how long would I last with him? What if this was all fun and games for a few weeks and then he'd ditch me for someone else? Sure he was attentive and suave and seductive now, but what about then? Suddenly, I felt like I couldn't be sure of anything.

"Eden," he whispered, squeezing my hand.

I looked up at him. He looked so serious, his dark brows knitted together.

"You've gotten under my skin," he said.

I wasn't expecting that.

"I don't think I'll ever be able to shed you."

I wasn't expecting that either. I had to take what he said with a grain of salt—I *had* to—and yet, his words were stirring up those butterflies again. He was trying to make me feel secure and safe. He didn't realize he wasn't doing me a favor.

I pushed past the heaviness of what he just said. "Well, as you can see, I'm not going anywhere."

"I can see, but that's not what I see," he said, tapping the side of his eye. "Do you really think I'm one of those men who will take you out and never call you again?"

Yes, I thought. But I said, "I'm not thinking much. I'm just really hungry."

He watched me closely for a few seconds before tearing his eyes away and looking at the menu. "The blue crab po-boys are to die for. They even bake their own bread."

And just like that, all the serious business was dropped. I had to keep reminding myself that this was just our first official date and things were moving way too fast. Then I had to remind myself that it didn't really matter how fast it moved, as long as it got there, and once I got what I wanted, I would be gone. I had to be.

CHAPTER SIX

After dinner was over and Javier had gotten me pleasantly drunk and fed me crab legs with dripping, melting butter, he got Rod to give him a bottle of wine and we took off for the beach.

Under the moonlight, the ocean looked less menacing and the waves had slowed down to a gentle lapping. We walked, hand in hand, through the soft sand. I had taken off my strappy sandals, my feet happy to be free. The sandals I had were the ones I wore when it wasn't appropriate to wear boots—they looked elegant, yet their criss-cross gladiator-style straps kept the scars on the top of my foot hidden. But under the light of the moon, after a lot of wine which we shared straight out of the bottle, I didn't care if he saw them or not.

That still didn't keep me from being nervous as fuck. The setting, the wine, the enigmatic man I was with. This was all leading up to something and I didn't know how to handle it. We were walking further and further away from the restaurant, the beach deserted, the houses on it growing further and further apart. It became more and more apparent that it was just him and I. We were alone, the universe pushing us together, turning off the lights.

I started babbling. I didn't know what I was talking about. I think I began touching on reality TV shows and how they were ruining the world. I'd done a lot of TV watching back at Uncle Jim's.

Finally, Javier stopped and pulled me right up to him. One of his hands slid to my lower back, finding the bare skin between my top and my pants. The other hand went to my face, gently wiping his thumb across my cheekbone, then trailing it down to my lips. He put the tip of his thumb in my mouth, at the fleshy part of my lip and gums, and grinned at me. I wasn't sure what to do with it, so I just let him keep it there, my eyes growing larger with fear and anticipation.

"Your lips are being wasted," he said to me, eyes boring holes into mine. His face was darkened in shadow, the moon at his back, but his eyes still glinted, gleaming like an animal's.

I was about to ask how so, but he pressed his thumb further until I lifted my teeth and let it in. My tongue tasted salt and wine and garlic. I gently swirled it around.

His eyes glazed over with lust. "Yes. This is better."

He placed his whole thumb in my mouth, so I had no choice but to suck it while locked in his gaze. His breath hitched, his nostrils flaring.

“Your lips are made for this. But this is easy. Would you like a challenge?”

I knew exactly what he meant. Believe it or not, I did go out on a date to a drive-in movie in Colorado. The guy wouldn't even kiss me but I still ended up giving him a blow job. I did all right. I mean, I must have, judging from the way he came in my hair. But I didn't want to do just *all right* with Javier. He had a lot of women, and if I was going to be the one to stick around, I needed to up my game. It's just...of all the games I had played, this was out of my league.

He slowly slid his thumb out of my mouth and put his lips to my ear.

“Don't worry,” he said softly. He took his dripping thumb and started to slide it and his fingers down the front of my pants. “My angel will always come before me.”

Then he kissed me, delicate lips and strong tongue. I seemed to draw energy from his mouth, heat and warmth and stars filling me from the inside. It was a kiss unlike any kiss I'd ever had. It made me addicted, like my own mouth would forever be lonely without his there.

Suddenly my pants were loose; the drawstring that held it together was being undone. I started clamming up, my body stiffening, my heart racing. I didn't want him to stop, but I was scared to death by what was about to happen. I was truly about to go into the unknown and losing control was risky.

His fingers found me wet and slid smoothly against my clit. He pulled back from my lips and let out a harsh sigh, his eyes closed. “Drenched, just for me.”

I let out a similar sound, relishing the foreign sensation of his skilled fingers, my cheeks flaming over how damn vocal he was, like he didn't have a care in the world. Before I really started grinding against him, he pulled his fingers out and lifted them to my lips.

“Taste yourself,” he commanded softly, rubbing his wet fingers on me. “Do you taste as sweet as I think?”

I couldn't even form words. I couldn't even be repulsed. I couldn't even think. All I could do was realize I tasted not sweet, but tangy and soapy, and thanked myself for taking an extra-long bath that morning.

He was watching me carefully. “You’ve never tasted yourself before?”

I shook my head, clearing my throat, finding my words. “No. Should I have?”

A grin slowly spread across his face, and he gave a quick shake of his head. “Ah, dear, sweet Eden. To quote the great Rhett Butler, you need to be fucked and by someone who knows how.”

“What version of *Gone with the Wind* did you grow up watching?” I squeaked out.

He bit his lip and pulled down the edge of my tube top. “There are a lot of liberties taken with Spanish subtitles.”

Then his lips were on my nipple, his mouth engulfing it, hot and wet, his tongue flicking as it hardened beneath it. Fizzing sparks fluttered down my limbs. Heat built up between my legs again, wanting his fingers to come back. Wanting him. It was too much.

As he lightly bit around my breast, I threw my head back and blurted out, “I’m a virgin.”

He stopped dead. He lifted his head and I slowly raised mine to face him. I expected him to look disgusted or disappointed or at least surprised, but he didn’t look like any of those. He looked...happy.

His mouth twisted into a smirk. “You just get more perfect with every passing second, don’t you?”

I chewed on my lips, conscious of my breast being exposed, just inches from his face.

“Don’t worry. You are an angel and I’ll keep you that way. For now, your virtue will remain intact.”

He suddenly scooped me up into his arms and I let out a small cry of surprise. I gripped him, my hands feeling the hard lines of his back as he carried me a few feet over to a log lying in the sand. This was someone’s beachfront, I could tell, but their house was dark and far back from the water.

He placed me on the log and then gently pushed against my chest until I was bending over backward. My head was in the sand, my hips and ass on the log.

“Relax. Let me take care of you now. And tomorrow I’ll take everything.”

I had a feeling I knew what that meant, but I couldn't say anything because suddenly he was peeling off my pants, pulling them down. I thought of my scars, praying he wouldn't notice them, my heart racing at the thought of him seeing them and being turned off.

But he stopped removing them just below the knees and gently spread my legs. I felt like I was offering my vagina up on a wooden platter. Talk about heading into the unknown.

"You're beautiful," I heard him whisper. "So beautiful." I felt his fingers run up and down the slash, teasing me. I pressed my head further into the sand and closed my eyes. All thoughts about my leg disappeared.

Then he lowered his head and his tongue was on me. I gasped from the shock and gasped again from the sensation. His lips coaxed mine, drawing me out, making me fill with blood and pressure. It was better than anything I had ever felt before. Better than a million golden sunsets, better than chocolate and wine and towels warm from the dryer. It made my legs spread further, my hips bucking into his mouth.

I moaned loudly, then tried to stifle it for fear of the houses nearby.

He pulled away a few inches and said, "You can scream, angel. I love the sound of my name coming from your lips, especially while I'm occupied with these ones."

It didn't take long before that happened. His lips, his tongue, his own moans and groans—it was too much for me to take, to hold on to. My orgasm ripped through me with startling ferocity. I cried out his name in passion and in fear. I thought, for a second, as the waves grew more violent, that I was permanently damaged, like I was being ripped in two and could never be put back together. It was an out of body experience, and when I came back to reality, when I realized I was still whole and still me, tears leaked from the corners of my eyes. Everything felt unleashed.

I lay there for a few moments, sand all over my hair, until I saw Javier poke his head up, getting to his feet.

"Take your time, angel," he said, looming over me. "I've never heard such purity before."

I felt anything but pure. I raised my brows, questioning him, out of breath and words.

"The sounds you make as you come," he explained, voice low and guttural. "Better than any symphony."

I swallowed the lump in my throat then quickly sat up, realizing how exposed I was. My head spun and sand scattered everywhere as I fastened my pants and pulled up my tube top. He moved over and suddenly I was face to face with his crotch. I could see his erection straining against his jeans. I was going to have to do something about that, wasn't I?

With newfound boldness, I put my hand on him, feeling how hard he was beneath my fingers. It's not like I had a lot to compare to, but size-wise he seemed more than adequate.

He groaned softly and gripped the back of my head, driving grains of sand in further.

"Careful, now. You'll make me come before I'm ready, and then you'll only create a mess that you'd have to lick up."

I quickly removed my hand, but he grabbed it with his free one and placed my fingers on his belt buckle.

"Unbuckle me," he whispered, keeping his hand in my hair, making a new fist in it. "Take me out into your hands."

With shaking fingers, the adrenaline of the orgasm still running through me, I did as he said. I undid the button, unzipped the fly, and was taken by surprise to see he was going commando. I reached in and took his thick, hard length out, holding it in my hands, feeling its heavy weight, the smooth skin. The head was shiny with pre-cum, waiting for my mouth.

"Lick the tip," he said. "Slowly. Only your tongue."

I licked it, tasting the salt from the slit. He moaned. "Yes," he hissed through his teeth. "Now use your beautiful lips."

I placed my lips around the purple head and then slowly slid them down, making sure it was as wet as possible. I felt his veins underneath my lips as I took him all in, as far as he could go.

The fist in my hair tightened and he yanked it slightly. I let out a small cry of pain but he ignored it. "Now, make a tight circle with your hand and squeeze me, like an extension of your sweet, sweet mouth."

I complied, and as I worked away at him, my confidence built up. I could hear how turned on he was from his groaning and grunts, the way he told me he loved fucking my warm mouth. Finally, just when I was certain he was about to come, he yanked my head back and ordered me to lie back on the sand.

“And lift up your shirt,” he commanded, getting down on his knees between my legs.

He started stroking himself, his hand going faster and faster, his grunts louder and shorter.

“Keep looking at me while I stain you,” he grunted through his clenched jaw.

I did, watching his gleaming eyes go from wild with lust to pinched with pleasure as he spasmed. His load shot out of him in hot spurts, streaming onto my stomach and tits. I was enthralled and embarrassed at the same time. The one thing I wasn't, which surprised me, was humiliated. I didn't feel defiled, just possessed, like he really was marking me as his. And at that moment, drunk on wine and lust, the beach at my back, his seed still hot on my skin, I didn't mind being Javier's.

In fact, I kind of loved it.

He collapsed on the sand beside me, breathing laboriously for a few moments. Then he took a handkerchief out of his jacket pocket and very tenderly, wiped it all off of me. From the gentle look in his eyes, you would have thought he was applying a band-aid on a child instead of mopping up his own cum.

“We'll get us both sorted out soon,” he said softly as he pulled my shirt back down. Then he leaned over and kissed me, nice and slow, before getting to his feet and pulling me up with him.

Hand in hand we made our way back down the beach, back to the Crab Hut, back to Jose, back to his house, and eventually, to his bed.

When I woke up the next morning, it took me a few moments to realize where I was. Nothing was familiar: the soft light coming in through the large windows, the whitewashed walls, the black satin bed sheets and matching down comforter. The dark-haired head between my legs.

“What are you doing?” I asked groggily, leaning back on my elbows.

Javier's head lifted, a teasing smile on his face. My underwear were still on, but he seemed to be in the process of moving it to the side with his

fingers.

“Good morning.” He greeted me like nothing was out of the ordinary, like he wasn’t about to go down on me while I was asleep. This man certainly had balls, I had to give him that. Well, that and a lot of other things.

After we returned to his house last night, I was insisting I should go home while he insisted that I stay overnight with him. He promised he wouldn’t try and take my virtue in my sleep, but it seemed he had no problem licking it out of me in the morning.

He went back to work, his tongue lapping at me like a giant cat. He took his fingers and slowly inserted them until it pinched uncomfortably.

“I’m just warming you up for later,” he said before diving back down.

I moaned despite myself, lifting up my hips and widening my legs to give him more access. It felt just as good as the night before and I wasn’t in the mood to make him stop.

“I have to work later,” I managed to say while his tongue flicked.

“There’s always a later after later,” he mumbled into me.

I couldn’t argue with that. He kept going until I was coming again, not as violently as the night before, but enough to make me grip the sheets between my hands, to make me call out his name, swearing; enough to make me blush when I realized how loud and uninhibited I was. I was going to have to get over that pretty fast because it seemed like Javier was just getting started with me. What was it going to be like to actually have sex with him? My imagination didn’t even stretch that far.

He pulled away, wiping his mouth then licking his fingers. I was glowing too much to be put off by that. He was a kinky motherfucker, that’s for sure.

I sighed and rested my head back on the soft pillow, so many new feelings fluttering all over me. I was lost in my thoughts, in the lingering sensations, when I felt his hand graze my legs. Graze my scars.

I immediately stiffened, waiting in fear. In all the ecstasy, I had completely forgotten about my scars. It was a first for me, but now it was all crashing down, smothering me with disgust.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?” he asked, his fingers lightly touching them.

“Please don’t,” I pleaded, pinching my eyes shut. I felt him remove his hand and he settled down in the sheets. I could feel his eyes on my leg, and when I finally looked up, they weren’t staring at it. They were staring at me. Golden green sadness.

The moment washed over us, sinking and permeating our thoughts. I waited for him to say something, anything. Then I realized he was waiting to hear a story. My story. Only I couldn’t tell him. Like my parents had made me do just after the accident, I had to tell him the lie I had known so well.

“When I was little,” I began, remembering I was Eden, not Ellie, realizing that Ellie’s life was a lie anyway, “we didn’t have much money. My parents would let me play in the dump to scrounge around for toys. One time I picked up a bottle. I thought it looked pretty. I didn’t see any labels or anything. I accidently dropped it. It splashed up my leg...battery acid.”

He didn’t say anything for quite some time, and I wondered if he even believed it. His eyes were emotionless, still locked on me. Suddenly he burst forward and kissed me, full of fire and passion. I could taste salt and a wetness from his cheeks and I wasn’t sure what to make of this man. He was constantly surprising me and catching me off-guard.

We made out for a few minutes, just our mouths communicating with each other by feel and touch. The world, my scars, drifted away for those blissful seconds.

Then he stopped and covered up my leg with the blanket.

“You lie here. I’ll get breakfast started,” he said, and slipped on a thin pair of lounge pants over his perky ass, his skin glowing more golden than usual in the light of the morning sun. He had a large tattoo of an elaborate cross running up and down his spine, adding to his bad boy appeal.

Soon he was back, bringing me a tray of scrambled eggs with rosemary, seven grain toast with fresh raspberry jam, and a glass of freshly squeezed blood orange juice. He went back for the espresso and climbed in bed with me while we ate, and he told me a bit about his four sisters back at home in Mexico. I had the impression that he took care of them all financially, but I didn’t want to press it. Not yet.

After we were done eating, we showered together and he insisted on soaping up nearly every inch of me. He teased my ass crack with his

foaming fingers and that's where I drew the line. He just told me he'd convince me one day; that he'd end up owning every part of me, inside and out. I ended up giving him another blow job instead.

With my head in a daze of pheromones, we eventually left the house and he drove me back to Biloxi where I had to get ready for my shift.

I got out of the car, feeling like a totally different person despite wearing the same clothes as the day before. I leaned on the driver's side door and gave him a quick peck on the lips.

"Thanks for everything," I told him.

The corner of his mouth lifted. "Angel, you haven't even seen everything yet. But you will. How about I pick you up on Monday at noon?"

Seeing as it was Saturday, that had me a bit disappointed. But I was working for the next two days anyway. It's funny how quickly I had turned into someone that wanted to spend every minute with a guy. That had never happened to me before. I guess I could blame it on working the long con, but deep down, I knew that wasn't it.

I told him Monday was perfect and said goodbye. I watched as he drove off, then prepared myself for the next two days. I was going to spend every second of it trying to get my head back on track. Everything depended on it. Even my heart.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Monday crashed through the weekend like a bull in a china shop. At first I wasn't supposed to work that evening but Deanne got sick and I was called in. It was only from seven to eleven though, which meant my date with Javier was still on, it just got sliced in two.

I spent Saturday and Sunday trying to get my wits together. I focused one hundred percent on my job, trying to work past the apprehension that was left over from my last shift. By the time Sunday night rolled around, I was handling the customers with ease and working through my Javier problem.

On the surface, there wasn't really a problem. The plan was going as planned and then some. Back in Dallas, I looked to this moment and imagined that I'd be having to get in with some sleazy old man, feeling ashamed and desperate of my actions. But, though Javier was definitely a player with some serious skills, he wasn't an old man. He was young and virile and made me feel like a million dollars.

