



Speechless

KAY ELLE PARKER

SPEECHLESS

KAY ELLE PARKER

Speechless Copyright © 2019 Kay Elle Parker

Published by Kay Elle Parker. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form, including electronic or mechanical, without written permission from the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. This book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This book may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with. If you are reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then you should return it to the seller and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the author's work.

Published by Kay Elle Parker on November 1st 2019

Cover Design: Jodielocks Designs

This book is intended for a mature audience only.

Dedications:

This one is for my Beta Bees, who have stuck with me throughout the hours of torment, questions, and emotional torture I've put them through while writing Speechless.

We lost a couple of wonderful ladies from the team this year due to other commitments, but their contribution hasn't been forgotten.

To Allie and Kathi, thank you for giving your all despite joining the team at a later date. You've brought a new atmosphere to the group and it's such a pleasure to be getting to know you as the days go on. I can't imagine life in the group without you and the other special ladies I love.

*So, Speechless is dedicated to you all:
Nanette, Deanne, Beth, Allie, Kathi and Sara.*

CHAPTER ONE

The night was cold, the wind bitter, and not one star could shine through the clouds smothering the night sky. Weather conditions like this called for thick sweaters, heavy jackets, several pairs of socks and a pair of gloves.

She had nothing.

Small, sharp stones dug into the bare soles of her feet as she stumbled along the road in the dark. Her heart lodged in her throat at every sound, every tiny flicker of motion in the woods lining both sides of the way.

The only protection she had against the cold was an old and torn shirt, one of Sire's cast-offs, which was well beyond mending and six months overdue for a wash. Even that meagre protection was useless against the cold biting into her bones, freezing the breath in her lungs.

How far she'd come, she didn't know. At first, she'd run away from hell as fast as she could, without looking back. When she couldn't run, she'd had to walk. As her body, her legs, surrendered to the weather and exhaustion, she knew she would make herself crawl if it meant never going back to Sire.

More than anything, she wanted to lie down and just curl into a ball. There hadn't been a sign of life since she'd run, no houses or vehicles, not even a glimmer of light.

She was scared of the dark.

She didn't want to imagine what Sire would do once he realized she had gone. No doubt he would tear the house down to find her, ransack the shed where he'd kept her like a dog for the majority of her pitiful existence.

He would hunt her down like said dog and squeeze the life from her body, breath by dying breath. He'd told her as much, more than once, and she had no doubt he would do exactly as he promised.

After all, when you kept something captive and didn't even give it a name, there was nothing to stop you from disposing of it at your whim. There was no affection, no love, not a shred of morality.

She couldn't go back. The pain, the torture, the degradation. Death seemed a far better option than to be dragged from her ratty blanket by her hair, marched from her damp and rotten shed to the house where she cleaned and fetched and carried. Where pain and humiliation rolled into one until Sire beat her, broke her and shoved her back into her dark, cold hell.

The road began to curve, and she thought she could see the barest hint of light through the trees. The closer she came to the source, the tighter her fear wrapped its nasty tentacles around her.

The front of the building loomed in front of her, and she didn't know if it would be her salvation or damnation. She couldn't read the big word spelled out in bright, flashing red. But there were lights in the windows and the faint throb of music on the air. Trucks filled the small parking area.

She staggered forward, beyond cold now, and tripped up the three wide steps leading to a pair of massive wooden doors. It took more effort than she could spare to stop herself sliding across the deck on her face. Her hands were numb, dead as she pushed against the heavy door.

Warmth hit her first, a glorious wave of heat across her abused body. She swayed in shock, held onto the door to brace herself. Sheer force of will kept her knees from buckling.

After several long moments, she realized the room had gone strangely quiet with only the music left playing. The voices, the rumble of conversation and laughter, had died.

Something inside her shriveled up and died with it.

Her gaze flicked from chair to chair, over faces painted with curiosity and predatory stares. Her heart stuck in her throat, and she knew instinctively—as prey was programmed to know—that a single move would bring the wolves down on her before she got out of the door.

“Hey, baby!”

“Come on over, got something you'll like.”

A barrage of cat calls, wolf whistles and derogatory comments flew at her as men began to shift, to advance on her. Her eyes locked desperately onto a face at the bar, one that looked to be friendlier than any of those surrounding her and wished fervently for help.

A hand grabbed her wrist, hauled her roughly into a sea of frenzied groping. She struggled frantically, her small hands shoving and battering at whoever came close enough.

“Aw come on now, sugar. We just wanna play. Baby wanna play?”

She stared into a pair of muddy brown eyes glazed with alcohol and shook her head insistently. The backhand connected with her icy cheek and sent splinters of pain stabbing through her face.

“You might wanna rethink your answer, little bitch. Joe don’t take no for an answer.” He leered at her, and the smell of beer and whiskey invaded her personal space. She winced, then grimaced when his hand closed around her throat.

“Baby doesn’t want to play,” a deep voice rumbled like thunder from behind her tormentor. “Daddy, however, doesn’t mind going a round or two.” One long-fingered hand circled around Joe’s throat, tightened. “Let the lass go and walk away. All of you.”

“Fuck you, Connor. Who made you boss?”

Through blurred vision, she could only just make out the incredibly tall form of a man. The grip of the hand cutting off her air supply became vicious before it dropped away completely. She sucked in a desperate breath and dropped to her already bruised knees on the wooden floor.

“You’re drunk, Joe. You’re not in your right mind. Take yourself home and sleep the booze off before you embarrass yourself further. Think about taking a swing at me and you’ll go home without your front teeth.” There was a pause, then the sickening crunch of bone on bone followed by a pained male cry. “That’s for the bitchy little backhander. I ever see you hit another woman, your time here will be severely limited.”

“Think you’re a big fucking shot,” Joe sneered, his voice muffled by the hand he cupped over his face. Blood dripped steadily from between his fingers. “Maybe you should think again.”

She cowered when the big blurred figure crouched down in front of her, one hand extended toward her. She blinked up at him, before horror filled her and alarm screamed through her blood.

Her savior stood straight and whirled around in one fast move, his forearm raised to protect his face as a bar stool came down at his head. He snarled, wrenched the stool away from his assailant, and used it to deliver a blow that sent the shorter man headlong across the floor.

War erupted. The tall man ranged over her, protecting her, as drunks came at him from all sides. He fended off every attack, and even though there were times she wanted to cover her ears and close her eyes, she couldn't keep her gaze off him.

"Connor! Connor, are you okay?"

So many voices, she thought dimly. The scent of blood and alcohol turned her stomach and combined with the fact she hadn't eaten in...well, only Sire knew how long it had been since she'd last tasted food, but her stomach and her head pitched into misery together.

Conner O'Malley flexed his sore knuckles and studied the array of semi-and fully-unconscious men sprawled across the floor. He shook his head at the stupidity of them; the majority of them had grown up with him, had fought him or his brothers before, and knew he wasn't to be messed with.

Give a bunch of morons a shitload of alcohol, throw in a girl, and watch said morons devolve into chest-beating, brainless Neanderthals.

The O'Malley's were a brand name in the small town of Howler Creek, Montana. Connor had been the town doctor for almost six years. His brother Caleb was the current sheriff, while his other brother Cain stood ten feet away, a baseball bat cocked over his shoulder and rage in his eyes.

"I'm fine, Cain. Get Cal out here to sort these idiots out." Connor stretched his shoulders with a small grunt of discomfort. It had been a while, he thought with a touch of amusement, since he'd had the good luck to participate in an old-fashioned free-for-all.

Something touched the back of his leg. He glanced down, frowned at the fingers barely grazing his jeans. A pair of huge green eyes stared up at him, wide and dazed, from a too-thin face the color of ash.

"Now you," he murmured softly as he crouched to her level. "You are something different, aren't you, baby?" He held out his hand carefully, like she was a wild animal. He never moved when she hesitantly reached out and wrapped her frozen fingers around his thumb.

"Christ, you're freezing. Who the hell let you out in these temperatures wearing only..." Connor trailed off and let her attire finally sink in. This was not a woman who forgot to put her sweater on before running to the store for milk.

She wore a man's shirt which might once have been blue or gray but had been reduced to a grimy brown. There were holes down the seams, and buttons missing. Several stains which could very well be blood were splattered over the front.

He kept his touch gentle as he grasped her arm, turned it over. There was nothing but sympathy and patience in his voice as he murmured to her. With only words and the brush of his fingertips, he soothed the panic exuding from her.

"Cain, I'm going to need you to ask Cal to come over to my office when he's dealt with these idiots."

"Is there a problem?" Cal rounded the bar, propped his bat against a stool and wandered over to where Connor crouched beside the little wraith. "Well, she's a sight for sore eyes."

She tugged desperately on Connor's hand, but he only tightened his grip by a fraction. "This is my brother, Cain. My name is Connor. We are not going to hurt you. Do you understand me?"

Tears formed in her eyes, a shimmer of confusion and pain. Reluctantly, she nodded her head and her hand relaxed in his. But when Cain shifted closer, she went rigid.

"Just careful," Connor admonished his youngest brother. "I don't think she's fully with us. There are ligature marks on her wrists," he added quietly and slid his gaze down her naked legs. Among the bruises and scrapes, a set of brand new rope marks glowed red around her ankles. So new, he noted with disgust, they stood out like a beacon from the cluster of similar scars. "Legs as well. I'll have to take her for an exam."

His brother cursed. "Some sick bastard did this to her?"

Connor met the girl's resigned eyes. She said nothing, but then, he hadn't expected her to. If the ligature marks were just the beginning of what he would find during the exam, he had a dreadful feeling in his gut she had been abused, and for a long time.

"I think so. I need to get her back home to the office. Can you get a blanket while I call Sarah, ask her to come in? I'm going to need some assistance."

Cain rubbed a big hand across the back of his neck. "Yeah. Yeah, I should have one...in the back, I think. Let me go look, and I'll get Cal over here. You deal with her and I'll call Sarah."

Once his brother disappeared, Connor knelt in front of the girl and held her hands in his. They were so cold, too cold, and he felt the shudder run through her as the heat from his skin broke through the chill of hers. “What’s your name, baby?”

Her pretty little mouth, a little blue around the lips, turned down at the corners. Her eyes got a haunted, mournful look. Thin shoulders slumped before she shrugged them weakly.

“Come on,” he cajoled sweetly. “Everyone has a name.”

A tear spilled over and streaked down her face. She eased her hand free of his and started to flick open the buttons of the shirt. He watched with horrified curiosity as she revealed some more of the trauma she’d suffered through. But the welts and scars and wounds were nothing compared to the five-letter word branded—fucking *branded*, he thought with a snarl—into the soft skin just above her left breast.

“Baby, that’s not your name. That’s just cruelty. What’s your *name*?” He put extra emphasis on the last word, but his suspicions were already roused.

She looked everywhere but at him, Connor noted. Her hand trembled as she ran her fingers over the scar branded into her flesh.

“You’re not a whore, baby. Don’t believe what it says,” he murmured. “I’m a doctor. I’m going to help you. This shirt,” he plucked at the hem. “This shirt needs to go, baby. It stinks, and it’s not exactly ideal clothing for the weather.”

“I’ve got your blanket, bro.”

Connor winced as the girl recoiled at the sound of his brother’s voice. He held up his hand to signal Cain to wait. “Stand behind her, Cain. Hold the blanket up so we can wrap it around her once this *thing* is off.” He sneered at the shirt. “Did you call Sarah?”

Solemnly, Cain nodded and did as his brother asked. “She’ll meet you at the office. She said to tell you everything will be ready when you arrive. I really don’t think I want to know what *everything* entails.”

“No, you really don’t.” Connor worked at the buttons with deft fingers. As the last one came undone, the girl battered at his hands desperately. “Don’t fight me, baby. You need to get warm.” He pushed the wrecked shirt from her body and just stared, disgusted to the soul.

Both he and his brother said exactly the same thing at precisely the same time: “Fucking hell!”

Connor's first thought was that the poor thing in front of him had suffered, beyond anything anyone could imagine. The sorry excuse for an article of clothing fluttered to the floor when his fingers dropped it, then he reached for her.

Her hands shot up to guard her face from a blow.

"Sssh, baby. It's okay. You've had a rough time, haven't you?" His fingers curled around her wrists, over the rings of scars, and gently tugged her arms down. He eased her chin up and smiled when she hesitantly met his eyes. "I will never hit you. That's a promise. I'm going to give you a quick check over and then we're going to go meet my friend, Sarah. Does that sound okay with you?"

Her fingers tangled together nervously in her lap. Anxiety radiated from her in waves. After a good minute of worrying her hands, she nodded slowly.

"Good girl. You have to trust me. Right now, that's all you need to do. Trust me to take care of you, no matter what. Can you do that for me?" When she nodded again, he blew out a long breath of relief. "Thank you. Let's get you up on your feet and see what's what, shall we?"

Her eyes flicked up to his, then over to the men splayed out on the floor.

"Ignore them, baby. They can't hurt you." Connor straightened from his crouch, carefully helping her to her feet as he did so. His eyes searched her from head to toe clinically. "Someone's given you some hellish beatings, baby. Starved you as well."

A myriad of scars started from just below her collarbone. All old and silvered, aside from a few which still held a reddish tinge. The branded *whore* in her skin drew the eye. The bones in her chest, her ribs and pelvic area stood out, her pale skin drawn painfully tight. Her limbs seemed to be nothing more than twigs, liable to snap with the slightest pressure.

There were bruises. Small ones that could have been made by hard fingertips digging into what little flesh she had left on her slight frame. Others were bigger, darker in color.

Connor sighed deeply. "Okay then, baby, there doesn't seem to be anything in need of treatment. I'll take a closer look in a little while."

"Um, Con? You might want to turn her around." Cain's face, so like Connor's, was hard as stone. His fists were clenched on the edge of the blanket to the point his knuckles were turning white.

She swayed in Connor's hold, her knees trying to buckle. He kept her upright easily with an arm around her waist. Her impossibly thin waist. Still holding her, he craned his neck to study her back. Her head twisted to look over her shoulder, her big green eyes imploring.

"Oh shit," he breathed and met Cain's eyes. "Get that blanket around her, Cain, before she freezes to death." He trailed light fingertips over the long, weeping welts crisscrossing her from shoulders to mid-thigh. "These are infected. Somebody's got some serious shit to answer for."

They wrapped her up in the warmth of the blanket. Connor gazed into her wide eyes and wondered what she'd look like after a bath and some food. The color of her hair was indistinguishable, just a mess of dirt and grease.

"Tell Cal I want him at mine as soon as he's dealt with these idiots," Connor said as he scooped his charge into his arms. Pain flashed like dark lightning over her face, her mouth opening but no sound coming out. "I know, baby, I'm sorry. I'm going to get you something for the pain."

"Just get her out of here," Cain ushered them toward the door. "She needs somewhere warm and quiet, and this bunch will start coming around any time." He gave one a solid kick in the ribs for good measure.

Connor shifted her carefully in his arms. "Thanks, Cain. I'll see you soon."

They slipped out of the door, her weight barely noticeable. But he was more than aware that every move he made, every step he took and each little jostle caused her a high degree of discomfort.

Yet she never made a single sound.

He felt her stiffen as they approached his car. "It's okay, baby. Ten minutes and I'll have you home. I wish you'd say something. I don't even know what to call you," he said with a sad chuckle. "Can't exactly call you 'baby' for the rest of our acquaintance, can I?"

She only huddled deeper into the cradle of his arms, her body shivering from the cold Montana air or from nerves, Connor wasn't entirely sure which. Probably a bit of both, he decided as he settled her into the passenger seat of his truck.

He closed the door and rounded the hood. His passenger jerked in surprise when he opened the driver's door and slid into his well-worn seat. Instead of turning on the engine, he twisted so he could look at her.

“I know I’m a stranger. I know that something has happened to you, something horrific. I don’t know what your name is, where you’ve come from or if anyone is looking for you, but you can trust me. My brothers and I will try and sort this mess out.”

She looked so miserably defeated, he couldn’t stand it. “I’ll get you back home, baby.”

Profound horror eclipsed the humanity in her eyes. She shook her head fiercely, her hands clawing for the door handle.

“Fuck, that was the wrong way to phrase that.” Connor leaned over and took her hands. “Not back home to whoever did this to you, baby. Back home to the people who must be missing you.”

She relaxed a bit. She shuddered as his thumbs stroked over her knuckles, warmed the chilled flesh. When her eyes began to flutter closed, he smiled and tucked her hands beneath the blanket, then started the truck.

By the time he pulled out of the lot, she was asleep.

Everything was different when she woke. For the first time in a very long time, she was actually *warm*. Her body wasn’t wracked with shivers and her skin didn’t feel as though it would shatter like glass with the slightest touch.

The only downside she could find was the fact her back was on *fire*.

She felt like she floated through the air, two strong steel bands behind her shoulders and under her legs. The scent of the earth surrounded her.

She remembered the man—Connor—with his black hair and eyes the color of the gray winter sky at dawn. He made her feel safe, and God knew how long it had been since she’d felt that way. She’d lost herself under Sire’s dominance a long time ago, and never again found the young girl she’d been.

She curled further into the warmth, unwilling to travel the path of memories leading to Sire. His cruelty and depravity had known no bounds, and she knew if he found her, he would take great delight in dragging her down the long, torturous road to her death.

After all, she’d watched him do the same to her predecessor, many moons past.

“Home sweet home, baby,” Connor said quietly, his voice rumbling in his chest, through her head like the first soft peals of a summer storm. “Let’s see where Sarah’s got to.”

She heard the click of a door closing and opened her eyes. Everything blurred so she only saw the vague outlines of furniture and pictures on the walls. Her hand moved to his chest, gripped his shirt weakly.

He was quick to reassure her, his arms tightening ever so slightly around her as she began to tremble. "I promise you, you're safe here. This is my place."

"Well hell, she looks like shit." A feminine voice came from nowhere and scared the living daylights out of her. "The room's ready, Connor. Are we waiting for Caleb? I mean, this looks like it needs the sheriff involved."

"Christ, Sarah, I think you just took ten years off the pair of us." Connor huffed out a breath. "Caleb will be here shortly. I'd like our guest here to be well out of her misery by the time he arrives."

Out of her misery? She tried to whimper but the sound stuck in her throat. That sounded perilously close to being put to sleep. To dying. She didn't want to die; she'd exerted every last drop of energy, burned through the small reserve of courage she'd had stored, to escape death. Surrendering willingly to the end of her life now seemed...wasteful.

"Get the heating turned up, Sarah. Make sure there's plenty of clean blankets within reach. The poor girl nearly froze to death."

She clutched at him when she felt herself tipping, when her bare feet touched the cool floor. She could barely focus on the outline of a long black table before the ground pitched and weaved under her. Nausea, a much-despised and constant companion, roared into life.

"I'm going to sit you on the table, baby. I'll give you some painkillers and antibiotics before we start cleaning you up, okay?" Connor's voice was low and gentle to match his hands as they cupped her hips and lifted her.

"Video or photos?" The one named Sarah asked from somewhere to her right. "Caleb's going to want everything documented, down to the last letter."

She stiffened, her hands fisting. They were not going to put her down, and she'd be damned if they would take photographs or a video of her. She'd suffered through that hell before, with Sire filming her struggling against the leather belt wrapped like a choke chain around her throat as he beat all but the last spark of life from her battered body.

"I need Amoxicillin, Tramadol and I think a little Sublimaze. She's not going to like what we have to do, and I think it'll be easier on everyone if we can get the worst of it done and out of the way." His hand smoothed

over her forehead. His beautiful gray eyes, so concerned, studied her face. "Can you lie on your stomach for me, baby? Just for a little while."

She narrowed her eyes at him and shook her head.

"Does she have a name or have you christened her 'baby'?"

Connor's hands made quick work of pulling one side of the blanket away from her arm. She jerked her arm free of his hold when the fuzzy figure of a small dark-haired woman came close enough to brush against her. Her body started a slow slide into meltdown when a silver tray clattered onto the table beside her.

"As she hasn't made a sound, I don't know her name. If she even has one. Someone capable of doing this to a person usually doesn't bother with niceties like names. But we'll find you a name, baby."

"Can't talk or won't talk?"

"I don't know," he said honestly and tugged her arm out straight.

Annoyed, she pulled it back and cradled it beneath her breasts. She didn't know exactly what was going on or what they intended, but she knew she didn't like it. Her eyes landed on the silver tray and widened. Everything snapped out of that horrible blurry glaze and into clear focus.

"Well if she's a Jane Doe," the woman said quietly as she opened a cupboard door. "You could call her Jane for the moment."

Connor tilted his head and studied her carefully. "I don't think she's a Jane, Sarah. We'll think of something. A name that suits her until we know her real one." He made a soft, considering sound. "I quite like Jenna."

Something inside her perked its head up in interest. She met his gray eyes for a second before she dropped her gaze to his hands. But her excitement at having a name, of being *somebody*, couldn't quite be contained. She placed her hand on his for just a moment, then snatched it away again.

Jen-nah.

"I think she likes it, Sarah. Job well done," he said with a laugh in his voice. He stroked his hand down her arm until he reached her fingers. "Hello, Jenna."

She smiled at him shyly.

With his eyes on hers, holding her captive in the stormy gray, Connor spoke in a quiet voice. Soft enough, Jenna realized with a frown, for her to ignore the words in favor of the wonderful distraction of his eyes.

The other woman, Sarah, picked something up off the metal tray and handed it to him. Efficient in every movement, she came around and cupped a small hand under the protruding joint of Jenna's elbow before deftly wrapping an elastic band around the bicep and tightening it.

Jenna shifted uncomfortably, trying to take her limb back under her control, but between the couple holding her, there was nowhere to go.

"Once this goes in, baby, you won't know a thing. I'm not giving you a heavy dose, just enough to let you float while we get the painful parts out of the way." Connor ran a fingertip over the crook of her arm, over and over again, as light as a butterfly.

She swung out when he picked the syringe up. Her pathetically bony fist bounced harmlessly off his shoulder, and panicked, she hit him again.

"Relax, Jenna. You don't need to fight me, I swear."

The needle struck her vein with precision, so smoothly she barely felt a scratch. But she knew, she *knew* her time was up when her body went suddenly limp and pitched forward into Connor's arms. Her mind protested, surrendered, protested and capitulated.

"There we go, baby. That's it, let everything go. Good girl," Connor whispered to her as her eyes fluttered closed. "I'll see you in a little while. Rest now."

Her face pressed into the side of his neck and every breath she took drew his scent inside her. She hovered beneath the heavy weight of whatever they'd given her, but she was still aware.

"Okay, Sarah, let's get her comfortable. Her back needs treating but we'll see to her front first. No point applying meds to her back only to have them rub off when we attend to the rest." Connor's voice was low, firm.

Jenna tried to cling to him as he stripped her of the blanket, laid her down on the table, but her hands and fingers wouldn't work. She cringed at the feel of hands on her exposed body.

As the warmth of him faded from her skin, she felt a tear slide down her temple.

CHAPTER TWO

“**W**hen you’ve got the video recorder up and running, I’d like you to start the pelvic exam, Sarah. I’m going to take care of her vitals, get some photos. Cal will want a rape kit doing, and I want the full range of swabs for testing. If they’ve hurt her sexually, if they’ve passed on STIs or STDs, we need to get on top of them.”

His nurse gave him the fisheye. “Are you sure she’s out, Connor? I’ve been a nurse a few years and I’ve never known a patient cry under sedation.”

“I’ve given her all I can for the moment. Her body weight is well below par. Giving her an additional dose might send her deeper than her body can handle.” He placed his hand gently on Jenna’s forehead. “We’ll just have to play it by ear. Start the pelvic exam, and we’ll see how far we get before she comes around. What’s in her system should be enough to keep her out.”

Even as he said it, he doubted his own words. Realistically, he was right. Jenna’s low body weight meant her system *should* be controlled easily by a low dose of sedative. But something niggled at him and left him uncomfortable.

Dutifully, he checked her breathing and heart rate, speaking loud and clear for the video record. Both suggested his patient was well under the sedative and far away from any fear or pain, much to his relief. He gave a somewhat cold and clinical description of the marks vandalizing the front of her body, the horrific brand above her breast.

His protective side had already kicked into gear, he knew that much. From the moment she’d clung by her fingertips to his leg, that instinct had exploded into life. Seeing what had been done to her, what she’d suffered through at the hands of another, was almost enough to send him into an animalistic rage on Jenna’s behalf.

“No sexual assault,” Sarah murmured from between their patient’s upraised knees. Her tone carried a note of surprise that mirrored Connor’s own shock.

“Are you sure?”

“No vaginal or anal damage. Her hymen is still intact,” Sarah said in a low voice. “Whatever they’ve done to her has all been physical and mental as far as I can tell. She might tell you different if—when—she can talk.”

That just didn’t make sense. Why have a beautiful young woman at your mercy and do nothing but beat and torture her? Surely if a person was that sadistic, rape and sodomy wasn’t a short step behind.

“Take the swabs anyway, just to cover the bases. Then we’ll turn her over and start the hard part.” Connor scrubbed his hand over his face. While his nurse finished up between the patient’s legs, he checked Jenna’s pulse. “Well hell.”

Sarah looked up quickly. “What?”

He studied Jenna’s face carefully. “Pulse is slightly elevated. Have you done the swabs?” He felt the blood surge beneath his fingers, trapped in the vein. “If not, hurry up.”

“Oh crap, give me a couple minutes.”

Connor didn’t want to think it, never mind say it, but he wasn’t sure they had a couple minutes left. The pulse point he monitored throbbed erratically. He could see signs of tension building in Jenna’s previously lax muscles.

“Jenna, baby. You’re okay. The sedative is wearing off a bit now. I’m going to give you some painkillers and antibiotics, but you’re going to feel pretty groggy.” Quietly, he crossed over to the counter and picked up the second syringe Sarah had prepared earlier. When he came back to Jenna, he noted the way her legs had begun to move restlessly. Just tiny, uncoordinated movements.

With efficiency, he administered the cocktail of drugs before Jenna came around fully. He stroked her grimy skin and planned a bath for her as soon as she felt able. “Stay still for me, baby. Sarah’s nearly done, just stay as still as you can for a couple minutes more.”

He didn’t know what made him glance up, but when he did, he saw the widest, wildest pair of terrified green eyes staring at him in desperation.

Her world was a sluggish revolution of time and unusual sensation. Sounds rang clear as a bell then hollowed into dull gongs. It was almost hypnotic, like waves of reality rushing into focus, fading out into disarray.

When clarity came, it terrified her. From fingers to toes and everything in between, she felt numb. Every so often, her body rewarded her with a second of movement as though reassuring her she wasn't dead.

"Stay still for me, baby. Sarah's nearly done, just stay as still as you can for a couple minutes more."

The words pierced the wisps of fog clouding her mind, and she forced her eyes open. They locked quickly onto the woman standing between her legs. Bile rose into her throat. Her gaze shot to the man standing beside her, a spent hypodermic in one hand and the other stroking her arm.

When he glanced up, met her eyes, she pleaded with everything she had inside her. She shivered in disgust at the movement between her legs, willed them to do something, anything. If she'd had control of her body, she would have fought back.

She imagined drawing her knees up to her chest and ramming her feet into the perky little brunette's chest so hard the imprint of them would be left on the nurse's chest.

For God's sake, help me. Please stop this.

"Are you done, Sarah?" His eyes stayed on Jenna's.

"Just a second," she replied absently.

Jenna felt her hand ball into a fist. Relief flooded her system. She wasn't dead. She wasn't going to be trapped in her own mind while her body remained frozen and lifeless. Now all she needed to do was make her arm lift and she could—

Connor's hand covered hers, warm and strong and *big*. She dropped her gaze to where they now connected, surprised at just how big his hands were. Long fingered, lightly tanned, with a slight rasp of calluses on the broad palm.

"She's not hurting you, baby. She just needs a minute more."

She bared her teeth in frustration. The hiss and wheeze of her breath between clenched teeth sounded like she was on the verge of a panic attack. With each passing moment, the pressure in her chest grew to immense proportions, enough that her fist vibrated in Connor's hold.

"Take my hand, Jenna. I've got you."

It was so strange, being addressed by a name instead of *whore* or *bitch*. A normal name for an abnormality, she thought disgustedly. Sire had reduced her to nothing and made sure she knew her place as such. Even as that thought ran through her mind, she turned her hand over and clutched Connor's, palm to palm and fingers laced tightly together.

"Breathe," he urged softly, his thumb brushing over her knuckles with small, gentle strokes. "We're going to roll you over when Sarah's done so we can have a good look at your back. You can go back to sleep for a while if you want."

Not bloody likely, she thought vehemently. As soon as her legs worked well enough to stay under her, she would be off this cold monstrosity and there was nothing anyone could do to get her back on it without a fight.

"All done, Connor. The swabs are sealed and labelled. Wherever she's come from, whoever she is, she's damn lucky they didn't rape her on top of everything else."

Jenna shivered. *If only they knew.*

"Good luck or just specific planning?" Connor replied in a sharp tone. He cleared his throat apologetically and shook his head at the odd look his nurse shot him.

Jenna could all but put words in their mouths and wasn't immune to the irony of it.

Finally, her toes twitched to life. A few more minutes and she would have full movement.

"Okay, let's make sure we have plenty of sutures and sterile equipment to hand before we start. The sedative seems to have worn off to a degree, and I don't know how long she'll stay still once she comes completely round."

Strong arms slipped beneath her shoulders and knees, pulled her to the edge of the table and off. She felt her stomach twist, her body braced for the fall to the floor and the pain she knew would come. Instead, she rolled carefully down those arms, back onto the table, only laid on her belly with her face pressed into a pillow.

She opened her mouth to protest as her limbs and head were repositioned gently to more comfortable angles. Nothing came out, not even a horrified squeak.

Fingertips grazed over painful welts and deep cuts. Her body stiffened and arched with each soft touch.

“If you can sit by her head, Sarah, and take her hands. Keep her calm. She’s as drugged as I dare and the painkillers should kick in anytime soon, but she’s not going to like me messing about with some of these.”

Damn right, she wasn’t! Jenna fisted her hands beside her head and squirmed as much as possible with her limited capacity for movement. She wouldn’t make it easy for them.

“Stubborn little mule.” Connor murmured next to her ear. “Go to my home office, Sarah. Second drawer on the left in my desk, there’s something that will keep her occupied for a while.”

The nurse’s presence disappeared, and feeling vulnerable, Jenna tried to curl into a ball. One big and cautious hand rested protectively between her shoulder blades, pressed down just enough to keep her in position, and to let her know she wouldn’t be able to outmatch this man, surprise attack or not.

“Just relax, Jenna. I’ll give you another sedative as soon as it’s safe to do so, but for now I need you to stay still.” His hand stroked down her spine lightly, over and over again, skipping over her hurts.

Beneath the touch of his skin, Jenna’s flesh trembled. Part of her wanted to arch into him, to rub herself against him like a cat in need of a good petting. The other part of her, the fragile, damaged, fearful part of her, shied away from his hand as though it burned.

“You have some weird ideas, Connor.”

Jenna jerked at the sound of the nurse’s voice. Somehow she’d been lulled into an almost trance-like daze, her mind adrift from the place where her body lay.

“Weird but wonderful. She needs to relax, and she understands what’s being said. We’re putting her on edge. If she calms down, she should slide back into sleep. There’s still sedative in her system, she’s just fighting it.”

Fingers ran gently through her lank hair, then something was pushed firmly into her ear. She shook her head like a mad dog, only to be stilled by a hand on her head.

“It won’t hurt you, Jenna. Trust me.” Gentle pressure forced her to turn her face, and her other ear filled. Sound muffled so Connor’s voice seemed distorted. “Close your eyes and let me take care of you.”

She felt his hand grasp hers, pry open her clenched fingers. A small square of plastic pressed into her palm. He guided her fingers over raised buttons and told her how to work the contraption. Then he tapped a fingertip on the square and music filled her ears.

A woman's voice crooned softly amongst a strangely rhythmic melody.

Jenna closed her eyes and let the music carry her. The lyrics wrapped around her heart and drew her into the world the voice wove around her troubled mind. She felt her anxiety start to slip away until it became inconsequential.

By the time the melody ceased in her head, her fingers sought the button to make it play again. And again. It soothed her, even as the hands on her back awakened pain only to silence it once more.

Connor's hands stilled for a moment as the pathetically lean and battered woman under his care slipped back into sleep. Taut muscles relaxed as he cleaned cuts and welts, plied them with cream and cooling gel. He heard her breathing catch and level out as the remnants of sedative coaxed her beneath the peace of slumber.

He was well aware he'd hurt her, more than once. She'd told him as much without ever making a sound. Even when her skin twitched and her body tried to curl into itself to escape the pain, not even a whimper had broken the air.

"Connor, are you nearly done?"

"Hmmm?" He lifted his head distractedly, his eyes unfocused slightly from concentrating on the mess in front of him. He blinked rapidly for a few seconds and managed to focus on his nurse. "Sorry, Sarah, what did you say?"

"Sheriff's here. Wants to know if he can come in." Sarah watched him patiently with her dark eyes, and Connor knew he amused her. Her expression said everything. "I told him the patient was currently unavailable to give him a statement, but he's insisting..."

"Yeah, he's big on being insistent." Connor sighed and crouched in front of his patient. He stroked his fingertips over her face and, when she remained unresponsive, gave Sarah the go-ahead for his brother to come in.

"So this is the little mute," Caleb said in his deep voice. Out of all three brothers, Caleb was the one most like their father from build to mannerisms to voice. "Have you managed to get anything out of her yet?"