And that, of course, was the real problem. I was becoming too attached to my mark. I thought it was lucky that I happened to win over someone like him, but feelings muddled things, and I was spending more time thinking about him from an emotional and romantic point of view than I was from the cold-level of detachment that I needed. I was in here for revenge, for the strife I'd been subjected to for the last ten years. I was here to even the score with Travis. Yet Travis was the last thing on my mind. All I could think about was Javier and what he was going to do to me next. He excited me more than anyone ever had.

I thought, maybe, it was okay to just be excited. For now.

When Javier came to pick me up in the morning, my excitement and expectations suddenly tripled. Instead of going out for lunch like I had imagined, we actually swung by a medical clinic. Yes. A medical clinic.

It wasn't terribly romantic, yet in some ways it was. He wanted to make sure I was going on birth control. He then made us both get tested for STDs. I didn't know what he was expecting to find in my virginal blood, but the fact that he was taking control of the situation, especially a situation that many couples never discussed, meant a lot to me. Like, a strange amount.

"You're my woman," he told me, as we left the pharmacy, a bag of new birth control pills in my hand. "And I'll be responsible with you. And for you."

I was his woman. Two dates in and I was his woman. And who was I? A liar. I tried hard to bury those thoughts and found a bit of relief when he dropped me at my shift later. Things were moving so fast once again.

"So, how is Mr. Wonderful?" Julie asked me in her thick Southern accent, snapping me out of my thoughts. It was Monday night, the bar was totally dead, and we were wiping down the counters, straightening bottles, and doing everything we could to busy ourselves.

I smiled at her petite round face, the cascade of wavy brown hair that went all the way to her lower back. She was built like a porn star, but I knew she had a very sweet boyfriend that she was completely over the moon for. His name was Andrew and she wouldn't shut up about him, day in and day out. If it wasn't for Javier—for my Mr. Wonderful—I would have been jealous.

“He's good,” I told her, feeling my cheeks heat.

“Oh he's very good, sug,” she said. “You know there's nothing sexier than a man who can take charge, and believe me, Eden, he took charge of Thursday night.”

“I thought you said I took charge,” I teased her.

“Well behind every good woman is a good man,” she said, then noticed I was glaring at her sexiest remark. She jabbed me playfully in the ribs. “And vice versa, of course. He's got such a way about him.”

“Javier?” I asked, surprised to see that same dreamy look on her face, as if she were talking about Andrew.

“Yes, your Javier.”

“Okay, he's not exactly my Javier,” I said, as though he hadn't just told me earlier that I was his woman and he was responsible for me.

“Oh, whatever!” Julie exclaimed, nearly slapping her thighs in overreaction. “It took Andrew two years and a trip on a Disney cruise ship with Nana before he even looked at me that way. I think it's because he finally saw how much of a bad-ass I have to be to put up with my family. Believe me, it wasn't easy. Between the food poisoning and the Catholic versus Protestant discussion, I almost lost him.”

And she had totally lost me. But it didn't matter. I was biting the bait.

“How does he look at me?” I asked as casually as I could muster.

Julie placed her small hands on both sides of my face. “He looks at you like this.”

Her eyes drooped and she just looked drunk. And like she was maybe having a stroke.

“Inebriated?”

She let go and smacked me on the arm. She was an animated little thing.

“No! Like he’s been searching for you his whole life, and there you turned up, under a pile of garbage.”

“That’s...poetic,” I said, frowning. “But I’ve only known him a few days.”

“Oh that doesn’t matter,” she said, before sliding a beer down to a gentleman who hadn’t even asked for it yet. He was a regular, I knew that much. “Love at first sight happens. They say it doesn’t, but it does. Just look at me and Andrew.”

I would have, but I’d never seen the dude. “We aren’t in love.”

“You will be,” she said slyly, filling out a bar tab. “I can tell. With some couples you can just tell. And he’s different. He knows stuff.”

I nervously tucked my hair behind my ear. “What kind of stuff?”

“You’ll see,” she said with a wink. “And then you’ll tell your new pal Julie all about it. Ain’t that right, sug?”

And an hour later, Javier showed up at the bar, winning Julie over with his manners and blinding smile. She giggled in response, unable to form words. Again I was struck by how gorgeous he was. Not in that conventional, hunky way, but mesmerizing all the same. He was very bad and very, very beautiful.

He led me out to his car and we got in. I was very conscious of my overnight bag which was sitting in the backseat. I had packed it earlier, at his request. It sat there, ominous, reminding me of what was about to transpire. I couldn’t have been more anxious if I tried.

I cleared my throat as we drove toward Ocean Springs. “I took my pill a few hours ago.”

He smiled knowingly. “It’s going to take a few weeks of you taking it before it starts to work. Don’t worry, I have enough protection to get us through. I hope.”

Oh Jesus. What was going to happen after tonight? Was I going to turn into an insatiable horndog after one romp in the sack? Watching his skilled hands, his long fingers as they handled the wheel, I knew what the answer was.

It’s just sex, I told myself. It’s just sex. It doesn’t have to mean anything. It doesn’t have to be a big deal. Your body is not your heart.

Yet even though I chanted that in my head until we pulled up to his house, glowing white and pure against the starry sky, I knew there was no

point. No matter what I told myself, I was at his mercy. I had no idea what to expect and he did. He was controlling the strings.

We went into the house, wordlessly, hearing only the waves crashing nearby, the rustle of blowing sand on the dunes. Javier plucked a bottle of deep red wine from the counter and two wine glasses and led me down the hallway, his hand guiding my back.

I never thought someone's bedroom could give me heart palpitations, but I suppose I had never met someone like Javier. The lights were off but the room had a soft glow thanks to a few candles on the bedside tables, those giant old ones that had years of wax dripping from the tapers and onto the carved silver holders. Rose petals were scattered on top of the black satin sheets, trailing off onto the floor. In some ways it would have been completely cheesy and straight out of a movie (what, was he going to hold a boombox above his head and stand outside the window?) except for the fact that I saw a red silk blindfold and a long grey tie displayed prominently on the bed.

"Don't be nervous," he said, placing the red wine and glasses on the dresser. He took my overnight bag out of my hands and placed it neatly on the floor then he poured us both a glass of wine, while I stood there, my eyes locked to the blindfold and tie, trying to keep my knees from locking together.

"Drink up," he said, putting the glass in my hand and raising the ruby red liquid to my lips.

I finished off the glass in a few gulps and he quickly refilled it. I finished that one too. He took the glass and placed it on the dresser. "Don't have too much. You don't want to cloud your senses."

I was pretty sure that's exactly what I wanted.

He stood in front of me and took off his maroon tie, flinging it on the bed so it landed beside the other one. Then he slowly took off his dark grey dress shirt, button by button. His eyes were lit from the candles, dancing in the flames. I felt like it was my cue to start undressing too, so when I found the feeling in my fingers again, I started to lift up my tank top.

"No, angel," he told me with a slow shaking of his head. He quickly shed his suit jacket and shirt, until he was bare-chested. I spied the name "Maria" tattooed in script on his inner bicep.

He came over to me and put his hands where mine were on the edge of my shirt. “I’ll be undressing you. I’ll be doing everything.”

I swallowed hard, trying to figure out who Maria was while trying to keep my cool. My legs really were shaking now. This was really happening.

“Everything?” I asked, my voice trembling.

He slowly raised my shirt until it was over my head and let it drop casually to the floor. He pressed his chest up against mine while reaching behind with one hand. With a deft maneuver he unclasped my bra and that too fell beneath me.

He sucked in his breath as his hands went to my breasts, slowly squeezing them, feeling their weight in his hands. My nipples were hard instantly and his thumbs began circling them. “Everything,” he whispered, bring his mouth to my ear. His hot tongue came out and did a sweep along the rim, ending at the lobe where he suckled on it, biting lightly. “Everything,” he said again, sending visible shivers down my back.

His hands went to my jeans and undid the button. He pulled down the zipper in a deliberate manner, as if he were unzipping my heart. He tugged at the jeans, pushing them down to my feet where I stepped out of them. He didn’t linger on my scars, didn’t comment, he just took me by the hand and led me over to the bed.

“Lie down, my angel. On your stomach.”

I paused at the foot of the bed while he went to the side table and brought out a box of condoms and a tube of lubricant. I knew the fear was showing in my eyes because he gave me a soothing look, his voice matching it.

“Please, lie down.”

“What are you going to do to me?” I stammered, still not moving.

“Nothing that you’ll fear.” He gestured to the bed, palm open. “Now, please?”

I could see a flash of impatience in his eyes, and instead of using that to run away, I instead did as he asked. I believed I had nothing to fear. I believed I only had something to lose.

I lay down on my stomach beside the ties and the blindfold, completely conscious of how silly—how vulnerable—I must have looked, being buck-ass naked and everything.

Javier's face lit up at the sight and he quickly undid his pants. As before, he was commando and his erection was large and impossible to take your eyes off of. My heart continued to beat erratically. I didn't know how I was going to be ready for him. He was going to hurt me without meaning to. I felt the blood rushing between my legs, pulsing eagerly.

He came right beside the bed, his cock pointing my way, throbbing as it waited for me. He reached over and picked up the blindfold and ties.

"I won't hurt you," he said, reading my thoughts. "But you can't just hand over your virginity to me, Eden. I have to take it from you. I have to make you surrender to me, to everything, in every way possible. I want your heart, your soul, and your body. I want the you that you're hiding deep inside. I must have her."

Carefully, he slipped the blindfold over my eyes, tying it behind my head.

"Is that okay?" he asked soothingly.

I nodded, even though everything was scarier and more dangerous without my sight, even though I didn't know if he was asking about the blindfold or whether it was okay if he took everything from me. I opened my eyes but could see nothing but an inky redness. Every pore on my body was suddenly alive and I jumped a little as I felt him gently take my hands behind my back, tying them together with the silky ties.

"Am I supposed to be your submissive?" I found myself mumbling into the pillow, my thoughts going back to some of the disturbing porn I had watched the other day.

He chuckled good-naturedly. "Submissive? I'm sorry to disappoint you my angel, but I don't run with that crowd. Perhaps you'll submit to me tonight, but after that, I'll be the one submitting to you."

He let go of my hands and I heard the snap of the lube bottle closing. I held my breath, my body poised and waiting to find out where he was going to touch me next. I felt his fingers, wet from the lube, going between my legs. I stiffened, afraid he was going about this *completely* the wrong way, but his fingers settled on my cleft instead. Was he seriously going to do it like this? I knew doggy-style was popular but not when it came to losing your virginity.

"How does that feel?" he whispered as he trailed kisses down my spine. I didn't know what to say. Good? It felt better than good. The touch

of his lips was magnified by the darkness, the feel of his wet fingers stroking me until it was almost unbearable. But despite how good it felt, I was still scared. I knew it was going to hurt no matter what way he took me, and I only hoped the pain would be short lived. I wanted it to end in the bedroom and not follow me for the years afterward, trailing like a cloud of smoke.

I felt him adjust himself above me, straddling my back. His sac dropped on me for a moment, soft and strangely pleasurable, before I felt the smooth tip of his cock trail the same wet path that his lips had made.

“I’m going to teach you how to fuck me, Eden,” he said, his voice hoarse. He shuffled back until he was sitting just behind my ass. “But first I’m going to show you what it’s like to be fucked.”

He scooped one hand underneath my pubic bone and pulled me up so my ass was higher in the air. With the other hand he inserted a few fingers inside me, plunging them in deep. It made me squirm in the best way possible.

“Are you ready to give me everything?” he asked.

I said yes before I had a chance to take it back.

He thrust himself into me in one smooth go. The pain shattered me from the inside out, blinding me so that the blindfold wasn’t even necessary. I cried out but Javier kept on coming, kept pushing in until the world was stars of sharp agony.

“Your pain is beautiful, Eden,” he said, his breath catching in his throat. “Because it will fade.”

I wished I had sheets to grip. The only thing I could do was squirm. I bit my lip until I tasted blood, and from the wetness between my legs I knew I was bleeding elsewhere.

His pumping slowed and I felt him lean over. He placed his hand underneath my throat, holding it in place. “Don’t breathe from here,” he said as he gripped my windpipe. “Breathe from your lungs. Slowly. Relax. Slowly.” And as he said it, his own thrusts matched the same cadence.

I tried to do as he said, even though he was almost choking me. I brought my breath out from the deepest part of my lungs, and within a minute, I was relaxing. My legs spread wider and I could feel myself opening up. It wasn’t quite pleasurable yet, but the pain was subsiding. I felt

tears roll down my cheeks and drip off onto his hand which was still around my neck.

“That’s better, angel,” he said, and he began pressing his hand back, as if to completely cut me off. “Sit up, sit back.”

His other hand went around my ribs and pulled me back until I was upright. He was still behind me, thrusting steadily, groaning into my ear. He kept his hand at my throat, and with the other, started pinching my breasts hard. I fought for breath again until I remembered to work my lungs. I gained control and his hand slid away from my breasts and down my abdomen. He pressed his fingers at my clit and slowly swirled them around. Before I knew it, I was feeling the pressure and the pleasure I’d been waiting for. It radiated out from me and sent waves of warmth all over my body.

“Don’t hold back,” he breathed into my ear. “You’re so damn wet, don’t hold back. I’m not coming before you do. I want to hear my name. Angel, please.” He moaned, his hand tightening, nearly losing himself. His voiced was pleading and his fingers worked faster. His cock pressed full against my inner wall, pressing my clit harder into his fingers.

“Say my name,” he grunted. “Give my cock what it needs. Give me what I need.” He stopped to groan and catch his breath. “Please.”

I couldn’t handle any more of it. I came hard and loud, screaming “Javier” involuntarily as I lost all control of my mind and body. I wasn’t even aware if he had come or not until I was face down on the bed, gasping for breath and clarity as he pulled out of me with another wet burst of pain.

He lay down beside me and slowly removed the silk ties and the blindfold. I expected to open my eyes and be in a whole other world, but we were back in his bedroom, the candles flickering around us. I blinked hard and looked at him. His chest was heavy, beads of sweat forming on his temples, his hair sticking to his face. He reached over and touched my cheek.

“Are you alright?”

I had no idea. I couldn’t even process what happened. It felt like a painful and pleasurable dream, a nightmare with a happy ending.

My mouth was totally dry; I couldn’t even speak.

He quickly kissed my forehead and said, “Lie here. I’ll get you some water.”

He left the bedroom and I lowered my head to the pillow again. I brought my wrist up to my face and looked at it. The ties had been gentle, and aside from a few pins and needles that were running up and down my arms, I was good. My nether regions on the other hand? I was too afraid to even move.

Javier came back with a glass of cool water, raising the cup to my lips. He coaxed me to put out my tongue and explained he was giving me some ibuprofen for the pain and swelling which was to follow.

“How long am I going to be sore for?” I asked after swallowing them down.

He shrugged lightly and smiled. “I don’t have too much experience in this, believe it or not. But I suggest you refrain from bike riding over the next couple of days.”

I rolled my eyes at that. Yeah, no kidding. He reached into the drawer of his bedside table and brought out a small towel. He poured a bit of water on it and brought it down to my legs.

“I’m just going to clean you up.”

I shriveled up, feeling embarrassed. “How much of a mess did I make?”

The towel was cold on my skin but his touch was more than gentle. “Not much, I’m afraid. You are a virgin, right?”

I could tell he was teasing me, so I said, “Not anymore.” I was glad I didn’t bleed too much. I always thought I’d lose my virginity and there would be blood splattered all over the walls like an episode of *Dexter*, but I guess years of tampon use and masturbation took some of the edge off.

When he was done he told me to roll onto my back and he continued cleaning me, making sure he was wiping every crevice clean. He then folded up the towel and got to his feet. He was still completely naked, and though his cock wasn’t as hard as before, I couldn’t help marveling at it. That had been inside me. He was my first. And, as I felt my heart clenching uncomfortably, I had the guts to wish he wouldn’t be my last.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Some days I felt like Eden White. Other days I felt like Ellie Watt. But most days, I only knew one thing: I was a horrible con artist. And, against my better judgement, I was making peace with that.

After Javier deflowered me, which sounded far more delicate than what actually happened, the next couple of weeks were a blur of sex and work. If I wasn't working my shift at Hogan's Heroes, I was getting rammed by Javier in the bedroom. Fucked sideways on the porch. Riding him in Jose. Thrust against the wall in the grimy stairwell of my apartment building. Reverse cowgirl on the couch. We were both insatiable, our physical need for each other overpowering everything we did. It was the catalyst for our thoughts, for our actions. We gave each other our bodies as if we'd die otherwise.

It reminded me of being on the Florida coast as a child, when we lived (briefly) at a gypsy-like trailer park. The ocean on the coast was rough at times and I was attracted to the waves. They held danger and mystery, even death, and my parents were too occupied to tell me any better. I'd jump into the surf, far away from the lifeguard stations, and time and time again, when I was trying to leave the water, the waves would break over my head. I tumbled, feeling the sand scrape my body, not knowing which way was up. And by the time I reached the surface, another wave would crash and I would repeat the turmoil all over again. I was tumbling in my new life—my new lie. I tried to come up for air, to think straight, to remember my plan, my goal, my revenge. But the heat in my belly that used to drive me forward had been replaced by the heat between my legs. It disappeared with every thrust Javier took, it melted when we came together. My body was his and it was just a matter of time before he had my heart. When that happened, I knew I'd take in water. I knew I would drown. Any love that starts under a lie is bound to kill you.