Connor just rolled his eyes. "No. I've been just a little busy trying to piece her back together."

His brother stepped up beside the table, hands on hips, and sighed heavily. He wore a simple white shirt and classic blue jeans, topped with his

usual black Stetson and calf-skin jacket. He screamed *Sheriff* from his pores. "Someone's got some shit to answer for. She going to be okay?"

"Who knows? The outside is badly scarred, some of these are deep and infected. Treating them is going to be a bitch. The girl can't or won't talk. God knows if that's down to mental damage or just...maybe she hasn't been allowed to use her voice. There's so fucking much that could be wrong, that she's suffered through, that I don't know where to start."

Caleb pulled his Stetson off, set it on the counter behind him and then just ran his hand through his short dark hair. The stresses and strains of being law and order in such a small town were usually neither here nor there aside from the odd major incident. Still, his temples glistened faintly with silver hairs.

He traced his fingers lightly along the wounds on her back still to be seen to. "You've seen marks like this before, Con. Don't bother to tell me you don't know what made them," he said with a bite to his tone. "I know your proclivities."

Connor's teeth snapped together in a snarl. "Jesus, Cal, that's my *private* business."

"Sarah's too professional to blab about what you do in your limited spare time, Connor."

Anger roiled in the pit of his stomach. "What I do in my spare time is what I *am*, Caleb. Your disapproval doesn't change a damn thing. I can't be something I'm not just because you don't like what I am. Just because someone saw fit to take a fucking bullwhip to this girl doesn't make them a Dominant, and it sure as hell doesn't make me the same as them."

"Dominant." Caleb sneered around the word. "Is this what happens in that sordid little underworld of yours, brother? Women chained and beaten, scarred and tortured in the name of pleasure?"

"Have you actually heard the bullshit coming out of your mouth? If this is a consequence of BDSM, it had nothing to do with safe, sane and consensual. This is just depravity." Connor slammed his hand down on the metal tray in frustration. The resulting crash made his patient jump. Before he could curse at his own stupidity, Jenna's huge green eyes stared at him. "Fuck."

"Sleeping beauty wakes."

Connor snarled at his brother. He knew Caleb didn't understand his sexual needs. Truth was, Connor didn't expect him to. Between Connor,

Caleb and Cain, there were only nine months between each of them. They had been as close as triplets throughout their entire childhood and teenage years, well into their early twenties.

As the eldest, Caleb had taken it hard when an ex-girlfriend of Connor's had run to him and claimed sexual abuse. It had taken several embarrassing weeks of thorough interviews with both Connor and the ex-girlfriend before Caleb discerned the difference between sexual abuse and a disgruntled ex-girlfriend using a consensual BDSM relationship for revenge after Connor ended things between them.

The ex-girlfriend had left town red-faced and mortified.

Connor stayed in town, under the reproachful watch of his brother, and managed to evade Caleb's sporadic bouts of judgement. He knew Caleb, ever the upstanding citizen, would never stand for anything remotely non-consensual. What Connor hadn't realized was his brother had trouble distinguishing Connor's lifestyle from that of a criminal.

And that hurt.

"Caleb, get out. You're not going to start interrogating her before she's even come to her senses." He tugged an earbud free and forced a smile for his patient. "Hey baby. You're doing so well. Just a little longer, think you can hold on for me?"

Her eyes rolled drowsily before she blinked them back into focus. They searched his face carefully. After a moment, she nodded slowly and seemed to drift back into sleep.

Until his asshole of a brother cleared his throat.

His calm, doped patient turned into a block of ice, frozen in place. Betrayal shone from her eyes when they locked on Connor's. Every muscle in her body visibly tightened.

One wrong move and the shit would hit the fan.

"Jenna, baby, it's okay. This is Caleb, my brother. You've already met my other brother, Cain, do you remember him from the bar? Caleb is the sheriff. He wanted to come meet you."

She shook her head and writhed in the way of a toddler heading for a temper tantrum. Her breathing came fast and choppy, noisy inhales through the mouth followed by sharp exhales down her nose. Her hand whipped out and slapped at him when he tried to touch her arm.

Their tentative bond and the slender threads of trust which bound them together strained frantically. He could all but feel the fragile strands pinging

loose one at a time.

“Jenna,” he crooned in a low voice. “Everything’s okay.”

He could see her choice in her eyes and knew there was nothing he could do to stop her. He held his hands up, watched her focus on them. “Sarah, I need you to take Cal into the kitchen. Make some coffee, whatever. Just go and go now. Not a word, Caleb. Not a fucking word,” he all but hissed when his brother opened his mouth to speak. “Go.”

All it took was one stupid movement. Connor saw terror flare across Jenna’s face as Caleb grabbed his hat from the counter in a barely restrained motion of violence. Before he could say a word or make a grab for her, Jenna had slipped off the table.

Her bony chest heaved, and Connor could hear her breath wheezing. She staggered back against the counter, no doubt adding to her bruises, before she gained any control over her legs. There was a slackness to her face that suggested the sedative had a tighter hold on her than Connor had expected.

She swayed, her eyes heavy as they swung from him to Sarah to Caleb and then to the door. She clutched his MP3 player in her hand like a lifeline.

“I can take her,” Caleb muttered.

“A goddamn gopher could take her right now.” Connor shifted his weight as Jenna inched her way toward the door. “Don’t move. Caleb, I swear to God if you—”

Connor cursed as Cal made the leap, his hand slapping the wall near her face and his arm braced to serve as a barrier. He wanted to bray the crap out of his dickhead brother, sheriff or not, when Jenna threw her hands up to protect her face and slid down the wall in a heap.

He heard the trust between them crack.

“Sarah, get him the fuck out of here,” he snapped as he elbowed Cal out of his way. He had to fight, viciously, his own need to punch Caleb. But when he weighed the consequence of that action, of using violence in front of a woman brutally terrorized through violent actions, he couldn’t bring himself to take the swing.

He would have it out with Caleb when they were on their own.

Connor didn’t move as Sarah and Caleb left the room. He heard their voices moving down the hall and noted, with satisfaction, that Sarah’s had chilled considerably. Good. Maybe Caleb would take a hint from her rather than a direct statement from his little brother.

He blanked that from his mind. He had bigger, more complicated issues in front of him. Slowly, he knelt onto the hard floor, never taking his eyes off Jenna. He opened his arms to her and prayed for a miracle. “Jenna, he’s gone. It’s just you and me.”

She stared at him out of devastated green eyes. The long lashes were wet with tears. She huddled against the wall, using her body to defend and hide the scars down her front. She glanced down at the music player in her hand, fiddled with the buttons.

Something like peace flickered over her features before she met his eyes again. What the hell had she found on that player?

“Can I listen?”

Her gaze flickered but after a moment’s hesitation, she scooted closer to him and held out the free earpiece. He pressed it to his own, and the haunting sound of LP’s *Muddy Waters* came through the speaker. “You really like this one, huh? This is the one you kept flicking back to every time it ended?”

Jenna eyed him. He nearly smiled. She was cute when she was suspicious, despite the ungodly smell and grime. But she nodded in reply to his question.

Connor settled in beside her. He could see the goose bumps running along her arms but didn’t dare push their fractured relationship by pulling her into his warmth. “My brother, Caleb, can be an ass. But he’s a good guy, one of the best sheriffs this town has ever had. You can trust him like you trust me.”

Her lips quirked in what could have been either amusement or a *yeah, right* expression.

“He said something earlier which made a lot of sense. He just came at it from the wrong perspective. He thought that someone from a...different lifestyle might have done this to you. A dominant kind of person.” He watched her face carefully, caught the flicker of acknowledgement he doubted she knew she’d even given away. “Was it a man who did this to you, baby?”

The song changed. Jenna’s hands fumbled to change it back. Once more, *Muddy Waters* began to play. A tear trickled down her face. And her head jerked in a nod.

“Did you know him?”

She shook her head in the negative and Connor sighed.

“This is going to sound like a stupid question, Jenna, but it’s important. I really need you to talk to me and I haven’t got a clue why you’re not talking. Do you have a vocal impairment? Something wrong with your tongue or your throat which makes it hard for you to talk?”

Another negative headshake.

“Did this man order you not to talk?”

Her eyes flashed up to his, bore into them with an intensity Connor felt penetrate down to the marrow in his bones. She gave him all the answers he needed with that one fierce glare.

“Good. If I tell you something, do you promise not to freak out on me?” He smiled at her kindly and chuckled when her eyes narrowed at him in return. “You have my promise not to hurt you, Jenna. What I need to tell you is something I consider very private. It’s my secret. Can I trust you with it?”

He’d piqued her interest, he noted with satisfaction. She looked toward the door and back at him. After a little hesitation, she shuffled closer to him and tilted her head as if waiting for him to divulge his ever-so precious secret.

“I am...” Connor sighed heavily. “It might be the man who did this to you believes himself to be a part of a particular lifestyle. BDSM. Bondage, domination or discipline, sadism and masochism.” He felt her stiffen and took her hand in his. “I think he took the domination or discipline part too far. Not to mention the sadism,” he added in a mutter. “I think he’s just a sadistic bastard who abused you because he could.

“I’m not like him. I have the same...urges?” Christ, that sounded wrong even to his ears and, by the way she recoiled, it didn’t strike Jenna the right way either. “Urges is the wrong word. I’m a Dominant, Jenna, and believe me, it would take me a while to explain the differences between who and what I am, what I need, and the steps I take to ensure that any woman in my company leaves happy, and the piece of shit who’s done God knows what to you.”

Jenna paled.

“I can be your Dom, Jenna. I stepped away from that world because... because I needed to. But if stepping back into that role, if giving you a *definitive order* to speak, helps you out of this mess, then that’s what I’ll do. I promised to help you, baby.”

The music faded, and the first melancholy notes of her favored song started again.

“I know ordering you to start talking again might not work. There’s a high possibility you’ll need to build trust in me, in us, before you feel safe enough to obey me in that way. I’m not looking at this as a sexual relationship, Jenna. I’m hoping it’s going to be a way to get you back on solid footing.”

Jenna tugged on the hand he held, but he refused to let go. He felt her panic, and just as quickly as it surfaced, he defused it. She sniffled, and if the expressions on her face meant anything, fought valiantly to keep the tears at bay.

Finally, she relaxed and rested her head on his shoulder, her body shivering as she pressed against him. As he wrapped his arms around her, drew her into the warmth of him, she nodded her capitulation.

For so long, she had feared the touch of another human. Sire had given her nothing but pain, even if it was just a casual backhand for an implied infraction. Trying to hold onto her humanity through an eternity of pain had seemed pointless when it was so much easier to just let that part of herself fade away into ether.

Now, with Connor’s arms curled around her naked body, his heat seeping through her chilled flesh, Jenna wondered what the hell would have happened if she’d let the ether claim that part of her.

Connor was strong, and warm and safe. He held her carefully, shifted her so her head tucked beneath his chin and her back didn’t press against his shirt. He rocked her, slowly, as the song she’d come to love from the first bars played in her head.

Connor’s talk of domination, of obeying made her nervous. How did he know about Sire’s explicit demand that she not talk? He couldn’t know of the threat Sire had dropped on top of the demand...the threat to remove her tongue and crush any hope of ever speaking again.

Sometimes Jenna thought she’d never be able to say another word, so long it had been since her vocal cords had been put to use. She often had visions of them crumbling to dust in her throat, gone forever, to leave her mute and miserable.

On top of it all, she knew Sire would be looking for her; there was one way and one way only that he disposed of his slave girls. There was a

specific reason why she was still a virgin, and why she—among the others before her—had toed the line no matter what the demand.

When he tired of his current girl, he would bring a new one in. The experienced one would show the new girl the ropes, and then after a few days, Sire would take them both out to his special place in the woods behind the shed and make his newest acquisition watch while he raped and choked to death the one he no longer required.

Jenna had been lucky. She had suffered through the agony of training two replacements, knowing her death was imminent, only for the girls to disappoint Sire to such a degree he ended them instead of her.

By hiding away everything that made her *her*, she had stayed in Sire's good graces far longer than she believed even *he* had expected. She'd bowed and scraped and taken the systematic beatings in order to survive.

When the third replacement came, Jenna knew her survival rate dropped drastically. She'd seen the end in Sire's pale blue eyes as he gazed at her like a loving but disappointed father.

She'd all but felt him inside her, his hands around her throat as they squeezed the life from her. She'd almost heard him grunt and groan in climax as her last breath rattled free.

Safe in Connor's arms, Jenna cowered away from the cold that struck her bones and scattered horror through her soul. A whimper caught in her throat; years of training expelled it without a single squeak.

"So much going on in this head of yours."

She wanted to purr at the gentle stroke of his hand over her hair. Soft touch, human touch. It had been so long since she'd felt a connection to anyone. Something light and bright and shiny fluttered in her chest. It took her a long moment to realize it was hope.

"What do you say to letting me finish fixing you up? After that, we'll get you bathed and feeling a lot cleaner before," Connor checked his watch and whistled, "I make you some toast? By the time we do all that, it will be well into morning. You can sleep in my bed while I do my morning surgery."

She looked pointedly at the door.

"Just you and me, Jenna. No one else unless you want them here."

This guy was a mind reader. She nodded and nestled in closer to him. Music thrummed in one ear while his heartbeat pulsed beneath the other.

Strong like him, with a rhythm so like the music she liked so much, his vitality soothed her.

Suddenly his warmth shifted away and Jenna blinked up at him in confusion. Obviously it wasn't something she'd said but...she clutched at his arms when they slipped beneath her, behind her, and lifted her effortlessly.

She found herself back on the stupid table, face down, the familiar pillow under her head. When he tried to take the music from her, she slapped at him, desperate to keep it in her head.

"Listen to me, just trust me." Connor said as he wrestled the little box from her hand. She had tears in her eyes as he walked away from her to a black box in the corner.

Out of nowhere, the notes of her salvation drifted. She relaxed and smiled as the music grew louder. The touch of Connor's hand on her back didn't make her flinch; she lost the weakest part of herself in that magical voice and kept only the sharpest piece of herself on alert.

"That's better, right? Now we can both listen to it," Connor murmured as he poked delicately at one of the freshest slices, one that curved from the base of her spine and danced around her hip. "I'd like to flog the bastard responsible for this."

Jenna shuddered when cold liquid splashed over her lower back. It caressed her wounds, sent needle-pricks of pain stinging through her flesh before it seemed to cool. Then she felt nothing at all, which made a nice change.

After a while, she floated. Connor's constant commentary and the ministrations of his hands merged into one. His voice sent little spasms of delight up her spine, so deep and smooth that every word sounded like something dark and tempting to eat.

As if agreeing with her, her stomach twisted uncomfortably and let loose with a savage growl.

Well used to it, Jenna kept her eyes closed and ignored her body's demands for food. For as long as she could remember, her dietary needs were fulfilled with whatever scraps Sire threw into her shed at night. *If* he deemed her deserving.

She yawned, stretched stiffly, as arms scooped her up and hitched her onto a broad hip. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind, memories of a

little girl surfaced. Held tight, her tiny arms and legs locked around a man with a shadowed face, her head tucked into the curve of his shoulder.

Unconsciously, Jenna mirrored the memory and her body wrapped around Connor's tentatively. She snuffled against the soft skin of his throat and smiled.

“Good girl. Go to sleep. When you wake up, it'll be a brighter day.”

CHAPTER THREE

Connor paused in the doorway to his room and stared at the frail hump beneath the covers on his bed. The king-size spread made the girl look so tiny, as though he could lose her in it. He'd turned the bedside lamp off so that only the light from the hall spilled over her, the dimmest of guardians against the dark.

He'd settled her on her stomach to take pressure off her back, and she looked like a neglected child in the cradle of the blankets. Dark shadows hugged her eyes, made more obvious by the deathly pallor of her skin.

He couldn't wait to get her clean, to wash the dirt and blood and abuse away so that the person she was beneath all that shit could clamber free. He didn't know the color of her hair or what her voice sounded like, but Connor realized he wanted to discover her secrets, to watch her bloom into the woman she should have been before...this.

And that was just dangerous territory.

He checked his watch, sighed at the time. Six fifteen, which meant his surgery started in just under two hours. He needed something to eat, a shower and a change of clothes before then. Most of all, he yearned to join Jenna in the land of sleep.

To hell with it, he decided. Caleb could see himself out and Sarah would do whatever it was she did before surgery started.

Connor was taking thirty minutes for himself.

He left his bedroom door ajar and walked to the next room, his guest room, and left that door wide open as he undressed down to his boxers. He needed to be able to hear his patient if she stirred, and he knew no one would disturb him.

His brothers in particular knew what Connor was like when disturbed from sleep. They'd had their fair share of black eyes after waking their

brother up more than once as a teenager. Connor O'Malley did not take prisoners.