I didn't really realize how deep I'd gone in, the power he had over me, until he picked me up after work one day. I was late doing the close down thanks to a last minute rush, so when he got tired of waiting he came inside and pulled up a barstool.

"I won't be much longer," I told him.

“Can I help?” he asked sincerely. He looked especially dashing tonight: black suit, skinny tie, white shirt. Sometimes I wondered what he did during my shifts—where he went, who he talked to. But I didn’t dare ask. I was afraid to ask. To ask would be to pop the sex-filled bubble I’d been living, and I’d been a virgin for too long to give that up.

“No, just sit there and look pretty.”

As I worked, quickly wiping down the counters like I was on fast forward, I kept glancing at his beautiful eyes. They watched me as they always watched me—attentive and involved. And horny as hell.

“Stop looking at me like that,” I admonished him, trying to de-smudge the eyeliner that had gathered under my eyes.

“How am I looking at you?”

“Like you want a good taste.”

He grinned, satisfied and secure. He gave me a short nod. “You know me so well already.”

That wasn’t quite true but I smiled back anyway.

“Can you wipe down the counter?” he asked, getting out of his seat. “I think you missed a spot.”

I gave him an odd look but did as I was told.

“No, do it with your ass.”

I snorted. “With my ass.”

He patted the counter with a few smacks of his palm. “Up, up.”

Curious, I threw the towel in the sink and hopped up on the counter. I wrapped my legs around him while my eyes darted over to the door.

“I locked it as I came in,” he said, reaching up and pulling my shirt over my head. “You really should lock it as you work. I don’t want any criminals coming in and feeling you up.”

My breath caught in my throat but he didn’t notice. His eyes blazed into mine as if he wasn’t a criminal himself. And as he took off my bra and pulled off my jeans and thong, I wondered just what kind of person I’d become. I was ignoring what he was and focusing on what he was to me. I was drowning again. *And* I was naked, sitting on the bar where I served drinks to customers.

I reached forward for his tie but he pulled back, wagging his finger back and forth.

“Nuh uh. You have been serving all day. Now it’s time for me to serve you.”

He made me lie down on my back, the counter still wet from the wipe down and sticking to my spine. He came behind the bar and I heard the rattle of ice cubes in a glass.

I turned my head to look at him, feeling like I was in a fucked up version of a doctor’s examination. “Feeling thirsty?”

“Only for you, my sweet.” He put an ice cube in his mouth and rolled it around with his tongue. He came up to me, dipping his fingers into the ice and sliding them over my hipbones until I shivered. He gently spread my legs, then got up on the bar with me, kneeling between them. He popped another ice cube in his mouth then proceeded to go down on me.

I flinched from his icy lips on my warm ones. The sensation was new but not unpleasurable, and just as I was getting used to the contrast in temperature, I felt him press the ice cube into me using only his tongue.

I gasped, gripping the edge of the counter while the ice started to melt away, constricted by my muscles and tempered by my inner heat.

“I could drink you all day,” he murmured into me, his hands stroking the sides of my thighs, his trimmed nails raking downward. But despite his threat, he got me off in seconds flat and I hoped my cries wouldn’t attract the attention of any passerby outside.

Afterward, I tried to return the favor but he just smiled and handed me my clothes.

“Why are you so good to me?” I asked him, surprised to hear the sincerity in my voice.

He cocked his head, studying me for a moment, before he placed his hands behind my head and brought my face to his so only our noses were touching. Up this close, I could count the number of golden flecks in his green eyes—twelve in the left and ten in the right—the color variation made his eyes take on that unusual hue. His eyelashes were dark as night and unbearably long and pretty, something else that was really quite unfair.

“Why am I good to you?” he repeated, his lips brushing against mine as he spoke. “Because I can see you are broken. And I want nothing more than to put you back together.”

I was drowning again. In his words. In his promises that he never said but I knew he kept.

“I’d like that,” I told him, ignoring that pinch in my heart, the one that told me that he could never put the real me back together. He could never fix Ellie Watt because he had no idea who she was.

My lips found his and I kissed him like he was the blood that pumped in my heart. We lost each other then found each other over and over again, tumbling in the depths.

Until a loud knock at the door rattled it on its hinges and broke us apart with a start.

“Shit,” I swore, jumping off the counter and slipping on my clothes as fast as I could. “I bet it’s Steve. You shouldn’t be here.”

He knitted his brows together. “Why not? I’m your boyfriend.”

My brain stopped on that very phrase—boyfriend—for one brief and happy moment before it went back to fretting that I only had my pants done up.

I slipped on my bra, twisting it around me. “You are my boyfriend. But I don’t think I’m supposed to have people here with me after hours.” For reasons that included the thing we just did on the counter.

The pounding continued. Javier took a step toward the door, determination righting his posture. “If it’s Steve, why isn’t he using his key?”

“Javier, please,” I told him as I pulled down my shirt and tried to make myself look presentable. “Go wait in the back and don’t come out till I tell you to.”

He didn’t move; his eyes were locked on the door. I wished I could see out the nearby window but there was an entrance blocking my view. I gave him a little push. “Go.”

He did so reluctantly, and I waited until he was out of sight, hiding in the hallway where the washrooms were, until I approached the door.

“Steve?” I asked. My hand went for the handle which was jumping with each knock. “Julie?”

I eyed the chain lock and decided to err on the side of caution and slide it across. Better safe than sorry. Then I opened the door.

There was an explosion of sound, of splintering wood and breaking metal. The door came off its hinges and hit me right in the face, slamming me into the ground. Before I could figure out what had happened, that someone had kicked the door open breaking the chain and the hinges, I was

being hauled to my feet by the big brute whom I'd gotten kicked out. Tom had come back and his fingers were digging into my arms as he shook me.

"Where's your messiah now, huh?" he cried out, face red, spit flying. He was even drunker than he was that day, and I turned my head to see three men behind him, all in their early twenties and jacked up as anything. These were not his frat buddies from before—he had brought reinforcements, men meant to fuck me up.

I tried to hide my fear hoping that Javier was dialing the cops from his hiding place. As good as he was at breaking noses, he wouldn't stand a chance with these guys. They were out for blood...mine.

"Please let go of me," I said, wondering if I could plead my way out of it. He responded by putting one hand at my mouth and squeezing it together. I cried out in pain and he leaned in close. "No one refuses me," he snarled, and I wondered if knew what dangerous ground he was playing on. Like hell I wouldn't press charges on him for assaulting me.

Then the realization hit me in the stomach like a cold fist. I couldn't press charges if I was dead.

I was so temped to look behind me at the bar to see if Javier was still there, but it would only give him away. Tom pushed me into another one of the guys, this one built like an MMA fighter and over six feet tall. He grabbed me by the top of my head and forced me down to my knees. With his other hand he went for his belt buckle. I'd bite his dick in two, I hoped he realized that.

"You're going to suck it, then you're going to fuck it," Tom squealed like an excited coyote. "Then you'll do it to all of us until you learn not to fuck with me again."

The man's fist tightened in my hair until I was sure I was bleeding at the roots. He took out his erect penis, an ugly beast of a thing, bringing it toward my mouth.

Another explosion. Liquid splattered on my face. For a second I thought perhaps he blew his load too soon, but when I opened my eyes, I saw blood and the man toppled to the ground. I screamed and scrambled to my feet, turning around in time to see Javier striding toward us, his arm stretched out in front, a gun pointed at Tom. He remained meticulously focused on him, eyes not straying, not even to catch a glimpse of the gun that one of the other men was pulling out from his pants.

Without missing a beat or looking away, Javier turned toward the gunman and fired, his eyes cold and hard, boring into Tom. The other man was shot straight in the heart and he fell to the ground, joining the man who had been shot earlier. My eyes were torn between staring at their dead, lifeless bodies, the one man still with his dick hanging out of his pants, and at the other man who was turning around and making a run for the door. Javier shot him in the back and he went flying to the ground too.

“Javier!” I couldn’t help screaming. I had screamed his name earlier under such different circumstances. But unlike then, he acted as if he hadn’t heard me.

He marched right up to Tom, grabbing him by the collar and pointing the gun up under his chin.

“The messiah is right here,” Javier said, his voice impossibly calm and cool. “And he’s going to kill every man who has the intention of hurting this woman.” He jerked his head in my direction. Tom glanced at me as I stood there, shaking, covered in blood, in complete shock. I wanted Tom to suffer but I didn’t want Javier to kill him.

“Javier,” I whispered, not finding the strength to go louder.

“I’d like a real apology this time,” he went on, pressing his gun further into Tom’s chin. “Then you’re free to go.”

Tom was also frozen. His mouth flapped stupidly, sweat streaming down his forehead.

“Now!” Javier screamed in his face, the veins bulging in his neck. I was fairly sure Tom was going to die from fright and be all the better for it.

But he swallowed hard and looked at me, avoiding the intensity of Javier’s murderous gaze. “I...I’m sorry,” he said with a gasp as the gun dug in deeper.

“Louder!” Javier screamed, rage personified.

“I’m sorry!” Tom cried out.

Javier smiled. It was akin to a lion baring its fangs. “Good boy,” he said, then pushed Tom away from him. “That wasn’t so bad now, was it?”

Tom just stared down at his dead friends, the blood pooling around their wounds and seeping onto the floor. He glanced up at Javier, brows drawn together, arms shaking.

“You’re just going to let me go like that?” he asked in quiet disbelief.

“Yes,” Javier said. “You’re free to go. I always keep my word. Of course, I’ll kill you before you get anywhere.”

As quick as the bullets inside, he raised the gun and shot Tom square in the head, a tiny hole of blood quickly spreading out from the center of the wound before he fell to the ground. I was screaming again, lost in the sound of the gun, the reality of the moment.

This was happening. My Javier, my criminal. He was every bit as bad as I thought he was and suddenly it was real. Who I was pretending to be. Who I was dealing with.

I hadn’t noticed I was crying until Javier was pulling me toward him, holding me tight. He stroked the back of my head with his hand, the gun still in it.

“Come now, Eden,” he whispered. “I did what I had to do. They had this coming.”

I could only sob in return, burying my wet face into his suit jacket.

“I promise to kill anyone who hurts you. They would have hurt you badly. And then they would have killed you.”

I pulled away, trembling despite his arm around me. “Did you know them?”

He shook his head. “No, though one of them looks familiar to me. I don’t know from where.”

I looked down at the bodies. My first look at dead people. Somehow I knew it wouldn’t be my last. “Are we going to get in trouble?”

He brushed a wet spot, blood probably, from my cheek and peered at me, leaning in close. “No. We aren’t. This was self-defense. And anyway, I’ll take care of this.”

I looked over at the bar. “The video cameras. They would have seen everything. Everything.” The whole getting head on the bar counter was going to be shown to everyone. I was going to lose my job. Not to mention the whole Javier shooting people in cold blood. Self-defense or not, it didn’t look good.

“Hey, angel,” he said, tipping up my chin. “Let me take care of this. You go into the washroom to clean yourself up. I have a few calls to make.”

He let go of me and jerked his head in the direction of the hall. Then he brought out his cell phone and dialed a number.

“It’s me,” he said into it. “We have a situation. Clean up. Camera needs wiping too. Bring Perez.”

Then he hung up and nodded again for me to get moving. “Please, Eden. I’ll handle this. You have nothing to worry about.”

I nodded meekly and staggered over to the washrooms. I looked up at my reflection in the mirror and did not recognize the blood-splattered blonde staring back at me. Ellie Watt was nowhere to be found. This was Eden White. And she had plenty to worry about now.

CHAPTER NINE

It was four in the morning when we returned to Javier’s house – he refused to let me sleep at home and I couldn’t blame him. After I had cleaned myself up at the bar, I came out of the washroom to find we weren’t alone. Three burly looking Latinos were helping Javier clean up the mess, the bodies nowhere to be found. Javier saw me lurking in the darkness of the hall but didn’t acknowledge me. So I stayed there and watched, knowing that the men must have seen me and didn’t care. They were under Javier’s total command.

And they worked fast. Soon, two other men showed up and then I was brought into the mess. While some of the men shampooed the carpets where the blood had seeped and repaired the broken door, I showed Perez, a chubby guy with a multitude of earrings and tattoos on his neck, where the electronic equipment was kept. Ten anxious minutes later, he said the security footage was wiped clean and replaced with benign footage. I immediately thought of the movie *Speed* and nearly laughed at the fact that this wasn’t a movie. This was suddenly my life and I was dealing with a whole new reality.

On the drive home, Javier convinced me that there was no way anything would be amiss. Gunshots were common in the neighborhood, that much I knew, and there was no sign anything had gone down. Everything

looked exactly as it did before and he said no one would report those boys missing.

“What about Tom?” I had asked. “He looked like a normal guy, like he went to college.”

Javier narrowed his eyes. “Never trust the men who look normal, Eden. They’re the ones who’ll cut you when you’re not looking. People will be looking for Tom, but they won’t come looking there.”

“But the incident at the bar. They might come for you.”

He smiled dryly. “No one comes looking for me. I go looking for them.”

Even though I knew a little about what he did for a living, Eden White didn’t. It was time to ask.

“Who were those men? The ones who helped you.”

His mouth twisted, lips pressed together. I wondered what answer he was going to give me, if it was going to be close to the truth, if he was just as adept as me at keeping stuff hidden.

“I have some friends, connections from Mexico. That’s all. We deal with a lot of...similar problems down south. I knew I could count on them to make things right.”

That was one of the vaguest answers I could get. But I decided Eden White didn’t want to question things. I had her nod, like it was completely normal to have a murder clean-up team at your disposal. I made her naïve and gullible and happy to accept anything that was coming out of his mouth.

And honestly, it eased the guilt that was forever lingering in my heart, knowing that he was a liar too.

Later that night, as I was falling asleep in his familiar bed, feeling safer in his arms, he whispered into my hair, “I want you to quit your job.”

“What? No.” I couldn’t quit. I was only leaving if they made me.

“I mean it. I worry about you. I can’t let you go out there without me. What if it happens again? What would I do?” His voice broke and I wondered how this man turned out to be the way he was. So completely caring yet a killer without a conscience. “I need you, my angel. And I’ll do anything and everything to keep you.”

I let his wonderful words slide into me, melting away my reserves, the scenes of the night that were stained in my head. But I couldn’t quit my

job. I needed something real to hold onto. “I can’t quit.”

“I’ll take care of you. I have money. I have the means. I’ve been taking care of my sisters almost my whole life.”

“Javier, please...no,” I said, trying to stay strong.

“Then move in with me. At least give me that much.”

Move in with him? We hadn’t even exchanged I love you’s yet.

“It’s too soon,” I said feebly.

“Nothing is too soon with us,” he said. He adjusted himself so he was propped up on one elbow, his fingers trailing through my hair. I closed my eyes at his soft touch. “Please, angel. Make me your home.”

Moving in with him would bring me so much closer to what I wanted. That glimpse inside his life, to become a part of it, to become a part of his job. But now that I had a look into what his other life was like, the one that happened when I wasn’t around, I didn’t like it. I had prepared for this but it didn’t mean anything. Each moment we were making love to each other, murmuring sweet nothings into each other’s ears, that was one life. Each moment that I would be reminded about his job, about my job...that was another life. And the further I sank into his arms, into the growing love I felt for him, I knew I’d have to make a choice. Did I want Javier? Or did I want revenge?

I snuggled my face into the crook of his shoulder and whispered, “Yes, I’ll move in with you.” That was the only decision I could make for now.

Since I had been spending so much time at Javier’s place anyway, I felt at home right away. The only drawback was the thirty minute commute to work each day, but I found that being alone in my truck was the best time to try and distance myself from my new situation and get my life back on track.

Which wasn’t easy. Javier had been right about the bar—no one suspected anything. Granted, after the incident happened, I didn’t work for

another couple of days, but no one had called me saying they found evidence of a few murders, so I figured I was on the safe side.

It was hard being back at work though, being at the scene of the crime. I'd tried to deal with what happened, what was going to happen to me, but every time I saw those images—Javier with a gun, the half-naked body on the floor, Tom with the gunshot in his head—I nearly blacked out from panic. I found ways to push the thoughts aside, to shove the images deep down. I tricked myself into thinking it had all been a dream, that none of it had really happened. I pretended that I was falling in love with Javier and that was all to the story. I didn't let myself dwell on who he really was.

And the fact is I still didn't know who he really was. I knew he worked for Travis. I now knew people worked for him. He had power. He could kill people in cold blood. He was extremely skilled with a gun. He would do anything to protect me. The years leading up to this, I knew who I was going after and what I was getting involved with. I knew drug cartels were ruthless and violent, breeding people with no mercy. People like Javier. And yet now that I'd uncovered it, now that the blood was on my hands, I wanted to turn a blind eye. I wanted to sleepwalk through the bad and focus on the good.

Love was very good.