He slipped under the covers and rested his hands beneath his head. The aches and pains in his tired body sighed with relief as the cool sheets enveloped and soothed. He closed his eyes and willed every thought out of his head.

"Connor. *Connor.*"

What the fuck? Connor struggled to rouse himself from the tangles of sleep pulling his mind back into blessed oblivion. He cursed the irritating hand on his bare shoulder shaking him.

"Damn it, Connor, wake *up.*" Sarah's voice was higher in pitch than normal, and it shocked his bleary eyes open. His nurse looked frazzled, something he rarely saw happen with her.

"What?" He cleared the croak from his throat. "What's wrong?"

"Your patient's throwing a tantrum. Won't let me near her."

He grunted. "What time is it?"

"Nearly noon. I cancelled your appointments for the day, I didn't think you'd be up to dealing with more after last night." Sarah ran her hand through her hair and scowled at him. "Don't look at me like that. You had a handful of appointments, and none of them merited immediate attention. *She* does."

Noon? Christ, he'd gone under and quickly. Connor blew out a hard breath and shoved himself upright. "Let me get dressed and I'll go to her. Can you prep the exam room? Jenna's wounds will need checking after I give her a shower."

She smirked at him before she turned toward the door. Damn sassy little mare. "Already done, boss. Not all of us slept the morning away." She winked and sauntered away.

"Not all of us slept the morning away," Connor mocked under his breath. With a grin that belied his tiredness, he swung his legs out of bed and pulled on his clothes. He made a mental note to hunt down some clean underwear after he'd showered.

The smell of coffee hit him as soon as he stepped into the hallway. God bless Sarah, for all her backchat and wicked sense of humor. She always knew what he needed, usually before he even thought about it.

Connor waited in the doorway of his bedroom and surveyed the empty bed. There was a slight dent in the pillow, but the sheets were barely

wrinkled. He frowned and let his gaze scan over his apparently deserted room.

A flicker of movement caught his eye and he focused on a patch of shadows between his drawers and wardrobe. She'd balled herself into the fetal position, and her slight frame was easy to hide. Even from here, Connor could see her skin shudder, what little flesh she had left quiver.

"Jenna?"

At the sound of his voice, her head snapped up and whipped around. Her luminous green eyes were almost swollen shut from weeping and her tears had made tracks through the dirt on her face.

"Oh baby," he sighed and walked toward her. His heart sagged a little for the child so obviously buried in the body of the woman as she cowered against the wall, trapped in the corner. He held out his hand and waited. "Come to me, Jenna. You remember me. You know what I promised you. Trust me."

Her hand crept toward him, then jerked back. He half expected her to stick a thumb in her mouth and suck on it. Instead, she chewed on a knuckle for a few moments before extending her hand out to him properly, her fingers trembling.

Patiently, Connor bided his time until her cold hand pressed into his. "Why the hell are you down here on the floor, baby? You'd be so much warmer in the bed."

She sniffled and knuckled her eyes with her free hand.

Something ugly struck him in the stomach. "You were never allowed to sleep in a bed, were you?" He recalled some of the wounds on her body in key areas and cursed a blue streak. "Pressure sores. How the hell did I miss that? You have pressure sores from sleeping on the floor."

Jenna nodded.

Fury rose in him like steam from a boiling kettle. Connor tried to hold it back, keep it tamped down, but it burned away at his brain like acid. "You sleep in the bed from now on, Jenna. Do you understand me? No more sleeping on the floor like a dog. You're a fucking human being, not an animal."

She shrank back from the vehemence in his tone. Connor cursed again and gentled his voice. "I'm not mad at you, baby. Don't think that." He shifted slowly, set his hand on her shoulder and rubbed gently. "I'm just

fucking livid that someone could treat you like an animal and think it's acceptable."

More tears dripped down her face and Connor felt his emotions begin to attach to her, stronger than they should have. He sighed and lifted her into his arms, and against his better judgement, pressed his lips to her forehead. "You're going to feel like a human being again, baby, once you've had a shower and some food."

Jenna's naked body curled into him. He could feel the bumps of her spine, the ridges of her ribs and hips. So slight, desperately underweight and heartbreakingly unloved. His arms tightened around her even as she clutched him like a lifeline.

He carried her like a treasured possession from the room as she wept soundlessly against his chest. Helpless in the face of her emotion, he could offer her no comfort but his warmth, his voice, whatever she needed from him.

It was ridiculous, Connor thought with an inward snarl. Bloody ridiculous how much he craved her trust. She gave him a scarce millimeter and he strived to take the mile.

Caleb would undoubtedly say such yearnings were indicative of those domineering monsters who chained and beat their slaves. Not unlike, Connor thought with disgust, the monster responsible for Jenna. But Connor had been away from the lifestyle for a long time, and although he knew his dominant side lay quietly dormant, he was very aware that it might not stay that way forever.

This wasn't his inner beast on the rampage, Connor would place money on it. This was something deeper, stronger, more tying than anything he'd ever experienced. Something he was not prepared to think about right now.

They reached the bathroom, and Jenna seemed to have calmed. While her hold on him remained tight, her body no longer vibrated with sobs. He reached into the shower and flicked the water on, adjusting the heat to no more than a few degrees over lukewarm. A far cry from what he was used to.

She flinched as the water ran, almost as if the sound hurt her ears. Connor stroked her back gently as he set her down on her feet and held her steady. "I won't let go of you, baby. It's only water. Time to see what you look like under all this dirt, right?" He knew he had a stupid, and possibly creepy, smile on his face but he couldn't help it.

Her hand shook as she held it out to the spray. Water splashed over her fingers and she jerked away.

Connor sighed. It was very much like having a small child in his care, a traumatized child with no idea of how things worked or what they were used for. He didn't have a clue what Jenna associated with such simple things as this, the shower. What memories it evoked in her mind.

He stripped off his shirt and pants and, clad only in his boxers, stepped under the wonderfully warm spray and pulled Jenna in with him. One by one, he felt the tired muscles in his shoulders and back start to relax under the warm caress.

Jenna's eyes cast down to their bare feet. He hooked a finger under her chin and lifted her face up. Already the water was at work, some of the grime washing away in streaks.

His thumbs wiped away droplets from beneath her eyes and Connor caught himself before he could dip his head and taste her lips. He reprimanded himself thoroughly for the almost-move; Jenna did not have the wherewithal to deny his advantage, either through strength or voice. He'd hate for her to think she had no choice in the matter.

Instead he emptied a good dollop of shower gel into his palms and slicked them together before massaging the forest-smelling gel across her shoulders and down her arms. She stood passively, so he worked his way down the front of her body with the utmost care.

The water swirling down the drain quickly turned black, even as her skin came up a pale, pale cream.

His voice echoed in the stall, chatting away to her about nonsense as he carefully lathered her most sensitive areas. Then he turned her, his ministrations more tender as he worked around her open wounds. No doubt they stung as the gel washed away over them, but Jenna seemed to hardly breathe, let alone react.

Finally, Connor tipped her head back a little and attacked her greasy mess of hair gently. Dirt and crap had fused into the rough-cut strands, the hair no more than hacked off crudely. Bit by bit, his fingers rubbed delicately through hair and debris until the first dark blonde hairs started to gleam through.

"Little miss blonde," he said with a smile. "Gorgeous."

The faintest sheen of red flushed across the tops of her shoulders, up her neck and her ears. His smile turned into a satisfied grin. Oh yes, she wasn't

unaffected just yet. There was a spark inside her that had yet to be extinguished. And by God, Connor thought, if it hadn't been snuffed out by what had happened to her up till now, there wasn't much else that could.

Rinsing her off proved to be difficult. More difficult than even he had expected. Now that the shit was gone and Jenna was clean, the severity of what had been laid upon her became very clear. Nothing hid the brutality of the scars. The brutality, Connor bared his teeth, or the sheer volume.

He spun her around, delighted with the change in her. Her green eyes were still downcast, and her face still pinched with a hunger only good meals could alleviate. But her hair was no longer unkempt, her skin caked in muck. He decided to take her for a proper haircut the first chance he got once she felt better.

"You have to feel better," he said quietly as he switched the shower off. He reached for a towel and wrapped it efficiently around her to offset the trembles contracting through her body. He used another one to wipe himself dry in super quick time. "You look...beautiful."

Her flush deepened. It was a trait he rarely saw nowadays, the healthy glow of a woman's emotions. Most often, those subtle hints were hidden away under too much makeup. And women now tended to be...hard to shock and embarrass, even flatter.

Jenna, however, was an open book. Every emotion, every nuance and feeling broadcast over her face, through her body language. He doubted she knew she did it, but she hid nothing.

Connor held out his hand. There was no more than a split second of hesitation before she wrapped her fingers around his and held on. What happened next thrust his heart into his throat.

She smiled.

A full-wattage albeit very shy smile that brought the cutest dimples to her narrow face and gave her an innocent, almost childlike aura. Something bright glowed in her eyes, and all Connor could think was, *I need to make her mine.*

He led her back to the bedroom, mindful of her bare feet. She hadn't done any permanent damage in her escape, but her dainty soles had taken a rough punishment and he had no doubt they gave her discomfort. He asked her to wait beside the bed and didn't miss the anxious glance she gave it.

"You're not here for that, baby. I'm not asking that of you." Connor unwrapped her from the damp towel, scrubbed it gently over her hair,

before he tossed it into a chair in the corner. "Laundry pile."

She remained motionless where he'd left her as he moved to his drawers and pulled out a long black T-shirt with a big, tough-looking bull emblazoned on the front.

"Arms up," he ordered and quickly dressed her in the T-shirt.

What might have fit him perfectly was not a good fit for Jenna, Connor thought and stifled a laugh. He was tall and fairly broad. The T-shirt hadn't been made for a lass nearly a foot shorter and half his size.

In essence, it drowned her in waves of black, silky material.

"Okay, looks like we're good to go. Let me just change and we'll go hunt something nice up for your breakfast. Actually, it'll be lunch but never mind," he added with a wink.

He started pulling items from different drawers, then gave her a sidelong look. "Why don't you, ah, go downstairs and find Sarah, baby? I'll only be two minutes getting dressed." *And I don't want to frighten you with the sight of a big, naked male body.*

Jenna glanced toward the door, then back at him. She eased closer to him, her fingers curling around his forearm in a fierce grip.

Well, shit. Connor stared at her dumbfounded and wondered what the hell he was supposed to do now. He patted her hand gently. "Okay then, you just stay there." He frowned. "You ever seen a naked man before, Jenna?"

Something dark and haunted flickered through her eyes before she nodded. The fingers on his arm flexed, trembled with some unpleasant memory.

"Sit down," he said gently and eased her onto the bed. With careful moves he plucked her fingers from his arm and set her hands in her lap, placed his on top in reassurance. "Give me two minutes to get my boxers off and some clean ones on, okay? Just close your eyes until I say so."

She did so, and Connor wasted no time in springing for his underwear drawer and yanking out a pair of dark green boxer briefs. He whipped off his wet pair and tossed them into the corner with the towel, then whirled when Jenna gasped loudly.

Her eyes as round as moons, her pupils dilating as they drifted down his body to lock on his crotch, then shooting up and to his right. Her pale skin flushed a brilliant shade of red as her mouth dropped open.

He sighed heavily. Now she'd be traumatized forever by the sight of his penis standing at half—no, make that full-mast. As if she didn't have

enough to think about in that bonny little head of hers.

There were things going on inside her Jenna never knew existed. Her mind screamed at her to turn away, to avert her gaze before Connor got mad and lifted his hand to her for disobeying a direct order. She knew the punishment for disobedience, and it wasn't something she ever wanted to suffer through again.

Meanwhile, her belly filled with the oddest fluttering sensation. Between her legs, the place she associated with dying filled with moisture, slick and plentiful. And how sick was *that*, she asked herself in disgust.

The man was sculpted to suit all aspects of female appreciation. Even her limited knowledge of men didn't stop her from understanding that this man in particular was an exception to the rule.

Sire's body couldn't compare to Connor's temple of muscle.

Her eyes flicked from point to point, landing anywhere but on that body. She couldn't stop the anxiousness, didn't know what to do with herself. She wanted to look, to touch, to hold. Would his skin be as soft as it appeared, his muscles as hard and strong? Would the warmth of him dispel the aching cold settled in the heart of her?

His hand pressed against her cheek, and when she found the courage to look at him, she discovered she was disappointed to see he'd gotten dressed—albeit casually—in dark grey jogging bottoms and a black T-shirt.

"I'm sorry," Connor said quietly. "That was unorthodox of me."

Unorthodox? Jenna frowned at the word. She reached out, mirrored the gesture of his hand with her own and smiled a little at the scrape of bristle against her palm. Her brazenness shocked her but the warmth of his skin beneath her fingertips felt like coming home.

His gray eyes darkened swiftly until they resembled the heralding clouds of a vicious storm. She traced across his firm mouth curiously and watched something dark and feral flash across his face.

Part of her, the innocent she was, cowered in deference to the beast chained behind Connor's calm outward façade. Another part of her shouted for joy at the newfound knowledge she wasn't the only one with something locked away. And the third part of her, the part kept segregated from society and that had taken the biggest hits from Sire, simply threw back its head in a howl and beckoned Connor's dark side to join her.

“Don’t start something I’m not prepared to finish,” Connor said, his voice a wicked rumble in his chest. His hands cupped possessively around her head, making her tilt back to stare endlessly and without complaint into his beautiful eyes.

Her tongue darted out to wet her dry lips; his gaze dropped to watch the movement. Slowly, he bent his head and touched his mouth to the corner of hers. First one, then the other. Soft as the brush of a butterfly’s wings, with just enough pressure to send a shudder of unimagined pleasure arrowing down her spine.

More. She didn’t know what *more* was, but she wanted it. Held captive in his hands, Jenna beseeched him with her eyes and poured every ounce of desperation into *the look*.

“Say my name.”

Jenna jerked back in shock and confusion. She frowned at him, at the powerful resonance in his voice that reflected his dominant persona. She couldn’t say her own name, never mind his.

“You want more, baby? I do. I want to know how you taste. How you respond to my kiss. But more than anything, I want to hear your pretty little voice wrap around my name.” His lips were a scant inch away from hers, his breath warm on her face. “Say it, Jenna. *Say it.*”

Connor. Connor. Her throat muscles strained with the effort to do as he ordered. Tears of frustration burned trails down her cheeks as she mouthed the word without a sound. Distressed, she dropped her forehead to his chest.

Connor’s arms came around her, pulled her tight against him and she sagged into the embrace. She snuffled pitifully as he tipped her head back so their eyes met. Then his mouth slanted over hers, all soft and warm, a long way from the ravenous kiss she’d expected.

Inside her, warmth spread from her chest down through her stomach to that odd place at the apex of her thighs. She pressed against him, against that hardened part of him that rubbed so delightfully over her center.

Jenna wanted to crawl inside him, to keep this feeling forever. To feel his tongue make love to hers even as his body mimicked the action. But his arms stayed wrapped around her, his hands kneading her flesh softly but not moving anywhere.

What the hell is wrong with me? She thought dejectedly. She still had her brain, her tongue, her vocal cords intact. They just couldn’t work together to form the damn words she wanted to say!

“It’s okay, baby. The words will come, I promise.” His mouth crooned near her ear, so calm and confident he quashed her rising anxiety. “No harm in trying, right?” He drew away from her, taking his warmth and his solidarity, and Jenna felt her body react vehemently to the separation. She clung to him.

In return, he pressed his lips to the crown of her head. “Time for breakfast, baby.”

What was food compared to the sustenance she gained when his arms came around her? She had managed to survive for months on little to no food, on scraps stolen here and there as she prepared Sire’s meals. She didn’t know if she could survive the loss of Connor’s touch.

But her hand was clasped firmly in his and she found herself following him gingerly on sore feet. Wherever he took her, she would stay with him.

The plate of food mocked her.

Jenna stared at it, at the two slices of lightly toasted bread slick with golden butter. They sat on the plate, smelling like heaven and making her stomach clench viciously with the need to shove them into her mouth, all at once.

But they mocked her, weaving their scent around her while Sire’s voice rumbled through her mind like a mantra: *Not yours. Never yours. Not yours. Never yours. Not yours. Never yours.*

Nothing was ever hers; the shed where she existed, the ratty blanket... even those, her basic items, did not belong to her. Sire made sure she understood that from the moment she’d awoken in his prison for the first time.

So she stared at the mocking plate, her mouth practically salivating. She could all but taste the butter, feel the toast rip between her teeth. But it wasn’t hers, would never be hers.

Connor cocked his head and frowned at her. His big hand nudged the offending plate closer to her. “You can’t tell me you’re not hungry, sweetheart.”

She licked her lips, swallowed down a pool of saliva that threatened to choke her. In reply, her stomach growled angrily, furious at being denied what it so badly wanted.

But the consequences were too much to risk.

She wanted to cry when Connor pulled the plate back toward him, barely restrained herself from yanking it out of his grasp. It had been a trick after all, but she consoled herself with the knowledge she'd passed the test. She hadn't broken, she'd stayed strong and resisted temptation.

"Here. If you don't eat, Jenna, I will be forced to take drastic measures." Connor's voice was grim, flat as he methodically cut both pieces of toast into quarters. He set the food back in front of her. "Don't make me get the feeding tube out, sweetheart; it's not something I want to put either of us through."

It took everything inside her, every last shred of self-control, to shove the plate away. Defeated, she let her head thunk onto the table with a heavy sigh.

"No. No, you damn well don't."

Connor's hand clamped down on her shoulders, pulled her back into a sitting position. With one hand, he dragged his chair around to sit in front of her. Irritation reflected in his every movement and set Jenna on edge. "I don't know what that bastard did to you, but I'm not going to let you starve to death in my care because you're, what, still adhering to his bullshit rules?"

Whoa, was he psychic?

"Now, open up." His gray eyes narrowed when they locked on hers.

His voice, his posture, his expression all changed into something stronger, more powerful. Jenna sensed the change in him before the full force of his dominance washed over her and pressed every single one of her submissive buttons.

She shivered in response.

"Last chance," he warned, holding a quarter of toast to her lips. "Open."

Jenna obeyed, thankful to let someone else take the reins for a little while and give her mind a break from the constant war it held against itself. She felt the toast on her tongue, then experienced an influx of flavor and texture. Soft yet crispy, warm slick butter on top of bread soggy in the middle, crunchy on the edges.

"Good girl." Connor crooned with pride evident in his tone. His free hand stroked over her hair, a reward from her master. His hand went to the plate to pick up another quarter.

Before she could think, she'd snatched the plate away from him, pulling it in front of her and caging her arms around it protectively. Hers, it was all

hers. Her teeth bared in a snarl as she tore into the food, almost choking herself by cramming her mouth full before she'd finished chewing and swallowing the previous piece.

"Slow down, you're going to be sick."

She didn't care. Couldn't care about anything but filling the void in her belly, satiating the hollow pain hunger brought. Even as the precious food settled like lead in her belly, she couldn't stop herself from wolfing it down.

Just like she couldn't help clawing at the big tanned hand that tried to lift the plate from the cage of her arms, using her nails to dig into flesh as she frantically stuffed more into her mouth. A combination of saliva and melted butter went down the wrong way, sending her into a fit of vicious coughing. She nearly cried as barely chewed toast sprayed over the table while she struggled for breath.

"Warned you, sweetheart." Calm as a saint, Connor rose from his seat and moved behind her, the heel of his hand thumping firmly between her shoulder blades. Planning or luck had him missing the biggest wounds. "I know you're hungry but pigging food will only make you sick."

Tears filled her eyes as she wheezed for air, feeling as though Sire's hand clamped brutally around her throat. She gripped the edge of the table, trying to stand when panic consumed her, but Connor just leaned her forward and rubbed his palm over her back between rhythmic blows.

Hungry was an understatement. It barely registered on the scale of how ravenous she'd become at the sight and smell and taste of simple buttered toast. It was humiliating to be reduced to her most base form by bread.

Her first pull of air was jagged and harsh, filling her lungs and easing the strain of suffocation. The firm smacks on her back stopped, settled into soothing circles that helped her focus while her body shuddered in relief.

"Here, she needs to sip this." The woman from earlier appeared beside the table, a steaming cup in her hand. She set it down, casting a wary eye over Jenna. "Might want to get her to the bathroom, Con. Your girl's looking a little green around the gills."

Attempting to edge away from the nurse, Jenna swallowed hard against the sudden flush of saliva forming in her mouth. No matter how many times or how strongly she willed it, the wave of nausea rose fast and firm.

"She'll be okay once she calms. Her system's a bit haywire this morning." More gentle rubbing, crooned words drowned out by the pulse of blood in her ears.

“Yeah...if you say so.”

It didn't escape Jenna's notice that the woman took several deliberate steps away in the three seconds before Jenna's stomach twisted into a hard knot...then expelled its meagre contents expressively over the table. The initial retch took her by surprise, wrenching her belly and throat badly enough she thought she'd be bruised internally.

“Ah, fucking hell.” Connor cursed and moved his hand up to her neck, massaging her nape reassuringly. There was no anger in his tone, no threat of repercussion for what would have been a termination offense in Sire's house. “Might as well get it all up, baby. We're not going to make it to the bathroom.”

Shame and embarrassment filled her even as the second retch heaved up most of her stomach lining and a quart of bile. Tears of frustration and disgust mingled with sweat, but not once did he disparage her for the horror spilling over his furniture.

By the time she was done, Jenna was exhausted down to the bone. Her knees trembled and gave way as her body shook with fatigue and shock. Half expecting to collapse face-first into her own mess and willing to accept that mortification, she was grateful to find herself swept up effortlessly into Connor's arms.

“Leave that, Sarah,” he ordered his nurse, turning to leave the kitchen. “I'll see to it once she's napping.”

Sarah scoffed as she rooted through the cupboards beneath the sink. “Nonsense. I've cleared up shit, blood and vomit before, Connor. This is nothing compared to what I've dealt with; go see to her, she's damn near translucent.”

Jenna's eyes rolled in their sockets as she gestured for Connor to set her down. It was her mess, she wouldn't—couldn't—leave it to others to clean up. She was too well trained.

Sire had once made her mop the kitchen floor of her own blood after he'd beaten her into oblivion, chuckling darkly as she struggled to hold the mop with broken fingers and almost blinded by the swelling around her eyes. The crop in his hand had urged her to complete the task, even when the pain became a tumultuous wave threatening to sweep her away.

Nausea and exhaustion were nothing in comparison.

“Be still, baby.” Connor's lips brushed her ear, sent a ripple down her spine. “We'll get you cleaned up and back to bed. You need rest.”

No! She needed to wash and disinfect the area she'd soiled, ensure everything was as it was before she ruined it. Anxiety wormed through her as Connor ignored her silent pleas and carried her from the room, his strong arms banded around her protesting form.

"Enough, Jenna," he commanded in a low but adamant tone. "Pale and clammy. Weak movements. You're not well enough to take on a feather duvet, never mind me. Is it so hard for you to let me to take care of you?"

Jenna went limp. The question wasn't harshly presented, but it had the effect of making her feel...ashamed. Stupid, really, but she didn't want to seem ungrateful for everything Connor was doing for her. Didn't want to give him a reason, any reason, to throw her away.

"Good girl. Just relax and let me handle the shit, okay?"

She closed her eyes. When he put it that way, it sounded rather appealing. Someone with broader shoulders offering to carry the weight that bowed her own fragile frame? A rarity in her world.

Kindness was a gift never given in her world.

She'd never been a good girl.

A tear slipped down her temple before she realized it was waiting to fall. As it tracked into her hair—clean, soft, scented hair—she knew there was more to come and willed them back. Tears were for solitude, for the dark where no one saw them fall and her misery was hidden.

That was her life.

CHAPTER FOUR

Connor swept his featherlight armful upstairs before she opened her eyes again. If she thought he hadn't seen the tear slide free, she thought wrong. Just as she thought she could hide from him by closing him out.

She'd learn, quickly, that she wasn't alone anymore.

There was no way to know how deep the extent of the mental damage coursed through her mind. He doubted if she knew herself. What was far beyond normal to him could be her perception of regularity.

Well, perceptions could be altered.

She curled into him as he shifted her carefully to fit her through the bathroom door without smacking her head into the jamb. She didn't need a concussion to deal with on top of everything else. One tiny hand gripped the front of his shirt, fingernails broken down to the quick.

Work-roughened hands. Dry, cracked, scarred. The hands of a woman in her sunset days after decades of hard work and physical labor. Jenna's hands were completely out of place, belying her...what, twenty-something years? Stress and abuse skewed his guess at her age, wearing lines into an otherwise youthful face.

It hurt to think he had to dig deep beneath the surface of her bravery into the raw nerves of what had been done to her. If he was going to find her true identity, get her back to her family, digging was the only way to discover the girl behind the woman.

Trust was the key, the glue that would keep her from running when everything became too much, too overwhelming for her to deal with. What else could a person do when made to confront their past? Run fast and far away.

Connor wanted desperately for her to run to *him*.

It had been too long since he'd last had a woman. Not just as a submissive, but in general. He missed the scent of an aroused female, the feel of warm skin beneath his hands as he learned her body, her wants, her deepest desires. It seemed like decades since he'd had the pleasure of waking with feminine curves pressed against him, sliding his hand over a shapely hip and hearing a sleepy moan of delight in response.

It occurred to him Jenna might never regain her voice. He might never hear her laugh or moan. There was a good chance his name wouldn't make it past those pretty lips, and that—if she ever trusted him enough with her body—he'd be denied the gift of hearing her sing in orgasm.

Jesus, what the hell was he doing, building an imaginary future with her? The lass couldn't even tell him her real name, never mind pledge herself to him with undying devotion. No matter what those lush eyes of hers said when she looked at him—and look at him she had when he'd broken several lines and kissed her—she couldn't give him verbal consent.

She refused to let his shirt go when he set her down on her feet. Held on with a determination he admired when he knocked down the lid on the toilet and pushed her into sitting on it. Her knuckles went white as he gently pried her fingers free, her eyes popping open with fear when he stepped away.

"I'm not going anywhere," Connor assured her, fixing the plug into the bathtub and setting the water running. The relief on her gaunt face gnawed at his belly, set his dominant instincts into high drive, only for him to squash them ruthlessly.

The meek, mute little mouse in front of him wasn't ready for Connor the Dom. She was barely coping with Connor the Doc, and it was the physician side of him who held most importance in her life right now. Helping her heal, restoring her body back to vitality, was his only priority.

Kissing her senseless again was not on the treatment plan.

"Take the shirt off, baby." He spoke quietly, turning to grab a clean towel from the rack in the corner, setting it on the floor beside the tub. When he faced Jenna again, she was worrying the hem of the long T-shirt in her fingers, biting her bottom lip between her teeth. "It's okay if you don't want to, Jenna. I won't force you to do anything you don't want."

Her chin quivered. Dark as emeralds, her eyes rose hesitantly to meet his. She might be speechless, but by God, those eyes spoke volumes. There was trust between them, he knew it as readily as he saw it shimmer in the green, but they had miles to go before trust completely overrode her fears.

Jenna glanced at the tub, then back at Connor with a puzzled frown.

"I know you've not long since had a shower," he told her with a nod of understanding. Slowly, he dropped to one knee beside her. "You've been sick, and you're sticky with sweat. You'll sleep better if you're clean."

Her mouth moved into a cute moue.

"Don't pout, baby. Freshen up and I'll tuck you in. It's going to take time for you to heal. Longer for your energy levels and weight to get back to normal. This isn't a quick process, Jenna. It'll be hard and frustrating, but worth it." He lifted her chin when her shoulders sagged, head falling forward. "I'll be with you every step of the way."

She nodded without enthusiasm and, idiot that he was, he couldn't help pressing a kiss to her forehead before pushing to his feet. "Good girl. Now, let's see if I can find you a spare toothbrush."

Walking to the cabinet across the room, he rummaged through drawers for supplies. He was sure he had a spare one somewhere, but if push came to shove, she could use his. No doubt a trip to the dentist was on the cards for the future—basic hygiene hadn't been important to her captor.

He gave a triumphant *hah* when he found a lone toothbrush still in the wrapper buried beneath a small mountain of disposable razors he hadn't used in...well, hell, since he bought his new electric shaver. Brandishing it, he straightened, using his hip to close the drawer, and wiggled it toward Jenna.

It took an extraordinary amount of willpower to keep his mouth from hitting the floor.

Looking so innocent, so fucking shy despite the fact he'd seen her naked more times in their short acquaintance than he guessed she'd like, Jenna stood on wobbly legs, the T-shirt bunched defensively over her small breasts so she wasn't fully exposed.

With a smile of acknowledgement for her courage, Connor set the brush beside the sink and wandered to the tub to test the water. Lukewarm, edging toward the hot side. Pleased, he shut the taps off and held his hand out to her. "Come on, baby. This won't take long."

There were only a few feet between them, and she tottered unsteadily toward him. He kept his eyes on hers, not wanting to make her feel uncomfortable under an assessing gaze. She reached him, sounding a little breathless. "Can you get in yourself?"

The T-shirt fumbled in her grip as she went to drop it, then clutched it back to her chest. A dark flush of embarrassment rose from just above the material, creeping up her neck into her too-thin face.

“You can take it in with you if you like.” Connor frowned, unsure why she was so hesitant.

Things became a little clearer when Jenna shook her head slowly and lovingly folded the garment with the utmost care. Her fingers stroked the material nervously a moment before she offered it to him with a mournful look in her eyes.

Connor’s eyebrow shot up. “Do you think I’m taking it away from you, baby?”

Her misery was clear in the minute nod.

The shirt was nothing special. One he liked wearing, sure, but it was just a souvenir shirt he’d picked up years ago from a rodeo after watching the bull riding. It held memories of a good night with his brothers and their joint circle of friends, a keg of beer and flirting with a pretty young thing nearly a decade his junior.

He took the shirt reverently from her trembling hands, placing it on the counter next to the toothbrush. She huddled into herself when he walked back to her and cupped her face in his big hands, tanned flesh against deathly white. He thought of the shitty piece of cloth she’d been wearing when she stumbled into the bar and nearly snarled.

“The bastard didn’t let you have clothes, did he?” Keeping the rage out of his voice took infinite control. Reading her body language was becoming easier, and he didn’t like the way she cringed. “Did you take that dirty shirt when you ran away, Jenna, or was that all you had?”

Tears shimmered, spilled. Connor heard the sharp intake of breath, saw her struggle to control the sob that followed. He didn’t let her pull away when she tried, just picked her up and sat on the toilet lid.

Her legs wrapped around his waist, her arms around his neck, and he pressed her face into the curve between his neck and shoulder as he used his free hand to ever so gently stroke her scored back.

“Okay, baby. Cry it out. We’re gonna get all that shit festering inside you into the open and you’ll feel so much better. No more guilt, no more fear. Never again will you go through any of it, Jenna. Caleb’s gonna find that fucker and slam the cage door behind him.” Connor spoke nothing but

the truth. Their relationship may be strained, but Connor had absolute faith in his older brother's capabilities as sheriff.

And if the law failed Jenna...well, Cain had a nifty nine-millimeter that would put a permanent end to the motherfucker responsible for the state of the young woman weeping in Connor's arms.

Connor would happily pull the fucking trigger himself.

Realizing his thoughts were growing dark, he yanked his mind away from revenge—justified or not—and redirected his attention back to Jenna. It was disconcerting to have a woman crying on his lap without her making a single whimper.

Her tears soaked into his shirt, her ragged breaths heating his skin beneath the soft cotton. He hated feeling the bumps of her spine beneath his hand, the protrusion of her ribs.

For some strange reason, it made him feel guilty for enjoying his life while she suffered at the hands of a stranger he didn't know, despite the fact he hadn't known she existed.

Tension slipped from her body, her arms growing limp around his neck as her breathing slowed. Hand cupping the back of her head, Connor eased her away from his shoulder, smiled a little as dopey green eyes blinked in an effort to stay open.

"Go to sleep, baby," he urged softly, rising in a smooth motion and carrying her to the tub. She squirmed as he set her into the water, her hands latching onto his. "Easy, Jenna. I'm right here."

Barely awake as he washed her, her grip on his left hand remained.

Connor made quick work of the bath, pulling the plug and lifting her out in under ten minutes. After drying her off, he stood behind her at the sink and guided the toothbrush into her mouth, wincing when she spat blood-tinged foam.

That dentist's visit needed to come sooner than later.

Wasn't that going to be a pleasant afternoon, he thought with an inner grimace. Maybe he'd just keep that to himself for a few days.

While Jenna sleepily brushed her teeth for the first time in God knew how long, Connor inspected the wounds on her back. A seed of unease settled in his gut as he carefully prodded around a couple of the deeper lacerations, apologizing when she jerked in pain.

Fuck. Making comforting sounds in his throat, he studied the tapestry of abuse with a clinical eye and formulated a plan for the following day. Four

wounds were worse than he originally thought. Even though he'd cleaned and treated them, they were viciously red and on the verge of leaking pus. While the lesser wounds were already starting to show minimal signs of improvement, those four were tenacious.

Jenna's captor had struck her with a ridiculous amount of force to inflict such nasty gashes, and Connor closed his eyes against the fury pulsing through him.

He'd have to become her tormentor, yet again. A role he neither relished nor appreciated. Digging deep into Jenna's flesh to clean out every last speck of dirt and grime, flushing them out, was going to cause her pain he couldn't imagine.