There was no point in denying it. I was in love with Javier. I just didn't realize how bad I had it until Gus called me one day before my shift. I pulled over in the parking lot, eyeing the clock on the dash. I had five minutes and I hoped Gus wouldn't talk my ear off. Not that it was his style to do so, but because I hadn't talked to him in weeks.

"Hey, Gus," I greeted hastily, hoping he'd catch the urgency in my voice. It was May now and the interior of my car was making me stick to the seats. I missed the dryness of California badly.

"Ellie," he said, and for the first time ever, my own name sounded strange to me.

"Eden, please," I said while attempting to put on mascara in the rearview mirror.

"Sorry, Eden." He grew quiet. "Long time no talk. How ya been?"

"I'm good."

"You sound good. You sound...busy."

"I'm just about to start my shift."

“You’re still working?” He sounded surprised.

“Of course.”

“I thought you’d be all wrapped up with, well, your mark by now. What’s his name again?”

I swallowed hard. “Javier.” My mark.

“Yeah, him. So how is that going? Did you get your revenge?”

I nearly jabbed the mascara wand in my eye. I needed to put the pointy objects away. I sat back in my seat, not wanting to talk about this, not wanting to face it. “Not yet.”

“It’s a long con,” he mused.

“This one might take longer than we thought...”

“Have you seen Travis yet?”

I hadn’t, actually. Aside from the night at the bar, I hadn’t seen anyone that Javier worked with. He was at home with me when I was there. We spent our days eating good food, jogging on the beach in the mornings, making crazy bunny love at night. I rarely saw him take any phone calls. In fact, it was so easy to pretend that he didn’t do anything at all; he just existed and purely for me.

“No. No Travis. Not much of his work, either.” I kept my voice low, paranoid of my surroundings. It was evening and a few patrons were heading into the bar. I only had a few minutes left before I’d have to serve them.

“Well, if this is still what you want, then you keep at it until you see him.”

My stomach turned in abrupt knots. “Why did you say that?”

“What?”

“*If* this is still what I want...”

“Well...people change their mind. They learn to let go of things.”

“They fall in love,” I blurted out.

Silence hugged the airwaves. Did I really say that out loud? I was about to say something else, anything else, when Gus beat me to it.

“Ellie,” he said, using my old name again. “Mistaking obsession for love is one of the greatest mistakes you’ll ever make.”

“What does that even mean?”

“It means that you’re obsessed with your revenge. You’re confusing that feeling for love. You don’t love this man. You couldn’t possibly. You

know deep down you couldn't love the man who's responsible for what happened to you."

I gasped, my heart thudding up my throat. "Javier is not responsible for what happened to me!" I hissed, indignation flaring up over my skin, my face turning hot.

"He is by association. And when you've been screwed so bad that can be enough. He works for the man you want to ruin. The man you say ruined you."

"He did ruin me!" I yelled into the phone, shocked at the anger that was pouring out of me. So much for sliding everything under a rug. "He ruined me," I said again, my voice lowered.

"Then you can't possibly look at Javier and think he didn't have a part in it."

"He's only three years older than me. He was in fucking Mexico at the time of the accident!"

"Look, I'm only telling you what you don't want to hear. Javier might have never even known who Travis was at the time, but you can't tell me that if Travis ordered him to do the same to someone else, some other little girl, that he wouldn't. That's the kind of person you think you're in love with, Ellie. I want you to wake up and see the lie. Obsession is not love. He is a bad man."

"Well maybe I'm a bad woman!" I yelled and promptly hung up the phone. I threw it down onto the seat, watching it bounce in the air. I tried to catch my breath, the truck feeling even hotter, and laid my head on the steering wheel, watching for the phone to ring, for Gus to call back. But he didn't.

Suffice it to say, I had a lousy shift. I was short with the customers and even snippy with Julie. She assumed I had a bad go with Javier, which was almost the case. I couldn't exactly tell her that I was questioning my own feelings for him, wondering if I was making the right choice, if I was making a huge mistake. I made up some story about us fighting because we were stressed out, and she invited us on a double date to the movies with her and Andrew the following week. Though I had a hard time picturing the new Javier having fun with another couple, I told her I'd ask.

When I got home later that night, I sat in the truck for a few moments, trying to figure out what was what. Gus had never called back

and that was fine. I heard enough. I knew the point he was trying to make and damn if it didn't make some sense. Had I actually been falling for Javier? Did I really love him or did I love the lust? Did I love the deception? Did I love the idea that I was getting closer to my goal, as much as I pretended it no longer existed?

For all my questions, I didn't have any answers. I got out of the truck and trudged up the stairs to the porch. To my surprise, the table outside was aglow with candlelight and wine and cheese had been set out on a tablecloth which flapped quietly in the Gulf breeze.

Javier stood in front of me in his casual clothes: dark jeans and a white polo shirt. The wind messed up his shaggy hair and he smiled bigger than the moon. That's when I saw the boy in him, the twenty-three year old from La Cruz, Mexico—the young man smiling adoringly at his young woman.

“What's this?” I asked breathlessly, touched by the feelings that were being stirred up.

“I wanted to surprise you, figured you needed a nice break after work.” He came up to me and held me in a tight embrace, his lips pressed against my neck. I softened in his arms, losing my resolve, losing my dilemma.

“You shouldn't have. It's almost midnight,” I told him.

“I would do anything for you, at any time of the day.” I brought my head in front of his and searched for the sincerity in his eyes. It was there in spades.

Who do I love? I thought. *Is it you?* Javier, as if hearing my thoughts, brought me into the most tender, sweep-me-off-my-feet kiss. How could such a bad man make me feel so good? Maybe it was because I'd been right earlier. I was equally bad.

We sat on the chairs and he poured me a glass of wine. He was sitting across from me and lifted my feet out from under the table, took off my boots, and started massaging them.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” he asked, popping a piece of hard cheddar into his mouth with his free hand.

“Something with you?” I asked hopefully.

“A few buddies of mine...colleagues...are going sailing. One owns a boat I was thinking about buying.”

I straightened up in my seat at two things. One, the mention of colleagues. That was enough to get my heart racing. Two, the mention of a boat he was going to buy. Just how much money did Javier have?

“It’s not a huge boat,” he said, reading part of my expression properly. “About a 45-foot Jeanneau, from France.”

“Ooooh,” I said with a laugh. “Only a 45-foot yacht from France.”

He grinned and threw a piece of cheese at my face. I was lucky it was brie.

“Hey, I have had my eye on this boat for some time now.” He grew quiet, concentrating on my feet, being gentle on my scarring. “You know, I used to work on boats as a child. My father was a mechanic in La Cruz. It’s a popular bay for cruisers, people stopping by when Puerto and Nuevo Vallarta were too full. Now I think there’s a brand new marina. It isn’t a bad thing, I think it brought some money to the town. But when I was a little boy, things were more simple. My papa, he knew everyone and fixed everything, from boats to cars. I’d help out when I could. Sometimes I’d run in the water and tow the little boats to shore so the tourists could go for a walk in the village. Sometimes they’d give me a few pesos...sometimes they were fuckheads.”

I nearly spit out my wine over that swear, sounding so funny with his accent. I wanted to hear more about his past, eager for it, like a little puppy. But Javier quickly dropped the reminiscing. “So, tomorrow, you’ll come?”

I nodded slowly. “Your colleagues are going...from the consulting business?”

The corner of his mouth twitched and he quickly covered it up with a wine glass, as if we both knew there was no consulting business, like this was all an inside joke. “Yes. From that. My boss might be there too.”

Again, the wine almost made an appearance. I tried to swallow it down quickly but it caught in my throat and I started coughing violently.

“Are you okay?” he asked, placing my feet to the side and starting to get out of his chair.

I nodded frantically, one hand at my chest, the other telling him to stay put. “Yes, I’m fine. Wrong hole,” I said between breaths.

He sat back in his chair and winked at me. “You’ve never complained about the wrong hole before.”

This time the piece of cheese went flying back at him. This then led to an all-out food war as the entire tray of brie, cheddar, and blue cheese went soaring all over the place. Next thing we knew, we were throwing glasses of wine at each other, covering us in the red liquid, not caring if we were staining our clothes or each other.

We collapsed onto the table with happy giggles and promptly shed our saturated clothing. We made love right there and then, Javier taking control and me letting him. We relished our childishness, our freedom with each other, exploring our bodies like they were made of one soul, not two.

And it would have been perfect had it not been for that little seed that had been planted in the back of my brain. The little thought I kept latching onto, even when he was driving me to an explosive orgasm, even when he was grunting swears in my ear as he spilled into me, thrusting hard.

His boss might be coming on the boat trip tomorrow. Travis. The man behind my actions and his. I'd spent the last few months avoiding the difficult decision I knew I'd have to make. And now, suddenly, it was thrust up on me, begging me to face it.

Tomorrow I might see Travis. Tomorrow I'd have to decide.

CHAPTER TEN

The next morning we woke early, Javier going out for his usual jog on the beach. The sky was blue and the light breeze smelled of salt and freshness, blowing away any vestiges of humidity. I declined the run, however, telling him I wanted to stay in bed just a while longer. Considering all the sex and spilled wine we had last night, he didn't question it.

But the moment he put on his low-slung jogging pants, the ones that made you want to undo the drawstring with your teeth, and ran out the back door, I slipped on my robe and crept downstairs to the truck. With shaking hands, I took the bottle of acid out of the glove compartment and slipped it into my pocket. I went back upstairs and got ready for the day.

We ended up at a marina in Gulfport. It was obviously still recovering from the hurricane, and even two years later, it looked like a non-stop construction site with new docks being put in everywhere you looked. There were a lot of big yachts though, wealth floating on the waves. I was dressed as neatly as possible for the occasion: white linen pants, a striped boatneck shirt, and a monogrammed scarf wrapped around my head, holding back my hair. A vintage saddlebag purse was slung from my shoulders, holding only three things: my cell phone, a small bag of makeup, and an unidentified bottle that I had to guard with my life.

We walked along the marina, my hand in Javier's. I was nearly floating away from anxiety; each step we took along the dock felt like a step toward the end of my life. At least the life I had so carefully constructed for Eden White.

Javier seemed a bit on edge too, wiggling his jaw back and forth. He was dressed entirely in black: black shirt, black dress pants, black boat shoes. Like a nautical Johnny Cash. He looked like he meant business, though I wasn't sure what business that was.

All I could think about was Travis. Every second led us toward him. I started scanning the marina, looking for him everywhere, on every sailboat, on every yacht. I imagined what I would say when I met him. If I'd be able to keep it together long enough until I found the right moment. If the moment would even present itself. After all, I couldn't just toss the acid in his face and run away. Like Javier would just let me leave...would he? What exactly would my lover do to me if he found out everything had been a lie? What did he *really* feel for me, and would it be enough?

I started to feel sick, the marrow of my bones full of lead. I clutched my stomach and slowed. Javier immediately stopped and grabbed my arm.

"What's wrong?" he asked. I had a hard time looking at him, my eyes concentrating on the wooden splinters of the dock. "Angel?"

"Just feeling a bit queasy," I managed to say.

“We aren’t even on the boat yet,” he said, looking around him. “Should we turn back? We can always go out another day.”

I shook my head. “I think I’ll be fine,” I lied through my teeth. How could I ever be fine after this? I was about to destroy everything I had come to love.

“Maybe you’re not cut out for sailing.”

I smiled weakly, looking into his eyes, swayed by the concern in their depths. “I won’t know until I try it.”

He watched me for a few moments before he nodded and started leading me along again. “All right. We shall see. You are one hard cookie.”

“Tough cookie,” I corrected him, forcing lightness into my voice. I had to act like everything was normal, I *had* to. He squeezed my hand and we continued. Each step toward love. Each step toward revenge. I walked toward the end of something, maybe the end of everything.

And it was all in my hands.

We turned the corner, a lump forming in my throat, and there before us was a gorgeous, long white sailboat with the name Northern Girl painted on the side. One man was sitting at the helm drinking a beer. The other two were on the dock, checking their cell phones, waiting for us.

I didn’t see Travis anywhere.

“Is Travis down below?” Javier asked them. My heart shuddered. It was the first time I’d heard the name come out of his mouth, the very mouth that kissed me and savored me. It made everything so damn real and the reality plunged into me like one of his bullets.

How could I choose between love and revenge? How was I going to get out of this alive? How on earth did my heart keep beating, as if it wasn’t about to stop? My mind reeled.

The man at the helm got up, putting his beer down. “No, he had something to do in Mobile,” he said. “He sends his apologies.”

Javier visibly relaxed, smiling sympathetically at the man on the ship.

Travis wasn’t coming.

The relief gutted me in the best way possible. It was overwhelming, palpable, bringing tears to my eyes.

At that moment, Javier looked at me and whispered, “Are you okay?”

I smiled bravely at him. “I think I have allergies.”

He brought my head toward him and kissed my temple and then introduced me to the other men. Raul was on the ship, Alex and Miguel on the docks. I couldn't take in much about them at that moment, except for the fact that Miguel was the only one who smiled at me. Actually, I couldn't focus on anything except the expansion in my chest, as if I finally got air, as if I finally stopped drowning.

Last night I had to make the hardest decision of my life. I had to choose between keeping Javier and our life together or fulfilling my destiny and exacting my revenge. I'd spent too many years nursing my wounds, wrapped up in the blackness that permeated every fiber of my being, dreaming of the day that I could get my life back. Revenge was all I knew, all I cared about.

Until I met Javier. The man who would lead me to it, who would bring me the justice I craved like an addict on their knees. Now I craved him, trading one addiction for another. And wasn't love the noble choice? Wasn't I choosing the right thing?

I didn't want to question my priorities anymore.

I got on the boat and we set sail for nearby islands. I kept to the bow, sitting with Javier, leaning back into his strong chest as he explained sailing to me, the currents, the whole new world that lay before us on the Gulf. Later, when he went back to talk to his colleagues, I scooted over to the edge of the boat, dipping my legs over the side, delighting in the tickle of the sea spray. When I made sure no one was looking, I reached into my purse. Grasping the cool bottle underneath my hands, I gave it a squeeze. Then I chucked the bottle into the sea. It landed with a small splash and quickly moved past the boat. It was one message I hoped no one would receive.

We docked at a small secluded bay at a marine preserve around lunchtime and sat down to an impressive feast on deck. I felt a million times lighter since throwing away the bottle and couldn't help grinning at Javier every second like a sick teenager in love. I was so happy and relieved with my decision to go legit that I didn't mind that Raul and Alex gave me the cold shoulder as we dug into our prawn cocktails and okra-laden gumbo. Maybe cold shoulder was pushing it—they were practically glaring at me the whole time, watching me like a hawk.

Javier could tell, I knew it, but he didn't confront them. He let them ignore me while holding me close to his side. But Miguel, on the other hand, paid me extra attention. He was the one who prepared the food for us, his skills just as good as Javier's.

I brought this up as I slurped back a hearty spoonful of the gumbo.

He beamed. Miguel was a cute man, a few years old than Javier, with full cheeks, a sparse mustache and goatee, like an angelic devil. He was a short man too, but built like an athlete.

"Well, I have to say that if it weren't for Maria, I wouldn't even know how to heat up soup," Miguel smiled.

I looked to Javier. "Maria? Your tattoo?"

His lips twitched into a smile. "Yes, Maria was my mama. Miguel grew up down the street from us."

"He's like a brother to me," Miguel said, "but an annoying younger brother that constantly gets you in trouble."

Javier laughed, sipping back his gin and tonic. "Miguel, come now. You're the one who would drag me out of work so we could go pick up your friend's sisters."

"Those were *your* sisters, old friend!" he joked, slapping the table. I laughed along with him, noticing that though a smile was appearing on Alex's face, Raul remained as cool as stone.

"So what made you move here, Miguel?" I asked. "Are you in the consulting business too?"

Miguel's smile faltered for only a split second and then he didn't miss a beat. "Yes, well, I'm trying to be."

Suddenly Raul got up and said, "Enough talk about work, I'm putting on some music. Javier, I think we need to discuss the boat."

He left to go down into the galley and Javier followed, patting my knee comfortingly before he went.

Alex got up too to light a cigarette and stroll to the front of the boat.

I raised my eyebrow at Miguel, already feeling comfortable with him. "I don't think they like me very much."

He waved his hands and made a "pfft" sound. "Oh, don't worry about them. They hate everyone. And anyway, they are just protective of Javier."

“Protective, huh,” I mused. I thought about how to properly phrase my next sentence. “That’s funny. I sort of got the impression that Javier was the boss of them.”

Miguel shrugged. “Your impression is correct. Javier is kind of the boss of all of us. Mas o menos.” He made the corresponding gesture with his hand. “More or less.”

“So why would they be protective of him...did Javier used to canoodle with bad girls?”

“Canoodle?” he asked. “Oh, you mean like have sex with?”

I pursed my lips. “I was going for another word, but sure.”

He grinned. “Yes, Javier is quite the ladies’ man. Even back in La Cruz. You know, he lost his virginity when he was fourteen to our friend’s older sister. I’m telling you, he was a Casanova.”

My eyes narrowed automatically. Miguel reached over and slapped my hand. “But I understand you live with him now and he’s never done that for any woman. So, don’t worry my friend. Perhaps Raul and Alex are just jealous. Men are funny animals.”

“That they are,” I muttered. How silly was it for me to feel stung over the admission that Javier was a ladies’ man? I mean, I’d heard it before at the Crab Hut. Hell, I did live with him now, so what did it matter? But now that I was throwing away my old and only purpose in life for him, suddenly everything mattered. My love for him was hitting me like a brick and along with it came my insecurities and the desperate need for his love in return. I hoped I hadn’t come up for air only to drown again.

After we finished up the food and Miguel and I drank the remaining Tecates over a few rowdy games of Crazy Eights, we headed back to the marina. The sun was sinking low in the sky as we tied up at the dock, and Miguel, Raul, and Alex hopped off the boat, Javier holding me back.

“You sure you don’t mind if we spend the night here?” Javier asked Raul.

He shook his head like it annoyed him to move. “No, how would you know if you want it if you don’t test all of it out?”

“The boat is like a lady,” Miguel teased. “You need to spend some time in all her tight spaces.”

I grinned while Javier squeezed me to him. “No one can compete with the one I have here.”

As expected, Raul and Alex were stony faced at that comment, but Miguel responded with a cheeky little grin. They waved goodbye and walked off, a mysterious trio if I ever saw one.

I looked up at Javier, his eyes glinting gold in the late sun. “Are we really staying overnight?”

He eyed me with amusement. “Of course, my angel. Raul is right. How will we know the boat is for us if we don’t spend time sleeping with her? I hope you won’t mind a threesome.”

I pinched his side at that comment, all the while grinning over the fact that he had said the boat was “for us,” as if I really mattered in his decisions. And as the evening fell, my worries went away with the sun. After a fresh fish dinner, he set Dire Straits to play from the cockpit speakers. Then he jumped off the boat and onto the dock, the waves rocking black liquid under the moon-filled sky.

He held out his hand for me after the opening notes of “On Every Street” began playing. “Care to dance?”

“On the dock?” I asked. “Right now?”

He cocked his head. “Come, my angel. Dance with me.”

I made my way off the boat and joined him at his side. A breeze had picked up and the marina filled up with the sound of halyards clanging against the masts as if Dire Straits had a whole new rhythm section. Down the rows of docks, the boats glowed with lights. This place made a surprisingly romantic dance floor.

I let Javier slip his arms around me, one at the bottom of my spine, his fingers trailing onto my ass, the other holding my hand up by our faces. Being so self-conscious of my leg and my occasional limp, I was never one for dancing. But Javier was so sure and so smooth he made our moves effortless as we glided past the boat. The emotions of the song washed over me, making my eyes close.

“What can I tell you as I’m standing next to you,” he sung quietly in my ear, “she threw herself under my wheels.”

I buried my head in his neck, inhaling his scent that used to be musk and tea but now was just him mingling with the salty air. It soothed me, coating my heart, making me forget everything I knew. Yes, I was drowning again, but this time for the right reasons. There was no better reason than love.

“You know,” he began, voice low and full, “if you were to ever leave me, I’d come looking for you, on every street.”

“You promise?”

“Always.” And I knew he kept his promises.

Later, we brought our blankets and sleeping bags up to the top deck. Though the night was already sweltering enough, the breeze just enough to cool our skin, we generated our own heat anyway. I straddled Javier as he sat behind the wheel, not caring if someone was on a nearby boat and getting a peep show, my breasts glowing under the twinkling lights. I was throwing everything to the wind, all caution, all my ghosts. I came, trying to keep my cries from carrying over the water but failing miserably.

Javier quickly pulled out and pressed me down into the seat, standing above me. He finished himself off with long, fast strokes and came onto my stomach, his body tensing, his head thrown back, face to the moon. I watched him, his body framed by my breasts, as he came back to earth. The desire in his eyes was still there, not tamed by his release. He went to his knees beside me and started slowly, softly rubbing his seed into my stomach and up onto my chest.

I watched him, my heart in my throat. I’d never seen such intensity from him after sex and it was here now in full force, burning out of his gaze.

I wanted to ask what he was doing, but I didn’t need to.

“I want to come on every inch of your body,” he whispered, and somehow it didn’t sound dirty at all. It sounded clean, pure, like rainwater. “I want to rub it in you, like this, until it’s a part of your skin. I want to stain you, Eden. I want myself embedded in your skin, in your heart, in your soul.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I sat up and put my hands on either side of his neck and kissed him as sweetly as I could. “You’ve stained me, Javier.”

I expected him to grin in response, to look happy or relieved. But the fire never burned out. It remained, watching me like he’d never see me again. It stayed like that as we fell asleep in the blankets, locked in each other’s arms, watching the wind instrument spin like the galaxies hidden behind it.

I woke up as dawn was spreading in the east, the sky a smoky purple swept with pelicans. Javier was already awake, sitting in front of me, hugging his knees to his chest. I slowly sat up, holding the blanket to me, and gingerly touched his back.

He didn't flinch. He kept his eyes focused on the sky, on the birds as they dipped and twirled in their early morning dance.

“Javier?”

I waited, biting my lip anxiously. The strange look in his eyes hadn't passed during the night and it was only then that I was recognizing it for what it was. I must have looked like that for the past few months I'd been with him. It was the look of guilt. It was the look of fear. I realized I'd never seen Javier look afraid before. An extremely unsettling feeling sunk in my chest.

“Javier?” I whispered, trying again, my palm flattened on his smooth, tawny skin. I stroked it down the lines of his cross tattoo. “Talk to me.”

He stayed silent. Somewhere a seagull cried, haunting and plaintive.

I lay my head down on his back, hearing his heart beating beneath, slow and methodic, unfazed and steady.

He cleared his throat. “I'm in a hole I can't get out of.”

His voice almost melted into the air, it was so liquid soft.

I turned my head and placed my lips to his skin, to let him know I was listening.

He continued, “I don't know if you and I can go on.”

It took a few beats for those words to sink in, but my heart felt it first before the rest of me did. It felt like it stopped and decided not to beat on. This was it. What was the point? Why beat on through this pain that was slicing into my bones, descending so suddenly and holding me hostage.

I hadn't realized I was gasping, getting to my feet with my hand at my chest, as if to will my heart to go on. I looked down at Javier in a daze, expecting him to explain, to continue, to keep going, to end this or start this or do something. But he kept staring at the sky, that fearful look in his eyes.

“Eden,” he finally said, after I felt like I’d died a million times on my feet. “I’m sorry. I am so sorry.”

I swallowed the ball of pain. My words finally found their way off my tongue. “Okay. I get it. I’m just one of your many women...”

I didn’t even know what the hell I was saying. But I didn’t know what to believe, what conclusion I’d have to draw. My lips opened and closed, wanting to say more, to scream and cry and ask what the fuck was happening. But the pain in my chest kept taking my breath away.

He brought his eyes to mine, staring up at me in confusion. “One of many women? No, my angel. You don’t get it at all. You’re my only woman. And that’s the problem.”

The fear on his face spread. “I’ve fallen in love with you. And I’m lying to you.”

Half of his words were like a balm. The other half ripped the wound open again. “You love me?”

He nodded solemnly. “I love you more than I’ve ever loved anyone. More than I thought I was capable of. Eden, you’ve taken my heart by surprise from the day I first saw you. It hasn’t been my heart since.”

I didn’t understand. I was elated, violently happy, so why wasn’t he? Why was this so bad, so difficult? What was happening?

“Then why do you look so afraid?” I blurted out.

“Because I’m afraid to tell you the truth about me,” he said quietly. “And I haven’t been afraid in a very long time.”

“You love me,” I said again, needing to hear it, even from my own mouth.

“Yes, I love you, Eden White,” he said. My fake name didn’t even make me flinch. He loved Eden White. I was Eden White now. He loved me as I loved him.

I came over to him and sat back behind him, my arms wrapping around him, holding him close to me. “I love you too. With all my heart. With everything I have. You’ve stained me, Javier. I’m yours to the core.”

I felt him swallow hard, his muscles tensing. “I’m not a consultant, you know. But I guess you’ve already figured that.”

Here it was. The confession. And it didn’t even matter anymore.

“I know you’re not,” I said slowly. “But I don’t care what your job is. I just want to be with you.”

“What I do isn’t exactly legal.”

“Just because something is legal doesn’t make it a virtue.” And now I was starting to tread on dangerous ground. I was justifying everything and too much of it, more than innocent Eden White ever should. But I didn’t care. He loved me and I loved him, and there was nothing else in this world left to care about anymore. Everything else was at the bottom of the sea.

“I’m involved with some bad men and I run in some bad circles. Angel,” he paused, breathing hard, “I’m not a good person.”

“Neither am I,” I whispered, willfully ignoring him.

“Don’t say that. Don’t try and compare yourself to me.” His voice grew sharper.

I shook my head. “Who is good and who is bad? Life isn’t black and white, Javier. You and I, we’re just trying to live in all the grey. Isn’t that what you’ve done? Isn’t that what you want? To live?”

“You’re making excuses for something you shouldn’t.”

He may have been right about that. But the second I threw away the bottle, I gave up my ghost.

“No, I’m not. I’m letting you know that I don’t care about what you have to do to live, the things you have done to survive. I’m in love with you, whether you’re good or bad.”

“I work for a cartel,” he spit out in anger, shame washing over him. “A fucking drug cartel.”

I straightened up and took my arms off him. I knew this, it didn’t surprise me, but his emotions did. I could feel them coming off of him, rising in the air.

He turned his head to the side, his eyes flashing beneath a furrowed brow. “I’ve killed as many people as I’ve fucked. I’ve stolen and I’ve lied and I’ve shown no mercy to people who may have deserved some. I’ve done deplorable things in the name of money. I’ve ruined lives for someone else’s pleasure. I’m a very bad man who has done too many bad things to deserve a pardon. I shouldn’t be walking this earth as I do, I shouldn’t have the money I have, I shouldn’t have the love of a woman who is so far above me she should have wings.” He twisted himself around and looked me dead on. “I don’t deserve your love, Eden. You have my heart, but yours should remain in your chest. Save it for a better man. Save it for someone who’s

worth it.” His eyes shimmered as tears threatened to spill over. “You need to leave me.”

“No,” I told him, grabbing his face. “I need to love you.”

I searched his eyes, imploring him to lose the guilt, the anger, the shame. To lose his past, his ghost, the things that haunted him. I coaxed and pleaded and tried to open myself up so he could see everything I was, and how it was all for him.

We gazed at each other for what seemed like ages, so lost but so found.

Finally, a small smile crept up on his lips, making his eyes dance like tempered flames.

“I am yours, angel,” he said determinedly. “And you, you are mine.”

We kissed as if it was the first time. As if it was the last time.

“You are mine,” he repeated against my lips, wrapping his hand around my wrist and holding it like he’d never let go.

“My angel is mine.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“That tattoo is healing pretty well,” Javier said to me as he loaded the dishes in the dishwasher. I was putting my hair up in the copper-trimmed mirror over the kitchen table and my bicep flexed. We had gotten tattoos a little over a week ago, and the music notes that were inked around my arm were still looking fresh and new to my eyes. To be honest, I jumped a little every time I looked in the mirror. It was my first tattoo and it was taking me a while to warm up to it.

Of course, I didn’t get it alone. A few weeks ago had been our one-year anniversary. Javier thought it would be great to celebrate our love by getting tattoos dedicated to each other. Since we both loved music so much, we decided to pick out songs for each other. I chose the Nine Inch Nails’ song “Wish” to go on his wrist. He already had his mother’s name on his

inner arm and that huge cross on his spine, so it definitely wasn't as big of a deal as it was for me.

I had the musical notations of the song "On Every Street" wrapped around my bicep. Javier said the song represented him more than anything could. He was the man who would travel to the end of the world for me. He was the one who would never give up. He looked at it and looked at me and I could tell he had branded himself on me forever. It was his mark. It was his stain. I was permanently his. No matter what happened to us down the road, the tattoo told me he'd come looking.

Sometimes it bothered me. I didn't want him to come looking because I didn't want to leave. I was happy with Javier, happier than I'd ever been in my life. Even a year later, I still woke up in the morning, marveling at how handsome he was, how attentive, receptive and loving he could be. He wasn't good and he wasn't bad, he was just Javier. And he was mine.

After Javier had brought up the truth about himself, he'd been careful not to involve me in it. As ashamed as he was about it, he still kept the job. He still worked for Travis. As long as I never asked any questions, he never told me anything. It was easy to pretend he really was a consultant. I would spend months believing he did nothing at all except enjoy the good life.

But, occasionally something would betray him. Instead of lipstick on his collar, I'd find blood. One time he came home late with a broken nose. I helped him tend to it, fussing over it like he was the victim when I knew very well he wasn't. If Javier's nose was broken, it meant someone else was in a shallow grave.

It was my new reality, my new life I'd come to accept. As long as I kept it out of my head, I went on being Eden White and being madly in love.

Besides, Javier once had his own mission as I once had mine. He had his revenge.

He opened up about his childhood and his family a few months after he told me about the cartel. By then, he had purchased Northern Girl from Raul and we made a point to go sailing whenever we had free time. Me, being stubborn, still insisted I work at Hogan's Heroes. It kept me sane and

busy, and I made a good friend out of Julie. So whenever I wasn't working, we were usually on the boat, sailing lazily around the Gulf.

I had just served him a gin and tonic, practicing my bartending skills on my day off, when we saw a pod of dolphins frolicking in the distance. I took out my brand new SLR camera, a gift from Javier, and started shooting them excitedly. Meanwhile, he was watching me like I was some cute new species.

"What?" I asked, after the dolphins had swum out of view. "Dolphins don't do it for you?"

"You do it for me," he said, leaning back in the seat behind the wheel. The boat was on autopilot but he still liked to look like he was steering. "No, I've seen a lot of dolphins. In La Cruz there was one pod that would swim up to the shore every morning. I always thought they were saying hello to me. Turns out my sister Beatriz had been feeding them fish scraps. I was very disappointed."

"Awww," I teased. "Not everything can fall for your charms, Javier."

He shrugged. "I guess not."

He never talked about his sisters very often, so I decided to broach the subject.

"So, tell me about Beatriz."

He raised a dark brow. "Beatriz? Why?"

"Because I don't know anything about your family."

He leaned forward, eyes glinting. "And I know nothing about yours."

"Yes you do," I said, completely conscious of the lie I was still living. "I'm an only child. I have a cousin in Florida. My parents still live in Arizona. My dad works in air conditioning and my mother is a schoolteacher. Not much else to add."

He wiggled his lips, thinking. Finally he shrugged again in that completely nonchalant way of his and said, "Okay, my angel, I will tell you everything you need to know." He took a long swig of his drink then cleared his throat. "As I've told you before, my sisters are Beatriz, Marguerite, Alana, and Violeta. Beatriz is a year younger than me. Violeta is the youngest...and brattiest." I smiled at that. "Alana and Marguerite are the twins. They were the favorites. They are also the prettiest girls in La Cruz, and I hope I never have to go back there because I know I'd kill any

man that looked at them.” My smile tightened now, my brain glossing over the fact that he probably *would* kill them.

He took another sip before squeezing the lime into the glass, taking his time. “My father was a good man. A bit of a bastard but a good man. He never hit my mother or us. But he didn’t really...love us, either. As I told you before, he worked as a marine mechanic. But...it wasn’t his only job. None of us knew about his other job, except maybe mama. But if she knew, she never let on that she did. I wouldn’t have been surprised if she was oblivious until the end. You see, my father, he was part of a cartel. The Gulf Cartel. The cartel that did not have any presence in the area. Everywhere on the coast, that was under the control of someone else. But my father was there. A mechanic by day, a spy at night. We lived under false pretenses. We were living a lie for my father.” He looked off into the distance and slipped on a pair of shades that were sticking out of a cup holder by the wheel. Now I couldn’t see his eyes. He wanted it that way.

“One day,” he said, trying to keep his voice calm and steady, “he was gunned down. I don’t really know what happened. I was sixteen at the time and in school. After that, everything changed. My mama could barely take care of the girls, and there was no one left to make a living. I had to drop out of school and take over the mechanic’s business. And naturally, I wasn’t as good at it as my father. But I did it. I supported us, all of us.”

My heart pinched for him. “Didn’t the police do anything?”

He laughed to himself. “Oh, my angel. The police? The police are more corrupt than the cartels. The police have their fingers everywhere, in every cookie jar. They did nothing because my father was the enemy and that was that. To them, it was good riddance.”

“And to you?” I asked softly.

“To me? It was a burden. He was a stranger to me, and now I had to do his work for him. It wasn’t fair and I hated him for it. Especially when mama died.”

I gulped. “How?”

“Same thing. A few years later, people came by in the middle of the night and they shot her. The only reason I’m alive is because I was still awake when it happened. I heard them come into the house, in my mama’s window. It was too late to save her. I went in my sisters’ room and made them hide under the bed and in the closet. We heard them kick in the door.

They would have found us easily, but they were already attracting attention. The children just weren't worth it."

He trailed off. I watched him as pain tried to claw its way onto his face. He fought it off and finished his drink.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, feeling helpless and dumb.

"So am I," he said. "After that, I talked to some friends. Miguel was one of them. I found out what my father was a part of. The Cartel Del Golfo. I wanted to join. I wanted revenge."