With a fingertip, he traced one long cut. If he could sedate her for an hour, he could clean and stitch all four lacerations without worrying he was hurting her. By the time she came around, he'd have her system pumped full of painkillers and antibiotics for a second time.

He just needed to get the right dose of sedation to keep her out long enough to get the job done.

"Connor?"

The toothbrush clattered into the sink as Jenna jumped, smacking her hip against the counter before she bolted blindly, slipping from Connor's restraining arms like a wraith. He cursed viciously under his breath, not wanting to scare her further with an outburst when she was already cowering in the corner with her arms over her head.

"Connor, you in there?" Caleb shouted, followed by three hard bangs on the bathroom door. "Sarah said you were up here."

Moving cautiously, Connor snagged his robe from the hook on the side of the shower and draped it over Jenna's naked form, tucking it around her. She flailed at him, her hands curved into claws. Capturing both slim wrists in one hand, her pulse hammering through the thin skin, Connor lifted her head so their eyes met.

The Jenna he knew wasn't there.

"You're okay, Jenna. It's just Caleb. Breathe, baby. Breathe past the panic and trust me to care of things." He could have been talking to a brick wall for all she responded. There was no flicker of recognition at the sound of his voice, no lull in the ferocity of her struggles. "Jenna, stop."

Teeth bared, eyes wild, she launched at him as Caleb pounded on the door again. Close to losing his temper with his brother and sorely tempted

to bellow back at him, Connor wrapped his free hand loosely around Jenna's throat, squeezing slightly.

In his strictest, most stern *no bullshit* tone, Connor commanded, "Jenna, *enough*."

She faltered for a second, something flickering to life in the mossy depths of her eyes.

Caleb's impatience kicked the fight back into gear, but Connor sensed a change in the dynamic, the slightest shift of her mind. Ignoring his brother, he stared at her with every ounce of dominance he could muster, feeling her hands flex in his hold. "Jenna, calm down. Take a long, deep breath and listen to me. Listen," he repeated harshly, "to *me*."

Submission won. Training—if what was done to her could be called training—overrode her natural fear instincts.

The moment she came back to herself, horror etched over her features.

"Good girl, Jenna," Connor told her earnestly. "*Good girl*, baby."

She yanked at her hands; he let them go, let her curl into herself and—unsurprisingly—self-comfort with her thumb in her mouth. He offered her comfort as well, pulling the robe halfway over her head to give her shelter.

Leaving her in the corner with part of his stupid heart, Connor stormed across the bathroom and ripped the door open just as Caleb's fist was about to make contact yet again. Silently, too furious to say a word with Jenna in earshot, Connor slammed his hand into Caleb's chest and sent him stumbling back across the hall.

With one quick glance at Jenna, Connor stepped into the hall and shut the door with a faint click. That small gesture used the last of his self-control.

"Don't *ever* pull that shit again." Sharp as a blade, cold as frost, Connor clenched his fists to keep himself from swinging at his sibling. "You're the fucking sheriff, Cal. I know it's a goddamn desk job nowadays but don't tell me you've forgotten how difficult it can be handling nervous victims. Abuse victims. Have you lost your fucking mind?"

Cal had the foresight to look ashamed. "I wasn't thinking, okay? You don't know what kind of shitstorm this is dropping on my head, Connor."

"I couldn't give a shit what's dropping on your head or mine," Connor shot back. "The only thing I'm concerned about is that young lass in there who's just been fucking traumatized by my asshole of a brother. She's been

through enough, has more to go through yet, without you acting like an ignorant fucker and putting the fear of God in her.”

“All the more reason for me to do what I’m here for. The sooner we get her ID’d, the sooner she gets shipped home to whatever family’s missing her.”

“You think I don’t know she needs to find her family?”

“I think you’re getting attached to a victim you have no business hooking onto,” Caleb returned evenly. “I saw you with her yesterday, Con. It has all the hallmarks of the relationship you had with—”

“Don’t you fucking dare bring that bitch into this conversation. For one, you know the hell she put me through, the goddamn lies she spewed to ruin my life, my reputation, my career. Lies you believed.” And the bitterness was still there. “Jenna has my attention as a doctor and as a human being. She deserves to be treated like a fucking person, Caleb; she’s gone too long being used as anything but.”

“Told you this, did she?”

His fist was raised, was arcing through the air before Connor realized he acted on instinct. Arguments always evolved into fights between the three brothers. Sometimes words just didn’t have the same impact as spilled blood.

Inches from Caleb’s smug face, Connor managed to drop his arm. He refused to go back to Jenna bloody and bruised. She’d seen too much violence, suffered through enough of it. He wouldn’t rub her face in it as well.

With a deep, calming breath, he quelled the urge to fight. “You tell me what you need, and I’ll get it for you. I don’t want you anywhere near her, not after this.”

“Can’t stop me, little brother. Obstruction of justice, impeding an officer of the law. I have a right to carry out my sworn duty as sheriff.”

Wanted to play that game, did he? Well then, two could play. “It’s my duty to protect her during her recovery and rehabilitation. Jenna’s not physically or mentally capable of undergoing an interrogation. She’s essentially mute and therefore unable to answer any of your questions. The officer of the law obstructed himself by acting like an asshole on their first meeting and terrifying her, compounding that fear with this stunt. I’ll stand in a court of law and testify to that if you take it that far.”

“I have a duty—”

“Let me do my fucking job, Cal. Regardless of what you think of me, I’m a damn good doctor. Any information she volunteers will be passed to you immediately. I’m not blocking justice. More than anything, I want justice for that poor girl. Right now, she needs to heal and rest, so you tell me what you need and then you get the fuck out of my house.”

Caleb’s mouth twisted into a sneer. “Fingerprints, DNA, photographs.”

Thinking of what he had to do the following morning, Connor nodded. Everything Cal required could be gathered while Jenna was under sedation. It would ease the stress of being prodded and poked, of being in the crosshairs of the camera. “She’s undergoing a procedure in the morning if I can convince her. Sarah will let you know when Jenna’s under; you can collect what you need then.”

His brother’s eyes sharpened. “What procedure?”

“Some of her wounds are badly infected and require extensive treatment. It won’t be pleasant, so I’ll need to sedate her. Her body can’t handle stress at the moment, and her emotional state is fragile.”

“Did you do a rape kit?”

“During the initial exam. Sarah should have sent the swabs to the lab, but all the evidence points to negative for sexual assault.” It was easier to talk shop than continue the feud. “The examination is on tape. You could get snapshots off that, but Jenna looked completely different after a shower. I want to document the wounds again anyway, so I’ll take identification pictures at the same time.”

Caleb ran a hand through his hair. “I’ll take the tape with me, get in touch with the lab. I’ll be here at ten a.m., Connor, so don’t keep me waiting.”

“I don’t run on your timetable, Cal.”

“Don’t suppose you do.” The sheriff stalked toward the stairs, then turned and faced his younger brother, eyes hard. “I will find out who she is, Connor, and her family will come for her. Don’t pull this possessive shit when the time comes—it won’t fly. She’s not yours any more than she was the sick fuck’s who did this to her.”

Connor snarled as Cal stomped down the stairs. Who the fuck did he think he was? He knew his place in Jenna’s life, knew his presence was fleeting. A steppingstone between the hell she’d lived and the promise of a future where she rightfully belonged.

When the time came, he would let her go.

The stupid little cunt had ruined *everything*.

The perfect system, twenty years in the making, on the verge of being destroyed by the one slave he'd actually kept months longer than he should have. Not because he'd had a soft spot for her, no. Because she'd adapted so well to the life he forced upon her.

So well, in fact, he'd chosen her over the two replacements he'd taken to train in her place. Simpering little nitwits, crying and snotting all over the damn place. Unwilling to learn, to educate themselves from useless citizens of a society gone mad into productive, nameless cogs of a silent wheel.

They hadn't even deserved to be assigned a number. When he'd raped them, choked the life from their worthless bodies, he hadn't been able to bask in the usual pleasure he felt when disposing the current number. Fucking and killing them had been...a chore. Not unlike taking out the trash.

But Twenty-Two...oh, Twenty-Two. In all his years of selecting and rehabilitating young females into his program, none other had fulfilled his objectives like she had.

It had taken several beatings, of course. The initial adjustment period often consisted of restructuring the way they thought, how they viewed themselves within the infrastructure of the human hierarchy. Those with self-esteem issues were the easiest to train, their minds welcoming the hand of command.

He'd had a few with illusions of grandeur fueling their anger, fear, outrage. Only half a dozen since the start, but they hadn't lasted long. Their reticence had sparked his ire, and his ire was a deadly force.

Twenty-Two had been his greatest success. Such a pretty little thing when he'd stolen her from a mall in Colorado. He hadn't intended to take her, hadn't prepared for her. He'd been quite happy with the progress Twenty-One was making, but then Twenty-Two walked up to him in the mall, given him a shy look out of delightful green eyes and a soft smile as she offered him the wallet he'd dropped from his back pocket.

Visions of what emotions he could make shine in those beautiful eyes had made him hard. Eyes truly were the window to the soul, and he'd found pain could turn them into stained glass. So many colors, so many shades and increments.

He'd snatched her on her way to the parking garage, without knowing anything about her. Not his usual style, but no matter. The moment she was secured in his trunk, nothing of her old life was of consequence. Luck had proven she was meant to be his; providing him the shortest window of time to whisk her away from her previous existence, locating her car in one of the few areas of the garage not policed by parking guards and CCTV cameras.

And now the sneaky little bitch had done the unthinkable and run.

The man who called himself Sire paced agitatedly in front of the fire burning in the hearth. Never had any of his projects had the nerve to attempt to flee—he would have broken the legs of any who tried.

Twenty-Two had disappointed him, severely. Discovering her absence had perplexed him at first, then invoked his ire to such an extent he couldn't remember the two hours following the realization she was gone. When he'd come back to himself, he found the broken body of what should have been Twenty-Three. The dark-haired adolescent was...unrecognizable.

It would take religious cleaning to get the stains from her internal organs out of the carpet, and now he had no one to do the cleaning. Just something else to lay at Twenty-Two's feet. When he found her, and he would find her, she would wear the marks of her penance for months before he made her train the next in line.

Ending her would be a pleasure beyond anything he'd ever experienced. He'd draw out her final moments until agony was her entire world. Raping her, sodomizing her, would become an exercise in stamina and exquisite control. Not just once, no. He'd give himself an encore, treat himself to the music of her despair over and over.

Perhaps he would immortalize her destruction on tape. Record every moment of her humiliation and degradation, capture every nuance of pain and terror on her perfect face.

A face he would erase once he'd squeezed the last squeak of breath from her lungs. She would be his example...yes, he liked that idea, very much. It would be easy enough to install a screen in the shed, have the tape play over and over. An unmistakable warning for her successors of exactly what happened to naughty numbers when they broke the rules.

With that in mind as a reward, Sire planned his next move. Twenty-Two may have been fortunate enough to escape, but she couldn't outrun him

forever. He had contacts with ears to the ground and eyes always open; there were few places she would find to hide where he couldn't find her.

He had no doubts her tongue would not wag wherever she ended up. That was one thing he made sure all his numbers were aware of. Should the tongue move, it was cut from the offending mouth.

There were several small towns in the vicinity. She couldn't have gotten far, so it was just a matter of keeping his temper in check, engaging his clever brain, and temporarily setting murderous thoughts to one side long enough to snare the cunning little rabbit in his trap.

Once the noose was around her slender neck, all bets were off. He'd drag her kicking and screaming silently back to where she belonged, and then he'd show Twenty-Two exactly what her short-lived freedom cost.

Nothing came without a price.

Nothing.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jenna woke in the dark, disorientated. Facedown, warm sheets covering her to just over her buttocks while cooler air kissed her bare back. A whimper stirred in her throat, was ruthlessly cut off as her flesh ached and burned.

Worse than the pain was the instinctive fear that she'd be caught where she shouldn't. The wounds she had now were nothing compared to what Sire would give her if he found her acting like a...like a human.

Teeth on the verge of chattering, mind delirious, she tried to slip off the bed.

"Not this time, beautiful." A gruff voice seeped sleepily through the darkness as a hand caught her nape gently, urged her back into position. "Settle down, precious. Go back to sleep."

The dull fog cleared from her head even as her heart kicked in her chest. Things clicked into place; she wasn't in the ramshackle shed with Sire hanging over her head as a constant threat. Her belly wasn't hungry, her skin didn't crawl with bugs and the cold that came with the damp.

Connor was her existence now.

Her lips parted and his name came oh-so close to whispering on the air. Her throat strained with effort to speak just that one word before rigorous training and soul-deep terror squashed the attempt like a steamroller over a banana.

Trembling viciously, she lay rigid beside her savior, feeling his heat travel the short distance between them. His fingers stroked her nape lazily, the caress soothing. Well, it would have been if Sire's face didn't loom through the darkness like a ghostly apparition.

She squeezed her eyes shut but that image remained there. The savage leer on her master's face, the expression he wore when his arm was raised

high with a piece of electric cable or his belt in hand. Eyes gleaming with terrible delight in the moment before he struck and dealt her unbearable pain.

“I’m going to hell for this,” Connor muttered.

They were all going to hell. She’d escaped for a brief time, but she would never escape it completely. She was destined to suffer in hellfire and sulphuric smoke for the rest of her days.

Big hands slipped beneath her, dragged her gently over the mattress before they lifted her like fragile glass. She flailed, only to find herself sprawled on top of a warm, hard body.

Connor grunted quietly, deftly arranging her limbs so they were both comfortable. His hand supported her head, fingers running through her hair before holding her still with her skull cradled against his shoulder.

If her naked body against his affected him, he didn’t mention it.

“I’ve got you, Jenna. I’ve got you safe.” His lips moved against the top of her head, but she felt the words resonate from his chest into hers. A quiet, strong rumble of power that comforted, tamed ravaged nerves. “No one can get you here, I promise. Close your eyes and sleep, baby.”

He was hard and soft at the same time. Muscles encased in warm, smooth skin. Against her breasts, she felt the muted tickle of sparse hair as she breathed. Between her legs, something hard pressed firmly against her mound, trapped in cotton.

Her body responded naturally, and she shifted restlessly as something ached inside her.

“You’ll be the death of me yet.” Another mutter, then the rumble grew deeper, rhythmic as Connor began to hum. His hands worked in tandem; the one in her hair massaged lightly over her scalp, sending tingles racing down her spine. His other hand stroked her hip, feather soft.

Touch and sound settled her. Edgy movements quieted; her eyelids began to droop. The ache in her belly pulsed fiercely before fading into the background, falling away beneath the spell he wove over her.

With a tired sigh, Jenna nuzzled into his chest and surrendered.

It was light when she stirred again, her nose pressed firmly into heated flesh and his familiar scent already embedded in her system. She’d know him by smell alone, even if she was blind and deaf.

His hands were already in motion, keeping her balanced on the fine line of slumber and awareness. Aside from the slow rise and fall of his chest

beneath her cheek, his body didn't move. He didn't speak.

It wouldn't take much for her to drift off again, content, if she didn't need to pee.

Urgently.

As her brain jolted fully awake, her bladder protesting, she scrambled off Connor with all haste and no grace. She nearly crashed chin-first into the floor, would have if his arm hadn't banded around her waist and caught her mid-topple.

"What's your hurry, baby?" he chuckled.

Desperately, she glanced at the bathroom, back at Connor. He lost some of the amusement as her legs crossed in the universal sign.

"Gotcha." Smooth as a panther, he was out of bed and pulling her toward the bathroom as she danced along beside him. He urged her toward the toilet, pausing to grab a small plastic pot from a cupboard. "You can manage by yourself?"

Jenna nodded, grateful he offered her privacy.

The pot was cool when he set it in her hand. "Pee in the pot, baby. I need a urine sample; might as well do it now as wait until later." He closed her fingers around it, gave her a smile. "I'll be in the bedroom."

Mortification welled, but she knew the humiliation would only hit harder if she peed herself while standing on the tile. She'd done so more than once in front of Sire, but no matter how many times she suffered the indignity of it, the embarrassment always burned deep.

Somehow she managed to fill the pot without getting herself and the surrounding area covered in urine, then found blessed relief in just being able to sit and function normally like any other person.

How stupid was it that she was exhausted just from that mad five minutes? Elbows braced on her knees, she set her face in her hands and breathed. Apparently peeing had turned into a marathon, sucking her energy like an unsanitary vampire.

"You okay in there?" A gentle knock on the door and Connor's head poked around the jamb. Concern crossed his features and he was beside her in an instant, his hand checking her forehead. "No temperature. Tired, baby?"

She gave him the affirmative and watched as he took the pot she'd set on the floor, capped it efficiently and put it to one side. Heat worked up her

cheeks as he patted her dry between her legs and urged her onto her feet, flushing the toilet before they washed their hands together in the sink.