His words were hitting me deeper than I would have liked, festering inside for all the wrong reasons. The selfish ones. He wanted revenge. He was like me...the old me. Suddenly it seemed Ellie Watt and Javier Bernal had a lot more in common than I thought.

"So, eventually, I moved east and joined them. They knew my father, and Miguel helped me in. I had no idea that he had such ties with them too. I felt so blind all those years, never picking up on anything. It was always just women and beer and dreaming of a better life. I never knew what I could hold in my hands, what my father held. Then, after a year or so, things split apart...you may have heard it on the news, though the news in America tends to ignore what's really going on. A mercenary army was brought in to help with the war with Los Rojos, the rival. Our rival. And the leaders found I was better at negotiating than I was at fighting. I was brought out here to help control the import under Travis Raines. Because, of course, Los Rojos is here too. You see the USA, you see the gulf of Mexico, but you don't see the Mexico in the gulf. The real Mexico. This is everywhere and under everyone's nose. Not all of the wealth here is from oil."

I noticed I was wringing my hands together nervously, sweat piling up on my palms. "And what about your sisters? Are they okay? Are they safe?"

He nodded. "They are. Beatriz works in a café and takes care of Violeta, who is still in high school. The twins are training to be flight attendants. I pay for their schooling, their houses, everything that I can."

"So you work to pay the bills like everyone else."

He looked at me sharply over his glasses. "You don't need to justify what I do. I do what I have to do to survive because that's all I know. I don't make excuses, I own it. This is me, this is who I am, this is my life. It

shames me but not enough to stop. At one point, this was all about revenge; it was about getting the men who got my father and my mother. But somewhere along the way, I forgot about the beast. Vengeance is a beast, you know. It can be tamed. I just stopped feeding it.”

And, as the months went by and Javier and I settled into our routine of sex and love and sea spray, I realized I stopped feeding the beast too.

But it wasn't gone. Not for good. Right after we had gotten the tattoos, it reared its ugly head.

Javier was attending a lavish fundraiser held at one of the casinos in Gulfport, ironically the same casino that my father once worked at. That was enough to make me a bit leery of it. Not because I thought I'd be recognized or that he'd be there—my father and mother had been gone for years and I knew they were nowhere near the coast—but I was afraid of the memories being brought up.

Still, I pushed past it. I took the night off of work and got dressed into a beautiful strapless gown, white with gold accents. It was the first time I'd gotten dressed up in a while, and I was delighted to be going with Javier, who I knew would look especially dashing in a tuxedo.

I rubbed some of the moisturizer on the tattoo and frowned at it in the bathroom mirror. It suited me just fine when I was wearing my usual jeans and boots, but in a fancy dress, I looked a bit punkish. I hoped it wasn't too snotty of a fundraiser, because the tattoo would be the first clue that I didn't really belong to my new lifestyle.

Javier was a lucky bastard; all his were hidden and even *Wish* would be covered up by his new watch.

“What are you doing in there?” I heard him call from the foyer. “I want to see you. And then I'll want to fuck you. And then we'll be late.”

I rolled my eyes and patted my updo. Sex or not, there was no way in hell he'd be ruining my hair after all the hours I had spent on it. “I'll be there in a minute,” I shouted back, and smiled slyly to myself in the mirror. We were already sounding like an old married couple and I loved it.

When I was satisfied with everything, I came out, grabbing my clutch off the bed and sashaying down the hall. The gown was long and my sandals were gladiator style, both of them covering up my scars.

Javier, clad in a sleek black on black tuxedo, turned when he saw me, the biggest smile spreading across his face. It lit up his eyes and made

him glow.

“You look beautiful,” he murmured. “Like a Roman goddess.”

“Good. I hoped I didn’t look like a bride.”

His eyes narrowed playfully and brought me right up to him, pressing me to his chest. “And why would looking like a bride be a bad thing, hmm?”

I blushed, feeling the awkwardness melt all over us. He was joking, of course, but we’d never even talked about the subject of marriage before.

“It’s not a bad thing...if you’re a bride,” I said with a teasing smile before kissing him.

“Maybe that can be arranged,” he said after pulling away, his eyes gazing into mine. He was sincere. The awkwardness came back.

I cleared my throat and raised my arm. “Hey, you don’t think I look a bit trappy with this tattoo, do I?”

He frowned, his smile wiped clean. “Who said you looked trappy?”

I could almost feel the ice coming off of him.

“No one,” I said quickly. “I just thought it didn’t go.”

His grip at my back tightened. “Go? It goes, Eden. It’s a part of you, just as I am. Are you saying I don’t go?”

I hadn’t heard such anger in his voice in a long time, and his normally perfect English wasn’t making much sense. I tried to placate him, running my hands through his hair, which was slightly sticky from product. “Javier, baby, please. I didn’t mean anything by it. If you think it looks good, then it looks good.”

His jaw twitched back and forth as he watched me, debating something in his head. The look made my heart race and not in a good way. I hated it when he’d get like this, like I was putting him down somehow or trying to get rid of him. I think sometimes he could tell that I wasn’t as in love with the tattoo as he was.

“Fine,” he said slowly. “But at least act like the woman you are. Be proud of your tattoo. Be proud of me. Especially when I introduce you to Travis.”

Everything stopped. Froze. Dead. Done.

Travis? Travis Raines?

“Angel, are you alright?” he asked. My hands had come off his hair and were shaking in front of me. Travis. I was going to see Travis. The year

we'd been together, I'd seen Raul and Alex maybe a handful of times, Miguel a bit more than that. His work was swept under the rug.

"Please talk to me," he said, his voice rising.

I turned away, tears springing to my eyes. Tears of fear and panic and revenge. I couldn't go there and see Travis. I'd come undone.

"I...I can't go," I tried to say, my breath shallow, my lungs useless. "I can't go."

He grabbed my wrists and held me to him, bearing down on me. "Why? Why? Is it because of the job?"

I nodded, the lump in my throat sitting there like a grenade. I'd let him speak, let him figure it out, because I sure couldn't.

"I know we said I wouldn't discuss my work and we don't. You know that. You know I keep you out of it."

Now the tears were falling, thick and hot down my cheeks, and I shook my head back and forth. He watched me, so confused by my emotions, trying to understand.

"I'm sorry, Eden. I didn't think you'd mind. He'll just be there; it's got nothing to do with what I do. A lot of the higher ups in Mississippi will be there, you'll see. I just have to introduce you if we see him. We've been together for a year and you haven't met him yet. He's dying to meet you."

And if I met him, I would die.

"Oh, come now," he whispered, bringing my head to his chest. "You don't have to go if you don't want to. I didn't think what I did affected you so much. But of course I am foolish not to see it. You're young and pure and beautiful and have no business in my world. I will remember to keep them more separate. From now on."

He peered down at me, wiping my tears away with his thumbs. "But you do understand that I still have to go. Don't you?"

Did I? Did I understand that? I didn't know so I just leaned into him again, trying to regain my breath and control my thoughts. My reaction was surprising even to me, to know that the beast, that ghost, was still lurking inside me somewhere. It terrified me more than anything else to know it could come back so fucking easily.

He kissed the top of my head. "I never want to love anything more than you."

I should have made him promise that.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The sky outside the window was black, a moonless night. The room was somehow darker. I was still awake when I heard Javier return from the fundraiser. I had spent the evening crying in his absence, until there was nothing left in me to cry. I curled up into our bed and waited for him, lost in my thoughts, battling with my heart.

“Angel,” he whispered into the silence. He had come in the room and I heard him quietly removing his clothes. He smelled like cigarette smoke, probably from Alex, and a lot of hard liquor. He went to the bathroom, being extra careful with the lights, then came into bed.

“Eden,” he said softly, pulling the covers up to him. I lay on my side, my eyes open, staring out into the night, my back to him. I felt him touch my hair, pushing it off the pillow. He gently kissed the back of my neck, breathing in deep, waiting for my response. But I didn’t say anything. I feigned sleep. And after a few moments, while I tried not to hold my breath, Javier slowly rolled over to his side. Shortly after that, he was snoring lightly and I felt free once again. Free with my thoughts, free to wrestle with my heart. Free to face the ghost who came screaming back into my life, more tangible than any wispy apparition.

The concept of having to face Travis, of knowing he was out there, was still too much for me to bear. I wondered if I’d ever get over it. I wondered if I should. How could I go on being with Javier, knowing what he did? How long could I ignore the truth again before it slapped me in the face? He was the leader of the cartel that Javier’s father had been a part of. That Javier joined for revenge. He wouldn’t be leaving it anytime soon—Travis would forever be a part of his life, just like he’d forever have a hand in mine.

I just didn’t know what to do. I wasn’t used to being a woman of inaction. I didn’t like this middle ground I was caught in, unable to make a

decision without second guessing it. I went a year with my darkness buried and in an instant it was everywhere.

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine life without Javier. It gutted me, to my very soul, to have to go on without him. I then tried to replace that emptiness with vengeance, but it didn't seal the hole. No matter what happened, the life I chose was going to hurt. I could stay with Javier, the love of my life, and be reminded of why I came to be with him in the first place. Or I could somehow get my revenge again and feel vindicated but hollow.

And then there was the third choice; I could just pack my bags and leave. Leave Javier and leave my revenge. I could just go; head north, or maybe to Texas to see Gus. I could start a new life and hope for a new love. I could start all over again with no more lies.

Of course, I knew I couldn't do that. My love for Javier was too overpowering, and more selfishly, I thrived on his love for me. He was a killer and yet I accepted it, because to have his love and devotion was like getting the pardon of a tyrannical king. I wasn't a lamb but he was the lion.

I just had to remember how sharp his teeth were.

The digital clock glowed 3:30 a.m. when I woke, my heart already beating in my throat. Did I have a horrible dream or did something else wake me? I looked beside me. Javier was gone, the thick covers thrown back.

A scream rattled my ears, squeezing my heart. I sat up and leaped out of bed, unsure of what was happening. It was still dark as anything, the ocean outside the window black like a pool of ink. I slipped on my pajama pants and made my way to the door, noting the light coming under the crack. I wished I had a knife or some type of weapon.

Javier's gun!

I scampered over to his bedside table, stubbing my toe on the bed as I went. I swore quietly through the pain and frantically searched the drawer. The gun he kept there was gone. I knew he had others in the house, but I had no idea where. The study, maybe, but that was outside where the

scream had come from. Now I could hear talking and the occasional outburst. What the fuck was going on?

I grabbed a pair of cuticle scissors from the bathroom counter, and holding them in my hand like I was about to stab someone, I slowly opened the door and poked my head out into the hall.

There were shadows on the walls from the kitchen and a whole lot of Spanish going on. I crept down the hall, against my better judgement.

There were four men in my kitchen.

One was Miguel, sitting in a chair, hands tied behind his back, a strip of shiny duct tape over his mouth. The other man was Raul, holding back Miguel's head, his fist in his hair. Alex was standing a few feet away, closest to me. And of course, naturally, oh I suddenly saw how natural it was, there was Javier, holding a long, shiny knife to Miguel's throat.

I barely recognized my lover. That cold reptilian glaze had come over his eyes, the same look I saw when he shot Tom in the back. This was the boy from Mexico who wanted vengeance. This was the man I said lived in a world of grey, when everything at this moment pointed to being either black or white.

He was black. So very black.

"What are you doing?" I whispered, panic rising in my throat. I was amazed I had the courage to speak, to confront this.

"Go back to your room," he said, the knife still held in place. Miguel's eyes were searching mine, pleading with me to do something. His nostrils flared above the tape, taking in what might be his last breath.

"What's happening?" I cried out. "Why are you doing this to Miguel?"

Javier looked to Alex. "Take her to our room, please."

Alex turned and grabbed my arms. I tried to shake him off but his grip tightened.

"Let me go! Get off of me!"

"Now!" Javier yelled at him, his eyes not even meeting mine.

Alex began to push me down the hall. I fought against him, not wanting to be put away, to be shut out. If he was going to bring this into our house, if he was going get me involved, then I was going to see all of it.

"He's like your brother, Javier!" I screamed, trying to twist out of Alex's hands. "You can't hurt him."

I didn't understand how this could be happening. Miguel was one of the good guys. He was friendly and personable and I liked him. I *liked* him. He and Javier had been through so much together, and now he was nothing more to him than a pig about to be slaughtered. And what for?

I was facing the bedroom, unable to see behind me when I heard a smack, palm against skin, and Javier roared, "He is no brother of mine! No friend of mine would betray me, would betray the family! He turned his back, he spurned me, and he deserves...nothing but death!?" His voice growled over the last words, more monster than anything. "I should keep you suffering for this, cut off all your toes and feed them to you. But I am not an animal. I am not like you, my dear Miguel."

Alex had almost shoved me in the room when I was able to turn around and get one last glimpse. Javier was bending over Miguel, his eyes fastened on his, so close, so menacing. I knew those eyes would be the last thing Miguel would see and I didn't wish it on anyone. He whispered a few things in Spanish to him, deadly but poetic, then I was shoved in the room.

I flung myself at the door, trying to open it, but Alex was on the other side, holding it shut. It was too late. With my ear pressed against it the door, I heard the swipe of a blade, liquid splattering amidst a gurgling sound. Then nothing.

I collapsed to a ball on the floor, shaking from fear, from the horror. I didn't have to see it to know what happened. To know that Miguel was sitting out there, slumped in his chair, a curtain of blood beneath his chin. I could see it in my mind, clear as day. And I could see Javier's face. Cold and impersonal. Another job completed.

I tried crying but the tears wouldn't come. I was hit with clarity instead. I couldn't stay here. It wasn't safe. I didn't know who that man was out there, but he wasn't my Javier. And I didn't trust him.

I got up and slipped on a sweatshirt that hung behind the door. I could feel that Alex was still on the other side guarding it. This was good. He was occupied and the others would be cleaning up the mess, or perhaps Javier was calling in his clean-up team because he couldn't stand to get his hands dirty; he couldn't stand it if the blood he spilled got on him.

I grabbed my purse and slipped on a pair of running shoes, and as silently as possible, opened the bedroom window and climbed out into the night sky. I landed softly on the porch and crept down the stairs to the

garage, glad that the waves were louder now and drowning out the sound of my escape.

I opened the door of my truck and quickly checked in the back for a small duffel bag I kept on the floor. I had always told Javier it was a change of clothes for my job. And sometimes it was. But its real purpose was to provide me with a getaway, a clean start and a new life. Gus had insisted I have one and I was glad I listened. It contained another set of fake IDs, extra license plates, a bunch of cash, and, yes, a change of clothes.

I took in a deep breath, my brain unable to let go of the panic and the fear. I was probably making a stupid move, emotions controlling my actions. But there was a dead man in my house, and at the moment, that's all I needed to run.

Knowing the others would hear me right away, I started the car and quickly reversed out of the garage like a bat out of hell. I spun the car around once I hit the road and then popped it in drive. I pressed down on the gas pedal like my life depended on it—and it might have.

I drove and drove and drove until I crossed the state line into Florida. My cell phone was left in the house, which was just as well. I had erased every text message I ever shared with Gus, so there was no trail if he examined it—and he would—leaving only texts from him and Julie. But Gus, I needed to talk to him, more now than ever. It had been eight months since we last spoke and I knew 'I told you so' wouldn't cut it.

But told me so about what? That I fell in love with the wrong man? That some people aren't worthy of love at all? Who was anyone to decide that? I loved Javier, despite the fact that I was running. I couldn't ignore it, it just made things harder.

The sun was rising as I checked into a motel outside of Defuniak Springs. I collapsed onto the bed and fell promptly asleep; even visions of Miguel's blood weren't enough to keep me conscious.

When I finally woke only a few hours later, I was tangled in the stiff motel sheets, the fan whirring slowly above my head. I rolled over on my back and watched it as the blade looped around. What had I done? I had panicked and run. I had left everything behind without even thinking it through.

Could I go back to him? Would he even take me? I was beginning to sound like a mental patient, sick in the head. It's funny what love can do to

a person. It strips them of everything, even their instincts. It creates a new reality for you to adhere to, a new world where you break the rules just to keep the love intact.

I couldn't figure it out on my own. Love made me weak and it made me scared. The motel room felt like a prison cell, not freedom. I leaned over and picked up the sticky rotary phone and dialed Gus's number.

"Hello?" he answered, sounding cautious.

"Gus," I whimpered.

"Ellie? Ellie, are you okay? Why are you calling from Florida?"

I sunk to the floor with the phone at my ear and started to cry.

"Ellie, please...talk to me. Are you hurt?"

I sniffed hard, wiping my nose with my sleeve. "Gus, I made a mistake."

"That's okay, it happens. What did you do?"

I sobbed. "I don't know, I've made so many. I don't know the right thing anymore."

"Ellie, where are you?"

"Please stop calling me Ellie," I said.

He paused. "Eden, I'm sorry. Where are you?"

"In a hotel in Florida. Defuniak Springs."

"Why are you there?"

"I left Javier," I cried out. "And I don't think it was the right thing to do."

"Okay, just calm down. You're okay for now. Tell me why you left him." His voice was soothing, like the kind of tone you'd take when doing hostage negotiations.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "He killed a man in our house a few hours ago."

"Oh...I'm sorry."

"It was a friend of his! He killed a friend of his, slit his throat, and I don't know why."

"Would it matter if you knew?"

"Yes!" I admitted. "It shouldn't, but it would matter. I don't get him, Gus. How he can be this way with me, so loving, so giving, and yet kill people."

"But you knew this was a part of him."

“I know I did!” I yelled in frustration, scrunching my forehead. “I know I did and it didn’t matter because I accepted him as he was. But now I don’t know if I took on too much. How can I keep loving him when I know what he does?”

“You can’t. You stop.”

“I can’t! That’s the problem. Don’t you see? I’m scared of him. I’m disgusted by the vile monster he becomes, this beast he lets out. But I still love him. I’d still do anything for him. I can’t just turn off my heart. I want to, I do, but I can’t. I love him with everything I have and I hate myself for it. Because it’s wrong to love him, I know. It’s so wrong.”

“What if he didn’t love you?” he asked quietly. “What would you do if he didn’t love you?”

“But he does. I know this. He does, Gus, He does love me. Passionately. Obsessively.”

“Ellie...”

“Eden!” I screamed into the phone. “Please call me Eden!”

“You are Ellie Watt. And he doesn’t love you. You got that? He loves the *lie*.”

His words choked me. The truth wrenched my lungs.

“No,” I stammered, “he loves me. He can see the me underneath, he knows me—”

“You are Ellie Watt!” Gus roared. “You are not Eden White. He loves Eden White, not you. Not you with your life and your parents and your scars that you got for very different reasons. He loves the lie you crafted, the person that you aren’t. What do you think he’d do to you if he discovered Ellie Watt? Would he love her? Or would he kill her?”

“Please...” I croaked out, not wanting him to go on. “I can’t...”

“Ellie, you got involved with a bad man and you are way in over your pretty head here. You did the right thing. You left. Now you have to keep moving. You hear me? You keep going. You stay low. You change your name again and try and head back here when you think the coast is clear.”

“I can’t...”

“You run away from him and you run now. He doesn’t love you. He wouldn’t if he found out who you were, if he found out that this was all a lie. You can’t live a life with him like this. I’m glad you gave up your

revenge, sweetheart, but you did it for the wrong reasons. You can't trade in that passion for another that would still get you killed. You listen to me and you run and you never look back. He will *never* love the real you."

"Gus," I whispered.

"What?"

"He has my cell phone. Never call it again. Never call me again."

"What?"

"Goodbye, Gus."

I hung the phone up on the cradle and sat back, legs splayed, my shirt wet where my tears had fallen. The heartache was waiting in the wings, waiting for me to coax it out of the darkness, for me to embrace it, to accept what Gus had said as truth. And when it came, it was going to devour me whole and I was so damn afraid of the person who'd come out on the other side. The person my heartache would spit out wouldn't be Ellie Watt and she wouldn't be Eden White. I didn't know her name, but I knew she wouldn't possess a heart.

I was fucking scared of her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I sat there for minutes on that motel room floor, leaning against the bed, breathing in and out, trying to slow my heart, trying to ignore the pain that threatened to crush it. To dwell on what Gus said was too easy. I was going to slip, and slip soon, and never get up. I didn't want him to be right; he didn't understand.

I slowly got to my feet, my knees shaking from my weight. I needed cold water on my face. I needed to put the fan on a faster speed. I needed to get some alcohol in my system, armor against the forthcoming battle for my heart and my head.

I was halfway across the room, my feet padding on the crunchy carpet when there was a loud pounding at the door. It jumped on its hinges and stopped.

I froze, ice swelling in my veins, coating me from the inside out.
“Eden!” came the panicked voice from the other side.

Javier.

He had come. He had found me. Just as he said he would.

And I wasn't afraid.

I went over to the door and opened it, not bothering with the chain.
No chain would keep him out of my heart.

He burst into the room, dressed in black lounge pants and a white fitted t-shirt, his sleeping attire. The same outfit he wore when he killed Miguel. He must have changed shirts, because I absently noticed there wasn't a speck of blood on him.

“Eden!” he cried out as he saw me, taking in my puffy, bloodshot eyes.

He grabbed my chin in his hands, pressing his fingertips into my cheeks. His eyes were wild, vivid, pulsing as they searched my face.

“Why did you leave me?!” he shouted with desperation. “Why did you leave me?”

My vision blurred, his golden face becoming hazy. It was a relief.

“You left me!” he continued, his voice cracking.

I sobbed and he shook my head back and forth until I stopped.

“Talk to me! Angel, please!”

My lip trembled. “You killed him. In our house.”

His face fell. “I had to. Angel, please, I had to. He wronged me. He wronged all of us. He lied. He *lied!*”

“You promised, you *just* promised me that I'd be kept out of it. Javier, you make it so hard to love you!”

His hands dropped off my face, falling to his sides.

“I know...I know. I'm sorry.”

“You're not sorry!” I yelled at him, finding my strength. I moved away from him, needing my space. “If you were sorry, you wouldn't have done it! I don't care if Miguel lied to you, there's no need to take an innocent man's life.”

“He wasn't innocent, he was with another cartel. All this time!”

“I don't care! You...you murdered him. I love you and you murdered him and I'm in love with a murderer! You murdered him, you took his life, someone I knew even, in my house. In my kitchen. Where I eat the fucking

bacon and eggs you make me every morning! You brought that into *my* life. I can't love you and have that. I can't do both."

"I am sorry," he said, now looking at the dirty carpet riddled with cigarette burns. When he looked up, his eyes were wet. "Please forgive me."

Oh, his words were cutting up my heart. My anger was strong but my weakness was stronger.

I tried to hide it, to stay impassive and strong, but he saw my vulnerability and his eyes burned with hope. He came over to me, pulling me to him.

"I need you to forgive me, for I have sinned," he whispered.

"I'm not a confessional," I told him, trying to ignore his lips at my neck. "I'm just...I'm just...I can't do this. I shouldn't."

I heard him sniff, felt his tears on my cheek. I was losing my resolve.

"Revenge has been my lover for too long," he said, breath hot on my neck. He began sliding down my body, toward the floor, arms around me. "Power, my savior. I need to learn how to put you first, above those things. I need you to help me, to teach me. I don't want to love anything more than you, Eden, so please, I'm begging you, show me how. You need to be my everything."

He was now on the floor, wrapped around my leg, holding on for dear life, a small sob escaping him. All of my defenses were down and I was melting with him.

"I once told you to leave and not to love me," he cried out, muffled. "I'm taking all of that back. Not because I deserve it or because I'm worthy of your love. But because I need it like the air I breathe. I need you. I need you to believe in me. I need your love to make me feel like I can be redeemed."

I looked to the ceiling, looking for something to steel myself against him but there was nothing but the fan and its steady whir. Round and round it went like me. Why did I have to love this man?

"Eden, angel. Please. Please forgive me. Please give me another chance. Please give me a reason to keep fighting, to be a better man. Redeem me. Only you can."

I sank to the floor and joined him, wrapping my arms around him. We held on tight like we were trying to choke each other. He cried into my

chest and I gave up trying to keep my head above water.

“I love you,” I managed to say. “I will redeem you if you can redeem me.”

“I promise,” he said, lifting his face. He buried one of his hands into my hair, cupping the back of my head. His cheeks were wet, his eyelashes black and glossy. My heart swelled, knowing I wasn’t giving him up. Knowing it didn’t have to make the choice. Knowing I didn’t have to brutalize it. It was still intact and beating, all for him.

“Do you really love me?” I asked.

He watched my lips, shaking his head in disbelief. “I really love you. I love you. I love you.” I closed my eyes, relieved, and he kissed my eyelids.

“How did you find me?”

He kissed my forehead and spoke into it. “You have a tracking device on your car. I put it there.”

My chest caved, just slightly. I swallowed. “You have a tracking... you tracked my car?”

“Yes, I can never be too careful with you,” he said, now kissing my temples. “I told you I’d follow you.”

Was that sweet? Or was that creepy? Or was that just Javier?

“Why?” I whispered.

“Because of this,” he said, stroking the tattoo on my arm. “Because you belong to me. You’re my angel. You could change your hair color, your eye color, everything about you. But the tattoo will always remain. I will always remain. I am the ink in your blood.”

He pulled back and ran his finger along my lips. “You are all mine, even if you run. I will find you because a soul needs its other half to truly live.”

He watched my lips with lust as he brought his thumb into my mouth. Instinctively, I let him in, sucking it, tasting him.

“And now,” he growled. “I will reclaim you.”

Suddenly he ripped his thumb out of my mouth and his lips were on mine, hot and wet and filled with fire. I was caught off guard and fumbled for a few moments before I could kiss him back. My hands couldn’t take his shirt off fast enough, while he just ripped my t-shirt down the middle, right in two.

He buried his face into my chest, biting my nipples until I cried out from the pain, squeezing my breasts, slapping them lightly. Whatever beast had been let loose last night was still in him, wanting to put all his fire in me. I wanted to let him. I wanted to tame him between my thighs.

I tugged down his pants, feeling his erection come free, holding him hard in my hands. Javier snarled in return, going for my neck. He sucked and bit until I was sure he had drawn blood, a wetness flowing down and pooling in my clavicle. I squeezed his cock, making him moan, feeding the fire, spurring him on.

He grabbed my hair and wrenched my head back, tugging at it repeatedly while he bit and licked his way down to my hips. His tongue swirled along the bones, soothing for a blessed moment, before he ripped my thong apart and shoved his face between my legs. He plunged his tongue inside me, groaning loudly, the vibrations moving my body to the brink. I raised my hips, trying to drive his tongue deeper, trying to get more, and he responded by giving me everything. He moved a wet finger through the soft crack of my ass and fingered the rosebud for a second before thrusting it in me.

I stiffened at the sensation before losing myself to the feeling. I came instantly, my body convulsing around his finger and tongue. Before I had a chance to regain my thoughts, to recover, he got to his feet and pulled me up by my throat before spinning me around and slamming me against the wall.

His eyes bored into mine as I gasped for breath. He ground his teeth together and hissed, “You are mine and will always be mine. I am going to fuck you so deeply you won’t be able to look at me without thinking of this, of the way I own you, of the way I’ll keep you.”

He jammed my leg up and brought his cock to my entrance, where I was already wet and throbbing again. He pushed it in, but only slightly.

“Tell me you want this, tell me you want me,” he growled.

My insides quivered, needing his fullness, craving him.

“I want you,” I said. He jerked forward, my head bumping against the wall.

“Tell me you want me!” he yelled, his jaw clenching, the veins in his throat sticking out. “Tell me!”

“I want you!”

“Tell me you need me and that you’re just a big fucking hole without me.”

“For God’s sake, Javier, just fuck me!” I roared back.

He wasted no time in complying. With one upwards motion he impaled me on him, riding me so quick and so hard the room started shaking, the fan swinging overhead. He came with the fury of a tornado, of an animal, of a man whose only redemption was found somewhere inside of me.

When we were done, I could see that the beast went with him. He was my Javier again, perhaps not redeemed but at least loved. He sat on the corner of the bed in his clothes, looking elegant and refined despite everything I had just witnessed, everything to the contrary.

I went to the bathroom to clean up and was surprised to see the weary eyes of Ellie Watt looking back at me. Judging me. I had been so close to becoming her again. So close to freeing her. She was disappointed, her body marred by bloody smears, bite marks and bruises, physical signs of our troubled love.

I gave her the finger. Then I got ready to go back home.

Javier loved me. That was the only thing that kept me going in the weeks and months after I ran away. He loved me and he kept his business out of sight. I never saw Raul again, I never saw Alex. When he left, usually on the weeknights I was working, he never told me where he was going and I never asked. Our love grew in this oblivion, feasting on my blind eyes. I only knew the him that I saw and that was enough for me.

He loved me because he kept his word and he never stopped showing me what I was to him. Whether he felt he had something more to prove or he was trying to make up for everything he’d ever done wrong, I didn’t know and I didn’t care. We became closer, opening up to each other, appreciating each moment. I’d never imagined that I could love him more than I already did, but each morning, each smile from his beautiful lips

made my heart swell. Its volume was surprising, taking so much in and giving so much back.

Some days we'd just lie in bed together, taking our time with each other's bodies. He had a habit of pinching the end of my nose and asking me to make a wish.

"What do you wish for?" he'd ask.

And I'd tell him, "Just this."

Javier had always wanted to put my broken pieces together and I wanted to show him that he had.

Everything was so blissfully happy that I had no idea how precarious it all was. How quickly it could change. It could go up. Or it could go down.

One morning I woke up feeling sick to my stomach and immediately hurled in the sink, not even making it to the toilet.

"Angel?" Javier asked, alarmed, as I slammed the bathroom door in his face. He knocked gently on it while I heaved and heaved, disgusted at what was coming out.

Finally, after I rinsed my mouth out for the millionth time with mouthwash, I emerged, trembling.

He took me into his arms. "Are you okay?"

"It might be the seafood from last night," I told him, though in the pit of my stomach I knew that wasn't it. My period was ten days late now. I'd been ignoring it long enough.

"Stupid Rod, trying to poison us," he muttered, holding me.

No, not stupid Rod, I thought. *Stupid me*. I'd been lazy with the pill lately, forgetting to take it on more than one occasion. But being in love gives you some kind of insurance against the world and I believed that after all we'd been through, surely we wouldn't be handed this.

But it looked like that's exactly what we got. Later I went to the pharmacy and bought one of the generic kits. I felt too nervous to use it at home so I used a gas station restroom instead. I felt like genuine trailer trash and remembered that's exactly what I had been at some point in my life. *Remember Ellie Watt?* the voice whispered on the breeze.

I ignored it. I saw the test and it was positive.

Fuck.

Naturally, that was my first thought. I was twenty-one and didn't have a maternal bone in my body. I had so much of my life left to live. I had the world as my oyster.

And I was making excuses. Because deep down, I imagined a life springing from my lie, and I imagined that lie becoming real. I imagined Javier as a father and knew he'd be an excellent one, giving and protective as hell. I knew our child would grow up never needing anything and he'd have all our love, since our hearts together were bigger than the moon.

A new life would help to bury my old one. Perhaps even both of ours.

But Javier. What would he say? What would he want? That's why I had done the deed in the stinky restroom, double-checking the package and the stick a million times until I knew it was real, then wrapping it up in toilet paper and throwing it in the garbage. I didn't know how he would react. Despite the way I loved him, the way he felt about me, this was a whole new angle to our lives together, spinning our relationship around.

I steadied my nerves and drove back home, waiting in the truck for a few moments before I decided to head out onto the beach. I walked across the soft sand, wrapping my cardigan around my shoulders and plunked myself down. I watched the waves roll in; a dog ran past me after a renegade Frisbee. I sat there for hours, watching the sky fade with the dusk, until Javier came out beside me, the white sand flying off his feet like salt from a shaker.

"Eden?" he asked delicately, taking a seat next to me. He was dressed all in black again: long-sleeved shirt with the sleeves rolled up, black linen pants, bare feet. The sand stuck to him like snowflakes.

I took in a deep breath. "I'm pregnant."

There really was no other way to say it.

I heard his breath hitch. I slowly turned my head to face him. His mouth was agape, eyes wide, brows raised to the heavens.

"You...you are?" he said.

I nodded. "Yup. I'll have to go to the doctor to take a blood test to make sure, but yeah. Ten days late on my period. Threw up today. Drugstore test ran positive."

He sucked on his full lower lip, blinking hard. It was rare that I saw him bewildered.

“I don’t know what to say...” he started, then frowned. “Ten days late? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I was afraid.”

“Of me?”

“Of facing the truth.”

He studied my face for a moment before exhaling sharply. “So. What do you want to do?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, I honestly don’t.”

His head cocked to the side like a beautiful bird. “You honestly don’t know? Eden, Angel...we’re having a baby.”

I gave him an odd look. Maybe I didn’t hear that right. “What?”

He grinned in pure joy. “We’re having a baby!”

He leaped up onto his feet and pulled me up with him. He hugged me, tightly, dancing around and laughing, then let go and clapped his hands together. “Oh, my angel, another beautiful angel is on the way.”

I smiled back. It was infectious. “You want this?”

“Oh, my love,” he rushed forward, cupping my face in his hands. “I want you. I love you. And I want the product of our life. It’s a new life, don’t you see?”

I did see. I saw that very well. I let out the whoop of joy that had been sneaking up on me, allowing myself to feel it, feel everything, my heart running over butterflies soaring from head to toe. Happiness popped like fizzing champagne, saturating us as we held each other on the beach, laughing and crying tears of bliss. New lives, for both of us. Another new start and this one was for keeps.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A few days later, the day before my doctor’s appointment, I saw something that made me die inside. My underwear was stained; just a drop of blood, but enough for me to know that this was it. It wasn’t for keeps at all. It was over, and over before we were really allowed to believe it.

I trundled out of the bathroom, trying to deal with the new pain. The crushing disappointment. I kept it to myself, holding the truth back, holding back the tears. I held on under false hope until I used the toilet again later. The blood was in full-force, my regular period, just two weeks late.