“Back to bed,” he decreed as though the intimacy of the last five minutes was an everyday occurrence. In the mirror over the sink, she caught a flash of something worrying in his eyes before he smiled at her and took her hand, leading her slowly into the bedroom. “I have some errands to run for an hour, okay? You catch some more sleep, then we’ll have breakfast.”

Jenna stopped, stared at him suspiciously. Her interaction with people might have been limited, but she’d learned how to tell when things weren’t right. It was self-preservation. Prey was quick on the uptake, and she’d had more cause than anyone to teach herself how to read a situation.

She jerked her hand out of his, grimaced as her wounds felt as though they’d been attacked with a blowtorch. Her mouth opened in a silent cry of pain. Breathing through the burn, the truth hit her faster and harder than any physical blow.

She raised her hands in a pleading gesture, shaking her head frantically. She couldn’t bear to see the compassion in Connor’s eyes, the unhappy set to his mouth.

“Jenna, trust me.”

Oh, she hated those words. It put her on such an uneven level. Trusting him meant walking willingly into a situation she couldn’t stomach. Denying him that trust opened a chasm in something she was starting to cherish.

Her hands clenched into fists. Her toes curled into the carpet.

“It’s not something I want to do, baby. I hate doing it. Those cuts are infected. Most of them are starting to heal but there are four deep ones I need to deal with.”

Jenna knew which ones he was talking about. She remembered the bite of the electrical cable as it bit into her flesh, how the pain had bloomed darker than she’d ever known. They’d bled and bled, her life dripping onto the rotten floor of the shed until she thought she might bleed dry. The thought hadn’t been unwelcome.

Connor stepped closer. He’d dressed while she’d been in the bathroom, she noted now. Jeans and socks, a plain blue T-shirt. He was prepared, while she was naked, defenseless, and at his mercy.

She flapped her arms at him, warning him to back off. Her decision hadn’t been made yet, and she was adamant it was her choice even if she didn’t have a voice to state it.

And with the choice in her hands, she was too broken to make it.

Too much time had passed with everything taken out of her control. How and when she ate, what she wore, when she slept. The chores she did, the punishments she took.

Overwhelmed, Jenna bolted into the bathroom and locked the door before Connor could slam through it. He'd hurt her for it, for shutting him out, disobeying him. Petrified down to the bone, cold settling into her body like death, she sank down the wall and stuffed her fist into her mouth, biting down hard on her index finger.

The pain of her back sliding down the wall didn't register.

Her teeth breaking skin didn't compute.

There was copper in her mouth, a strange warmth running over her chin, red droplets on her flat chest that oozed down her scarred skin. The banging of her heart pounded in time with the hammer of Connor's fist on wood until both sounds merged into one incessant *bump-bump-bump* of noise.

Her chest grew tight. Her breathing came in shallow gasps.

There was warmth on her cheeks, salt mixing with the copper on her tongue, clear drops landing among the red.

Jenna pressed her fists against her ears and keened.

Knocking insistently on the bathroom door, calling Jenna's name, Connor fought back the panic. It threatened to consume him. There was nothing coming from the other side of the door. No running water, nothing to indicate Jenna was lashing out, expressing her fear by trashing his bathroom.

Christ, he hadn't anticipated this. Hadn't foreseen she'd be able to read him as quickly and accurately as she had in those few seconds. He'd had a plan in place, a simple but effective one.

Sedating her while she was sleeping was an underhanded tactic, sneaky and not quite ethical. But it would have saved them both stress and anxiety, and she wouldn't have known anything about it until after she woke up, her wounds treated, and her medication administered.

He'd seen the terror on her face. Torn between giving her space and keeping her safe, he'd faltered and fucked things up. He should have tackled her, held her until the worst of her panic attack was over.

Should have.

An eerie chill spiked down his spine, cold and nasty. A second later, the most godawful, most haunting sound erupted from the bathroom. An unholy keening wail that set every hair on his body standing straight and shoved ice beneath his skin.

It was the sound of an animal in horrific pain.

“Fuck this.” Mindless of his sock-clad feet, Connor reared back and kicked the door above the lock, baring his teeth as his foot jarred roughly. The door shuddered but remained intact.

Changing tactics, he took three steps back, breathed deep, and blanked everything out of his head but Jenna. He charged, dropping his broad shoulder into the wood and forcing all his weight behind it.

Wood cracked—or his shoulder did—before the lock gave in and he staggered into the bathroom. Whirling, he cursed as he spotted her curled up against the wall. Covered in blood from the mouth down, white as a sheet, and silent once again.

It took him a moment to discover the bite on her hand, still bleeding. Sluggishly, nothing to worry about too much. He pulled her eyelids open, found blown pupils. Her pulse raced in her wrist, her throat, and her skin was cold.

“Okay, baby, you’re in shock. I’ve got you.” Connor snagged a bath towel, bundled her into it, and scooped her up. Limping slightly, ignoring the pull of his shoulder, he carted her downstairs, shouting for Sarah as he descended.

“What the hell?” Sarah demanded incredulously, hurrying into the hallway.

“Get the heating turned up in the exam room. I need some more blankets.” He ducked past her, striding into the room and laying Jenna down on the examination table carefully. His fingers sought her pulse again. A fraction slower than it had been, a little stronger, but her breathing wasn’t quite right. “She needs oxygen.”

“Boss, you have to calm down.” Ever the medical professional, displaying the qualities Connor hired her for, Sarah got to work without a hint of flapping. In under a minute, the oxygen tank was in place beside the table, the mask strapped over Jenna’s slack mouth, and air hissed quietly. “Step back, Connor.”

Why did he feel numb? Blankly, he stared down at where his hand circled Jenna’s wrist, unable to understand why he was shaking. There was

blood, he thought with a frown, and puncture wounds in her finger.

Teeth marks.

“Jesus, Connor, you’re as pale as she is.” Small, deft fingers unwrapped his from the fragile stem in his grasp, then curled around his bicep and led him away from the table. It only took a short, sharp shove from Sarah’s palm against his chest to sit him on his ass in the visitor’s chair. “Tell me what happened, boss. Jenna’s fine,” she assured him as he tried to get up. “You’re not. What happened?”

The last twenty minutes ran through his brain like a movie reel gone wrong. Connor told her everything as his hands gripped his jeans with the impotency of the situation. Relaying the information, slowly and in detail, helped his mind to clear.

Sarah nodded and patted his arm before walking to Jenna and checking the oxygen mask, monitoring her pulse again, and checking her pupils. Satisfied, she levelled him with a look. “The logical side of you knows she had a panic attack. An extreme one, but a panic attack, nonetheless. The part of you in love with her already just lost his shit because he couldn’t stand the thought of losing her.”

Connor scoffed and rubbed his hand over his face. “Come on, Sarah. That’s the kind of sappy crap that happens in romance novels.”

His nurse cocked a neatly groomed dark eyebrow. “Don’t believe in true love, Connor?”

Now she was putting words in his mouth. Love was a funny thing, wasn’t it? For some people—Louisa, his ex, for one—it wasn’t a feeling, but a tool. Nothing more than a word. In the wrong hands, off the wrong tongue, it had the power to cause more harm than a knife to the gut. “Didn’t say that. Love works for a lot of folk, Sarah. I’ve seen it, I believe in it.”

Slowly, she shook her head, chocolate eyes melting with sympathy. “I’m not talking the bullshit Louisa dumped on your head. That bitch didn’t deserve you, Con. I mean the tie between soulmates, that unbreakable link that forges deep and strong. The sappy crap,” she added with a smile, “happening to you right now, with this tragic young woman right here.”

His gaze found Jenna immediately, sliding away from Sarah’s smug expression to rest on the sweet, innocent face slack with sleep. Proper sleep now, he determined. Color surfaced slowly beneath the ghostly cheeks. Despite the blood drying on her mouth and chin, Jenna truly was innocent.

“Considering I’m hearing no argument from your quarter,” Sarah continued gleefully, “we’ll segue from true love into love at first sight. Took her straight under your wing, didn’t you?”

Connor rolled his eyes and pulled his attention back to the annoyance grinning widely at him. “No doubt the tale is making the rounds through the Creek,” he answered dryly. “Was I expected to let those fuckwits manhandle her, paw at her until she passed out in terror and they could carry her away to some dark corner?”

“Who was the first one to reach her, hero?”

He ground his teeth. “Cain—”

“Ah-ah. Which upstanding member of the community out of all those present in the bar—of which there were several—got in Joe’s face, fended off the assholes who ride with him, and smacked that punk bitch into the next millennium for laying a hand on this precious little thing?”

Damn it, she was starting to press his funny button. “That punk bitch has been pissing me off for months,” he pointed out. “It was either punch him or let Cain take his bat to town on the idiot’s thick skull, and I wasn’t inclined to spend my night stitching the whiny bastard back up.”

“Evasion.”

“Sarah.” Connor added a warning tone to his voice. Jenna would have recognized it immediately; Sarah didn’t appear to—if she did, she chose to ignore it in favor of poking the bear.

“You’re not answering the question. When every other patron of the bar kept their ass firmly in their seats while Joe and his pansies heckled her, who came to Jenna’s aid? Cain had your back, yes, but no one else stood up for her, defended her, carried her home.”

He hadn’t given them a chance, Connor recalled. The moment Jenna entered the bar, swaying in the warmth, her blue-kissed skin translucent beneath the shitty lighting, he’d been drawn to her. It hadn’t been the abruptness of her entrance or her disheveled appearance.

It had been her.

Then her shocked eyes, huge and dilated, had met his for the briefest moment, a plea in them, before the jackals moved in and Joe opened his big mouth, set his hands on her.

Connor’s vision had turned red, and the story began from there.

“I need to see to that bite wound,” he stated, abruptly changing the subject and fully aware his scrappy firecracker of a nurse was uncannily

like a terrier with a rat.

As predicted, Sarah tossed aside her roundabout avenue of hitting the mark and aimed straight for the bullseye with a steel-tipped arrow. “What you need to do is admit what you feel for the girl before shit gets tangled up. Sooner or later, her family will get involved, Connor. When Jenna remembers who she is, or when Caleb finds her roots, they’ll come for her and they’ll want her back. You need to stake your claim, make sure this girl knows what you feel for her, so she doesn’t think her only option is to walk away to a life she might not want.”

“And if I’m wrong? If it’s not love?” he asked quietly.

Sarah made a rude sound and swiped her hand through the air. “Bullshit. Your fucking heart’s in your eyes every time you look at her, Connor. Hell, it was nearly choking you when you brought her downstairs. Didn’t even know you were on the verge, did you?”

He narrowed his eyes. “On the verge of what?”

“Crying, boss. This little episode nearly broke you. Mute or not, Jenna has your heart by the short and curlies. Few things put a catch in a man’s voice like the prospect of losing someone he loves beyond measure.”

Defeated by a slip of a woman, Connor pinched the bridge of his nose. “I feel like this is something I should be telling Jenna the first time I say it.”

Beaming brighter than a Freightliner’s headlights, Sarah bounced in place. Her hands clapped together in front of her, then she was on her tiptoes, her lips brushing his stubbled cheek. “Don’t tell me. Just make it special when you tell her.”

“Sneaky witch. Am I allowed to do my job now?”

She stepped back, folded her arms over her chest. “Hold out your hands. Palms flat.”

Connor sighed, but obeyed.

She gave him a sharp nod. “You’ve stopped shaking. Off to work you go, boss.”

“Sassy as well,” he grumbled. “There’s a urine sample on the bathroom counter upstairs. Would you mind getting it for me? It can go with the blood samples I’ll have to get this morning.”

“Absolutely.” Singing under her breath, Sarah nearly skipped away.

What a strange fucking morning, Connor thought. His emotions had run the gamut from content to concerned, frantic to terrified, and everything in between. Now he was...peaceful. Calm, focused, prepared.

With his doctor brain engaged, he removed the oxygen mask from Jenna's mouth and studied her breathing. Steady, strong, normal. Her color was good, her pulse back to its regular beat.

She stirred as he lifted her eyelid, flashed a light over the pupil. Her hand lifted weakly, slapped listlessly at him. But her lips formed a single word, slow and pronounced.

Sorry.

Connor took her hands in his, squeezed. "Nothing to apologize for, baby. You were scared and I...I made mistakes. How do you feel now?"

Watching her wake fully was an experience he could relive forever. Her body moved in a hundred tiny different ways as muscles and nerves came back online. She blinked several times before her eyes stayed open, and her nose wrinkled and twitched.

Her lips curved into a sad smile.

Yeah, he was in love with her, all right.

Sarah brought her a cup of orange juice and some toast.

Jenna kept a wary eye on the nurse, and on Connor, as she polished off the meagre meal. Her stomach roiled for a few moments, but seeing as she wasn't allowed to move, it soon settled happily with its tasty reward.

For the last twenty minutes, she'd been smothered in blankets on the damn table she was coming to hate. Both Connor and his dark-haired sidekick had fussed over her while they'd been doing whatever it was they did that didn't include torturing her.

Anxiety nibbled at her, braced her on a tense ledge. The worst part was yet to come, Jenna wasn't stupid enough to ignore it. But flashes of her moments in the bathroom plagued her, and she didn't think she could handle another mental break like that.

She'd hurt herself and, in doing so, had caused Connor pain.

The knowledge didn't make her feel good.

Jenna snuggled deeper into the cocoon of blankets. It was warm, almost too warm, but there was protection in them. Her own blanket fort, impenetrable to evil forces. Or so she liked to tell herself every few minutes. Her eyes watched Connor as he sat at a desk in the corner, typing steadily away on a keyboard and peering at the computer screen.

Sarah was a hummingbird, flitting from one cupboard to another, gathering things Jenna was sure didn't bode well for her.

Then the nurse zipped over to Connor, setting her hand on the broad shoulder closest to her and leaning in. There seemed to be a discussion, a lot of whispering, head shaking and nods, before Sarah winged away to another cupboard.

Jenna's eyes turned to slits.

The blanket fort wouldn't be enough.

"Okay then, sweetheart, time to take some vital signs."

Her lip curled. Swallowing hard, she winced as the rawness in her throat amplified. Suddenly her stomach didn't appear to be quite as happy as it had been.

"Temperature first, I think. Completely painless and just takes a minute." The nurse's voice was bright and upbeat, non-threatening but perky enough to send Jenna's pulse jumping. "Tilt your head for me, sweetheart. I promise this won't hurt at all."

Not moving a muscle, Jenna watched and waited.

The woman had nice white teeth, she noted when Sarah gave her a sunny smile. Straight and white. Jenna showed her own when Sarah reached out to brush the hair away from her ear.

"None of that, sweetheart." Sarah smoothed the hair around the curve of Jenna's ear with an easy touch, tucking it away. Lifting the digital thermometer, she made soothing noises. "Relax, Jenna. You look like you want to cry."

She wouldn't cry. She wouldn't. But she did flinch as the thermometer breached her ear, cold and foreign. Her fists clenched in her lap beneath the blankets. A few moments later, she flinched again at the quiet beep.

"All done. Clever girl. Ninety-nine point eight. Fairly high but within normal range." Sarah smiled comfortingly, touched her hand to Jenna's shoulder. "See? I'm not someone you have to be afraid of, sweetheart."

The jury was still out on that, she mused. Her eyes darted over to the corner, to Connor, and she yearned for his voice, the warmth of his hand.

"Reassure your charge, Connor. She's starting to worry."

Jenna flushed, dropped her chin. Yearning was one thing; making it obvious was another. She huddled into the blankets when a hand reached for her, ducking away from a blow. That same hand stroked over her hair, around the side of her face.

"Nothing to worry about." That voice. It wrapped around her, inside her, and almost made her purr. "Good girls don't have to worry about anything

at all.”

Bad girls did. Bad girls were bad for a reason.

“Blood pressure, Sarah, before the reading is compromised. So many triggers every which way we turn,” Connor murmured, and eased the blankets down, baring one bony shoulder. He grasped her arm gently, held on when she pulled away from the pressure cuff. “It will feel tight, Jenna. The pressure tightens and releases while the machine works. It’s not going to hurt you.”

A memory slipped free from behind the wall Sire had spent months erecting in her mind. A long-lost freeze-frame of her past she could barely remember.

Sitting in a sunny room, perched on a knee with her arm outstretched just like this. A thick black cuff around her small, slender, unmarked arm. Giggling as the puff-puff-puff of air filling the band matched the rhythmic squeeze.

A warm, feminine voice in her ear, telling her to sit still, that she’d have a lollipop if she was a good girl. So much love in the tone, a blanket of security and home comforts.

Giggling became a high-pitch squeal of indignation followed by hot, confused tears as a sharp sting of pain ruined the moment. The female voice stayed calm and soft. Lips pressed against the child’s temple, and she smelled lilacs.

With a jerk, Jenna came back into herself. Like sand through her fingers, the memory remained cupped in her mind for a brief few seconds before it trickled away, broke apart, left her lost and desperate to reclaim the shard of her past.