Telling Javier that the pregnancy had been false was the hardest thing for me to do, much harder than telling him I thought I was pregnant to begin with. I felt like a total idiot getting our hopes up like that. I should have waited for a doctor's test to confirm it; I should have bought another kit just to be safe; I shouldn't have trusted the cheapest brand. I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions and I shouldn't have sunk my teeth into the one I'd jumped to. It's just that he was so happy...I'd never seen him that way before. He'd even gone out, and bless his heart, bought a tiny plush angel for our future baby.

He was devastated. He'd never looked so wrecked to the core, just absolutely devastated. He didn't cry or yell or anything. But I could tell in the way he held me that he was just trying to hang onto himself. That he might not even stay together. And I was the one that broke him.

Days passed by in a weary silence as if we were living in a funeral home and were strangers to each other. I had my own grief to deal with, but I put that aside for him. He had fixed me once, hadn't he? Why was it so much harder for me to fix him?

I even told him that we could actually try. We could try to get pregnant; we were both young, and if that's what we wanted, it would stick. For keeps. For real. We could have it, it would be ours. Your wish is my command.

But it only angered him and I didn't know why. Maybe since the bad news he'd changed his mind, adjusted to the new reality just as I had done before and constantly. One morning I went out on to the porch and saw him at the edge of the water, throwing the plush angel out into the waves. I imagined the poor thing would float for a while, lost at sea, then finally sink, maybe finding its resting place beside a small bottle of acid. A seafloor full of things we needed to forget.

Before I knew it, the days had turned into weeks and I felt like we were just shadows of the people we used to be. He wouldn't talk to me anymore, not about what was important, not about what we used to. Our conversations were shallow and safe. He became busier, and in retaliation,

so did I. I took on extra shifts at Hogan's Heroes because it kept my mind off of it, working all weekends. Julie was a good person to lean on and she never asked too much about him, never questioned why we hadn't gone on a double date in a while. I guess some things were pretty obvious just by looking at me. Yet I'd stare at him over and over again for one hint of why that coldness that had crept into his eyes and I couldn't glean anything. I loved him with all my heart, and all I could think about was that he was slowly slipping away. I just wanted him to keep loving me like he had, because the minute he stopped would be the minute everything ended.

One Saturday night I was driving to work when I noticed a whole slew of fire engines parked outside. It turned out there was a small kitchen fire, not enough to cause a lot of damage, but enough to close down the bar for the night. To tell you the truth, I'd been looking forward to gabbing with Julie and having a few well-deserved drinks after our shift, but she'd already gone home.

I stopped by the gas station, filled up the truck, and picked up a six-pack of Tecate. I liked the Mexican beer more than Javier did, but I figured I might win some points by showing up at the house with it. Perhaps it would lead to the bedroom too. That was the lucky thing about Javier and I—even though we weren't communicating by voice, our sex life had filled in the blanks. His desire for me was still at full throttle and I never had to complain.

The house was completely dark when I pulled up to it, which struck me as odd considering Javier was at home when I had left, tooling around on the computer. When he went out he usually went out late at night and it was only eight p.m. I parked the truck in the garage then decided to go in the house through the door there instead of the porch. Thinking he could be napping, I quietly closed the door behind me and crept down the hall and up the stairs. I put the beer on the counter in the kitchen and pulled one off the ring. If he was awake, it was his, but if he was asleep, it was all mine. I tiptoed down the hall toward the bedroom door.

And heard him moan. For a split second I wondered if something was wrong, if he was hurt or maybe having a nightmare. But this wasn't a moan of pain. It was the all too familiar moan of pleasure, the sounds he'd make in my ear when he was riding me hard.

I raised my brow, tickled at the fact that he was jacking off, wanting to go in and watch him as he came. But that whole idea, my whole world, came to a halt when I heard the sound following it.

A woman's cry of equal pleasure. A woman in the throes of passion. A woman moaning and groaning along with Javier. A woman that wasn't me.

I was stuck to the floor, my chest being beaten from the inside, my heart sinking to the ground. The shock, the hurt, the sadness, the grief. The disbelief. The terrible disbelief. This wasn't real; this had to be a dream. I could hear their cries get louder and louder until they were both coming, the sounds filling the house—our house—and stabbing me in the gut. My insides twisted, feeling the pain that was all too physical, almost falling over. The beer almost slid out of my hands and I caught it just in time.

This couldn't be real. This couldn't be happening. But my body knew the truth, and it was aching, breaking—I was falling apart. Javier was cheating on me. He was fucking another woman in our house. In my bed.

I put my hand to my mouth, trying to keep the vomit at bay. I was going to be sick. Oh, I couldn't be sick here; they'd come out and they'd see me, they'd see the vomit everywhere, and I'd have to confront it all. I'd have to face it and her and him and I didn't want to, I didn't want to.

I swallowed the bile that had filled my mouth and fought to take in air. I stood there, in the hall, one beer in my hand, a person drowning on their feet. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't move, I couldn't be. The anger, the pain, my fucking heart.

My fucking man. How could he? After everything we'd gone through. After everything he'd said. The pain was so excruciating I'd rather have my legs burned by acid a million times over before experiencing this. This made me envy Miguel, his throat slit, dead and peaceful. This crippled my soul, the one thing I had left. He broke my heart until I couldn't be sure I had one to begin with.

And then the laughter started. The girl, that fucking whore's voice, was soaring out of the room, whispering sweet nothings to him. He whispered them back. I heard "baby" and "beautiful" and the only relief in the sting was that he didn't call her "angel."

My sorrow quickly whipped itself into anger. Anger was an old friend. Anger was a weapon I knew how to play with. I went down the hall,

prepared to barge in on them. I was prepared to catch them in the act, to show that I knew, to rub Javier's face in his deceit, in his destruction of our love, something he so carelessly tossed aside for someone else.

I found that the door was open a crack, and if my lungs were capable of breath, I would have held it. I pushed the door open, very slightly, very quietly.

And saw something I didn't expect. They were facing away from me, lying on their stomachs on the bed, side by side, their feet hooked around each other's. They were staring into each other's eyes, and while Javier looked like his cool and disgustingly charming self, the woman was very obviously in love. She was long with tawny curves and a thick head of red hair, and she smiled at everything he said. They were still making sweet talk to each other but I couldn't hear it anymore. The heartbeat in my ears was too loud, drowning out everything.

My mouth dropped open, my lips ready to scream, my tongue ready to fight. And I realized I couldn't do it. Not this way. If I confronted him, I'd give him the satisfaction of knowing that I knew. He'd blame my leaving him on that. He'd follow me around the world and beg for forgiveness that I would never grant him. The only thing I had going for me, in accepting the lie, in forgetting the past, was that he loved me.

I thought he loved me and he didn't. I gave up my ghost for him—my plan, my revenge, everything that I was. Right or wrong, I had given up a large part of me to be with Javier, to overlook the things he did and continued to do. I did all of that because I thought he loved me. I believed in it, in him, in my bones, in my core, in my very soul. But here was the truth, her shapely ass staring me right in the face.

He lied. I lied. Any love that starts out under a lie is bound to kill you. I just didn't want to die on my feet.

I backed away from the door, careful to not get caught, and quietly made my way downstairs, picking up the beer as I went. I started my car and only made it halfway down the street before my vision got blurry, the tears spilling over. I pulled over and quickly wiped them away, trying to stay calm, trying to stay focused. I adjusted the rear view mirror so I could watch the house, cracked open my beer and waited. I waited until she walked past the truck to her own car, not even glancing my way. I guess

Javier had made her park up the street to hide the evidence. I guess Javier didn't want to get caught with someone like her.

She was gorgeous and sensual and walked with a confidence I severely lacked. She was everything that I wasn't, providing Javier with the things that I couldn't. I didn't even know what I lacked, except that it wasn't enough to keep him faithful. This woman was unblemished, unscarred. She looked real. She looked like she used her real name.

I watched her drive off, the chrome of her Mercedes glinting under the streetlights. And that's when it all hit me like I'd been punched in the face, in the stomach, in the chest. The anger, the pain, it erupted from somewhere deep inside, rushing forward and taking over my body and my mind. Things were going black, my ears throbbing with pressure, my limbs shaking with the rage that spread over me.

I thought about him fucking her. I thought about him fucking me. I thought about every look he ever gave me, everything he ever said. I thought about how beautiful he made me feel, how good he'd been to me, how happy I was when I was with him. I thought about being in love, making love, living in this love we shared, this life we created. Even if it was a false life, it was still my life, and now suddenly, in an instant, it was gone.

It was all gone.

There was a cavern in my chest where our love used to be.

I screamed like a dying animal, thrashing in my seat. I stuck the seatbelt in my mouth and clamped down, biting as hard as I could, letting the screams roll through me, shaking the car, shaking me to my very being. This was my soul crying, my heart fighting, and they all were losing. I screamed and hit the dash with my fists until all I felt was pain, the real pain that felt so much better than the claws that were raking at my heart, making me bleed inside, making me feel like I lost myself for good. I screamed and bawled and convulsed and kept at it for hours, buried by the pain, unable to keep from feeling it. It would go away for one second, enough for me to get air, and then it would come crashing back down, that merciless wave that wanted to drown me. And every time I thought about giving up, about letting my lungs fill, about being too weak to take on any more, the reality wouldn't let me. I was stuck on this endless loop. That was the truth then, this is the truth now. That was the truth then, this is the truth now.

So many lies leading to so much loss.

I stayed in the car until I didn't have anything left in me to give. I was numb, and even when I tried to think about it, it didn't sting. It just ached, dull, like a tooth that needed pulling.

I drove away to a coffee shop, ducking from people's curious glances, then made up my face in the bathroom. My makeup was ruined, my eyes red and puffy—dead giveaways. I washed my face, dabbed cold water under my eyes, and ignored the knocks on the door from impatient customers. I made myself look presentable, then leaned forward on the sink, having a staring contest with myself.

“You are Ellie Watt,” I told myself. “And that's something he'll never take from you. Eden White is dead.”

Then I left, brushing past the people, and went back to the house. I'd already stopped calling it home. I parked in the garage and took my four beers upstairs.

Javier was in the living room watching television. He smiled when he saw me and I was sure he saw through everything. But he didn't question the extra time it took me to return the smile. He didn't mention the extra makeup I had on my eyes to cover up the puffiness. He didn't notice the darkness in my eyes while I had to look at him. His beautiful face. I couldn't have hated him more.

I gave him the beers, sat by him on the couch, and we made small talk about work and I pretended I was playing a role. He never knew me, the real me, he never loved me and therefore he never hurt me. Ellie Watt was unscathed. Ellie Watt would survive the night. Ellie Watt would leave.

We kissed goodnight and I refused to enjoy it. I refused to miss those lips or remember that last kiss or remember anything about us. I kissed him like I'd kiss a snake.

In the morning, he got up and went for his jog. I declined, pretending I had a bit of a headache. And then, in thirty minutes, I packed up everything I could. I took a gun of his from the study. I took a load of cash from his safe. I took the car keys to Jose. Like hell I was going to let him track me this time.

I went into the garage, moved all my shit, moved my con artist emergency kit from the truck and into my new car. Then I took my cell

phone and placed it on the ground just behind the tires. I started Jose with a victorious roar and backed out, smashing the cell to delicious smithereens.

I roared away down that street, away from Javier, away from my first love, away from the lies. I gave the middle finger to Ocean Springs, to Biloxi, to Gulfport, to the whole damn state. I kept driving because that's what Ellie Watt wanted me to do.

To keep going, keep moving, and never look back.

A few weeks later after conning my out of Louisiana, I was back in Texas with only one place to go. Gus wouldn't know I was coming and maybe he wouldn't even want to see me, but I figured it was time to tell him he was right. It was time for me to apologize.

Texas, of course, was always bigger than I expected. I pulled over at a Holiday Inn outside of Huntsville to crash for the night. Sleep, however, didn't come easy to a road weary mind. In fact, I'd turned into somewhat of an insomniac ever since...well, ever since Mississippi. When my mind wouldn't shut off at ten o'clock, I rolled out of bed and made my way across the parking lot to a saloon, hoping for a stiff drink and maybe some steak brisket.

The bar was fairly packed so I took a seat up at the counter, away from the loudmouthed fishermen at the end, but beside a grizzled old woman.

Actually, up close she was less old and just grizzled. She was probably in her late sixties, with blond and grey hair gathered back into an anorexic ponytail. She had skin like cowhide and makeup that belonged on Malibu Barbie. I could tell she'd been just like me at some point, lost and angry and racking up the miles.

She smiled at me, hot pink lipstick on smoker's teeth, and said, "Thank you for joining me."

I nodded back. "They have strong drinks here?"

She shook her head. "They don't. Stick to the beer, I'll buy you one."

“Thank you...” I trailed off expectantly.

“Thank you, Marda,” she said. “And who is the beer for?”

I stuck out my hand. “I’m Elaine.”

My new name never sounded so sweet.

She pursed her lips as if she figured I wasn’t telling the truth. But it didn’t matter, between strangers in a bar, on the side of a Texas highway.

Marda told me she was just waiting for her husband to pick her up. He was working late and they were jetting off to Houston right afterward. Someone’s birthday party was the next day. I told her nothing about myself, learning to lay low and keep my mouth shut. She bought me drinks and brisket, and after my fourth beer, that’s when everything changed.

The bar had emptied out. There were some rowdy men in the corner booth and a few lonely souls scattered about. The service had dried up and the bartender was spending her time in the back room, watching infomercials on a tiny TV screen. When we needed her we rang the bell, otherwise we were on our own.

I guess the bartender reminded me of Hogan’s Heroes, because suddenly I was thinking about Julie, then Javier, and a single tear leaked down my face.

“Honey, what’s the matter?” Marda asked, handing me a greasy napkin. I took it and put it beside me, wiping my tear away with my hand.

“It’s nothing,” I told her, breathing in long and deep. I had a prescription in my purse for panic attacks just in case, but I’d learned to tell the difference between panic and sorrow, even though they sometimes felt like one and the same.

“It’s everything,” she said after she slugged her beer. “I saw it when you came in. It’s a man, isn’t it? Oh, what a stupid question. What did he do?”

I hadn’t told anyone yet about what happened. It had been locked in my head, buried in a box. I was afraid to speak, to make it real. But the beer was hitting me hard and I was just so fucking tired of trying to hide from the pain.

I let it all out. I told Marda everything. Well, almost everything. I left out what Javier’s job was and what my job had been. But I drudged up the details of that moment, when I discovered what he’d done, when everything

had been ruined and I'd been forever changed and irreparable. Javier put me back together only to break me again.

"Child, please," Marda said after she heard me babble on like a fool. "I know the pain you're going through, oh baby do I know it! But damn, you can't give up on love that easily."

"But he was my first love, my first everything," I sobbed quietly.

"So? Your first love? We all have our first loves. They come and they go. Just because he's your first love doesn't mean he'll be your last. Take it from me, the human heart is much more capable than we give it credit for. Being able to love again is a choice."

"But I just don't understand. How could he have done it? Why? Why did he choose her? Why did he sleep with her and throw everything we had away? Why?"

She shrugged. "I don't know why. You'll probably never know why. And if you did, would it matter? Would it change anything that happened? Would you be able to forgive him even with the best excuses?"

I swallowed down my beer. I couldn't think what Javier's excuse would be. Was he previously married or something and I was the woman on the side? Was he somehow forced—maybe blackmailed, maybe something to do with his job or his sisters? If any of that could possibly be true, would it matter to me? Would it make this pain go away?

No. It wouldn't. Because he did it. He chose something else over me.

"I just thought he loved me," I said quietly, more to myself than to anyone.

She sighed and gave me a quick squeeze around my shoulders. Then she eased herself off the barstool. "Just because he cheated doesn't mean he didn't love you."

I looked at her sharply, not expecting that.

She gave me a sluggish smile. "He might have loved something else more, that's all. Look, love and respect don't always go hand in hand. You can have one without the other. But if you want my advice, you should always have both. You, Elaine, you deserve that."

I thought about that for a moment until a horn sounded from outside, a growling old 4x4 with headlamps on the roof that was waiting across the parking lot.

“That’s my ride,” she said, wobbling a bit unsteadily. She patted me on the shoulder and staggered to the door.

“Thanks for the beer!” I yelled after her, surprised to see her leaving so soon.

She waved goodbye haphazardly, her sights now set on her husband.

And now my sights were set on her seat. She had taken out money earlier to give to the bartender, but I guess her wallet never made it back inside her bag. It was right there, right beside me.

I picked it up and turned it around in my hands. It was full of cash, credit cards, her driver’s license. Marda Lee. I looked around me to see if anyone was watching me in the bar. They weren’t. I watched her still walking crookedly across the lot, her husband flashing his lights at her, getting her to hurry up. I could still catch her. I could return her wallet to her like the good citizen that could be. I could show the world that it wasn’t such a bad place when it really, really was.

I looked around the bar to see if anyone had seen me take it. They hadn’t. There was barely anyone around. Then I looked out the window in time to see Marda get in her husband’s car and drive off. I ripped a twenty out of Marda’s wallet as an extra fat tip and slammed it on the counter. I chugged the rest of my beer then left the bar with the wallet tucked away in my purse, knowing that her money would pay the gas for my trip up to Dallas.

For the first time in a while, I managed to sleep well that night.

THE END

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