Connor’s hand curved around her cheek, his thumb wiping away the tears she shed for a young girl who’d come to lose everything, including herself. Instinct turned her face into the wide palm, her own hands lifting to hold his wrist, grasp his fingers.

“All right, baby. There’s no shame in being scared.” His other hand collared her throat and, as she recoiled, caressed the thin skin where her pulse jittered. “You don’t have to be, not anymore. I give you my word on that.”

She wanted to tell him about the memory, to give it to him to hold so he could give it back when she needed it. But the words still refused to come,

and the details shimmered back into the dark recesses of her troubled mind, lost to the shadows and the demons that guarded them.

Tears slowed, died. Dried on her cheeks. Mourning for a life she hadn't remembered for a long time was a waste of energy. What was the point? Sire had stolen her from her life and made damned sure she couldn't use happy memories to carry her through the bad times.

Somehow, he'd known when she had, and taken the belt to her hard enough she couldn't differentiate between life and death. Eventually, thinking of her loved ones caused more pain than forgetting them.

"Caleb will be here in ten minutes," Sarah muttered, setting a covered tray beside Connor's arm. "I know he's your brother and the sheriff, Con, but he has a way of getting her hackles rising."

"I know. He has a way of riling everyone up when he's in the mood."

"In the room," the nurse corrected with a curl of her lip. "I can try to hold him off for a few minutes, but I can't promise I won't deck the sanctimonious prick if he starts throwing his weight around."

"I'll deal with him if he does. Is everything there?" Connor's eyes slid toward Sarah, and Jenna sucked in a shaky breath. She was getting good at deciphering the glances and looks between them.

"Everything's ready. Want me to, ah, step out?"

"No, not this time." The hand around her neck shifted, skimmed over Jenna's hair and down to the nape of her neck. "We got in a bit of mess last time, you and I, didn't we? We're not going to do that again, because it hurt both of us and I don't want to see you suffer like that. Ever."

Jenna swallowed miserably, trying to turn her head away from those all-seeing, all-knowing gray eyes, but Connor held her securely. Telling herself to be brave, to trust him, to be obedient and not make him regret saving her didn't really work.

"We need some blood samples," he told her directly, soothing her when she shuddered. "Once I've taken them, I'll sedate you. Lightly," he emphasized in response to her emphatic head shake. "Sarah is going to hold your hands the entire time, and I'll be right here."

She scowled.

"Don't look at me like that. I know you're in pain. Sarah, can you take the blankets?" His smile was apologetic. "Will you give me your arm, baby?"

Jenna clung to her useless fort, batting at Sarah's hands as she gently removed the blankets and gave her a pat on the leg. Seething silently, Jenna crossed her arms over her chest and clenched her jaw.

Oh, she knew she'd lost the battle, she just wasn't ready to concede.

Connor touched a fingertip to her lips, traced the pout of her lips, the hard set of her jaw. "Give me two minutes, Jenna. That's all I'm asking."

That's all it would take, she knew. Two minutes and he'd send her tumbling into the darkness she couldn't stand. But the to-ing and fro-ing, the battle between them was draining her. One way or another, Connor would get his way.

She curled one arm protectively over her breasts, closed her eyes, and offered the other as though expecting it to be sliced off. Tremors ripped down the limb; small hands cupped her elbow, her wrist, and steadied her.

"All right, sweetheart, you're doing so well." Sarah's melodic voice wasn't the one Jenna needed to hear. "The tourniquet is going on now; it might feel tight for a moment or two."

She winced, tried to pull away as something nipped her bicep a couple of inches above her elbow. Already she was regretting her choice to submit quietly.

Fingers poked firmly into the crook of her arm, testing, plumping the vein. She opened her eyes as Connor slipped the needle through her skin, felt her stomach lurch when thick red blood—*her* blood—filled the syringe. Her free hand shot out, made a grab for it.

It didn't belong.

"Don't struggle, baby. I'm almost done. Almost there, Jenna," Connor crooned absently, somehow managing to fend off her attempt and finish taking the sample.

Blood that should have been inside her body rolled onto the tray, encased in a plastic shell. For some reason, it sent her into a panic. Was she next? Would they roll her into a plastic coffin and bury her, leave her to suffocate under the earth?

"Lay her down." His voice was no-nonsense now, his hands firm on the back of her head and her shoulder. Sarah mimicked him on the other side, leaning Jenna back as she wheezed and thrashed. "Breathe, baby. Just hold on another few seconds."

She was dying. She'd be trapped forever in a little plastic bubble, unable to see out, to breathe. Imprisoned for eternity while men like Sire

stared in at her, eyes hungry, hands ready to destroy.

Crying pitifully, unable to draw in a full breath, Jenna let the nurse pin her to the table. Limbs deadweight, broken by the strength of her silent sobs, she felt hands on either side of her face as she went limp.

“Get it in while she’s quiet,” Connor ordered under his breath, then pressed his lips between her eyes. “Look at me, Jenna. Look at me, baby.”

She obeyed, panting in short, rapid breaths. She obeyed, and she saw things in his eyes that calmed her more than words could. Sucking in a normal breath, she trembled under the compassion in those eyes.

“You are such a good girl, Jenna. I’m so proud of you.” He held her gaze as Sarah muttered to herself. “I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“Needle’s in,” Sarah said quietly as Jenna’s arm flinched. “Sedation coming now.”

Cool fluid hit her bloodstream; it felt as though an icy fingertip touched her skin for a fraction of a second. Jenna blinked, struggled to open her eyes, keep them open.

“Relax, baby. Let go now, I’ve got you.”

The last thing she heard was his voice.

CHAPTER SIX

“Say anything, move wrong, and you’re out on your ass.”
Blocking the door to the exam room with his body, Connor stared Caleb down with uncharacteristic hostility. He resented his brother’s presence, hated that Caleb’s status as sheriff entitled him to be in the room to gather evidence, and it showed.

Muscles strained over his shoulders, down his arms as he braced them on the jambs. One particular tendon twitched and flexed of its own volition in his right arm, ready to take the offensive should Connor’s brain take half a second to give the green light on violence.

“Connor, this is a serious matter—”

“This is my house, my exam room and my goddamn rules. Break them, so much as think about bending them...” Connor had to suck in a calming breath before his temper switched from hot spring to volcano. “Jenna does not react well to you. This will be difficult for her; if you make it harder, you won’t be welcome.”

Caleb rolled his eyes. “I’m not planning on terrorizing the poor girl, Connor. All I want is answers. Besides, she’s sedated, isn’t she?”

“She is, but she’s not under deep.”

“Why the hell not? Knock her clean out, let me do what I have to do, you do the same, and everything comes up smelling of roses.”

Idiot. Connor nodded slowly. “And when her heart gives out from the strain? She’s malnourished, she’s weak, and knocking her *clean out* could clean her clock permanently. That’ll look just pretty on both our career records, Cal.”

“Okay, okay.” Caleb held his hands up.

Teeth grinding, Connor pushed away from the door and let his brother pass. He put his medical head back on instead of his guardian mindset and

gestured to the prostrate female on the table. “What do you want first?”

Jenna stirred at the sound of his voice; Sarah shushed her softly and ran her thumbs over the girl’s knuckles.

“Fingerprints.” To his credit, Cal kept his own voice low. “Oral swab and hair sample.”

Connor crossed to the cabinet behind the table, took out two sample tubes and a swab kit. With Sarah murmuring quietly to the patient, he quickly took several strands of blonde hair from Jenna’s head, making sure he removed the roots, and stuffed them into the tube.

With the swab in hand, he dropped to a crouch in front of her head, nudging Sarah aside, and smiled as glassy green eyes tracked sluggishly to his. Recognition was a slow flame, growing brighter as she watched him. Her fingers flexed slightly. “Open your mouth, baby. That’s it. Clever girl,” he purred as her lips parted an inch.

She closed her eyes as he ran the swab tip over the inside of her cheek, snuffled drowsily when he rose and set the swab into the tube, capped it. “Sarah, can you give Cal a hand with the fingerprinting please?”

While they fussed with the ink and the sheets, Connor grabbed the digital camera he’d had on charge, tried to convince himself he wasn’t violating her rights. While they had video evidence of the initial examination, the technical run-through of her wounds and overall condition, this seemed more...invasive.

“All done, Connor.” Sarah glanced at him, then at the camera in his hands. She gave him the slightest nod. “I can roll her onto her side, hold her while you do that. Takes the pressure off her back.”

“I can help turn her,” Caleb offered.

“Don’t touch her,” Connor snapped reflexively, then sighed. “Sorry. Sorry, that was uncalled for. Just tell me what you need, Cal.”

“Good shots of her face. Any identifying marks.”

He gave Sarah the go-ahead, held his breath as she carefully eased Jenna onto her side and, standing behind her, held her in position with one hand on the protruding hip and the other supporting Jenna’s head. Working quickly, he took several stark pictures to identify her with, ignoring the fact her family would see the abuse with a single look. It couldn’t be helped.

“Jenna. Jenna, baby, open your eyes,” he coaxed, brushing away a lock of hair from her gaunt cheek. Eyes were specific, unmistakable, and could

be the key to finding who she really was. He got a few clear shots when her eyes fluttered open. "Okay, baby, all done."

He handed the camera to Caleb, slid his hands under Jenna as Sarah rolled her back into position. Not best pleased his brother was witness to Jenna's bare front, Connor pulled the cotton sheet covering her legs up and over her to the shoulders.

"Anything else?" he asked gruffly, retrieving the camera and moving to the computer in the corner, beginning the process of uploading the photographs.

"That'll do for now. I've started a search on missing women under the age of thirty. Didn't have much criteria to go on until now. Green eyes and blonde hair aren't going to narrow the sheer number down by much. Montana alone has too many."

"Should string the sick bastards up by the balls when we catch them," Connor muttered, sending the best photos to the printer. "I'll email you the whole file once I'm done here. There's the original photos of the ligature wounds, her primary condition upon arrival."

Caleb nodded and took the printed copies. "I know I told you not to get attached, Connor. Sounded like a bastard, no doubt, but there's a reason behind it. Girls like her...they get under your skin. The abuse, the history, it...does something to men like us. Makes us feel like heroes. Knights in shining fucking armor."

Connor folded his arms over his chest and waited.

"I've done it myself, back when I was a rookie. Domestic violence case, husband whaled the shit out of his wife of six months. Broke her arm, snapped a rib or two, damaged the nerves in her face well enough she couldn't smile for nearly a year." Cal rubbed his chin. "I was twenty-three, getting my feet wet on my first real investigation, and I fucked everything up. Fell for her. Hard. Turned myself inside out to be her rock, went to every specialist appointment and doctor's visit for moral support.

"She looked to me for everything. Couldn't make a decision without waffling for days, had panic attacks and meltdowns over choices we make every damn day. So I made them for her. I organized her life, helped her get back on her feet, back into a normal routine, and thought this is it. This is the start of good things for both of us."

Connor's arms relaxed. He knew Cal was waiting to take his legs out from under him, was braced for the blow, but he'd never heard anything

about this. Hadn't had a clue his brother had been involved with a woman under his protection. It was fascinating to see another side to the stern lawman, and it was showing him a different side to his brother.

"It wasn't about sex. Didn't lay a hand on her for damn near six months. Didn't dare, her injuries were bad enough to put that on hold." Caleb stared long and hard at Jenna, sighed. "Think this one's worse off. They come to rely on you for the physical stuff, sure. Help with the groceries, getting in and out of the shower, whatever they struggle doing. But the mental reliance is the killer, Connor."

As though aware of eyes on her, Jenna stirred. Immediately, Sarah's hands were on her, fingers combing lightly through her hair until she settled again.

"I bet if she'd opened her eyes and looked at you, you'd have been on your feet and beside her in the same breath," Caleb continued. It struck Connor how tired his brother looked in that instant and he wondered how much work Cal was putting into finding the monster who'd done this to Jenna while Connor dealt with the fallout. "It's one thing being their rock in the bad times, brother. It's entirely another becoming their world."

"What happened with the woman? Your woman?"

"I exhausted myself trying to keep her together. It was like being a single parent to a thirty-year-old child. When I couldn't do it anymore, couldn't fathom the thought of another day being her focal point in life, I called it quits."

Connor saw the grief in his big brother's eyes, felt the punch of it in his own gut. "She killed herself."

Caleb blew out a long, harsh breath. "Didn't last a week. Ignored the friends I'd helped her make, the social circle we'd built for her as support. Left a note for her family, one for me, and took herself out onto the back porch of the little house we'd lived in together." He swallowed hard enough to make his throat click, and his voice was tight with emotion when he spoke next. "Next door neighbor found her the next morning, some damn love song playing on repeat, and her toes three inches off the floor."

"Fuck, Cal. Why did you never say anything?"

"There was nothing I could say. You were acing your way through school; Cain was busy being star athlete. Why should my life and my fuck-ups knock you two off track?" Caleb waved that away and pointed at Jenna.

“She’ll take you down, Connor, if you get tangled up in her. Worse, you have the power to stop her world turning.”

Still stunned by his brother’s admission of love and loss, Connor shook his head slowly. “She needs someone to depend on, Cal. She needs stability.”

“Let Sarah take over. It’s only been two days, Con. It’ll be difficult, only seeing her in a professional capacity, I know, but you’ll thank me for it down the road.”

Connor met Sarah’s eyes, read the blatant warning she fired at him. Maybe it would be for the best. It didn’t explain why his chest ached at the thought, but maybe distance between them would be better for Jenna. Jesus, he’d already kissed her—his attachment was taking root faster and faster, every damn time he laid eyes on her.

“If Sarah can’t take her, I can make arrangements at the hospital, have a social worker and therapist assigned to her for the duration of her recovery.” Caleb donned his authority as easily as shrugging on a jacket. “Jenna will be in good hands. They’ll get her a speech therapist, a psychologist. She’ll stand a chance of having a good life.”

A good life without him, Connor thought miserably. Good hands that weren’t his. They wouldn’t know how to make her smile or what made her eyes light up. They wouldn’t understand her fears, wouldn’t comprehend the state she’d been in when she found him.

Because she *had* found him, one way or another.

They hadn’t seen the look in her eyes, the shadows that crossed her face when she was expectant of a swift backhand. They wouldn’t have a clue how to keep her in bed when she retreated back into what that bastard had made her become.

“Let the professionals deal with her,” Caleb urged.

Connor rose from the chair, stood straight and proud. He didn’t meet Sarah’s eyes again, but he stared directly into his brother’s without hesitation. “I’m sorry for what you went through, Caleb. I wish you’d told me sooner.”

“Connor.”

He lifted a hand to silence Sarah, then ran it through his hair. “Professionals can’t help her, Cal. Not at this stage. They know their jobs, they’re damn good at them, but they’re overworked in a system where one-on-one doesn’t come into the equation. Jenna needs one-on-one care. It’s

essential she builds trust in humanity before she gets thrown back into the circus her life will become.”

“You’re not a psychologist, Connor. You’re not a speech therapist, a social worker. You’re not what she needs!”

Anger rose, swift and keen. “I have skills she needs *now*, Caleb. It’s my hands patching her up, my hands keeping her quiet in the dark when the nightmares rip her to pieces. My voice keeping her together when the stress of all this shit sends her into a meltdown. Trust me, you send her into a hospital, it will kill her.”

“How overdramatic do you want to be?”

“Overdramatic? Her heartrate goes through the roof when a stranger comes near her. Times that by two people, three, however many fucking strangers they call to hold her down while they drug her up to the eyeballs. If she doesn’t have a heart attack before they get the drugs in, likelihood is they’ll overdose her in an effort to keep her constantly calm and sedated.”

“Guys, you might want to keep your voices down,” Sarah interrupted.

“There’s no need. Caleb is just leaving.” Connor was prepared to haul the sheriff out to his car personally if needs be. “He has work to do and so do I.”

Caleb shook his head. “Stubborn fucker. I can report this, you know. If your superiors find you’re acting unprofessionally, you stand to lose a lot more than a skinny wraith. Don’t make me take it that far, Connor.”

The threat of a report took his temper to boiling point. The *skinny wraith* comment blew the lid off his fury and sent logic scattering to the wind. His knuckles smashed into Caleb’s mouth and pain bit into his hand along with his brother’s teeth. Something cracked, Caleb grunted, and Connor reared back to strike again.

Caleb lifted his hand to block the blow; Connor smacked the defense aside with a snarl and let his fist flatten Cal’s vulnerable nose with a savage crunch and nasty spray of blood.

“Connor, no!” Something small and ridiculously agile landed on his back, shimmying up him like a monkey up a damn tree, and grabbed the fist he pulled back for a third shot. “You made your point!”

He was mad enough to try shake Sarah off, but she clung tight, one arm around his neck and the other looped around his arm. “No one insults her that way. She’s a fucking person, not a possession!”

“He didn’t mean it, Con. Did you, Caleb? Tell him you didn’t mean it.”

Wiping at the blood on his face, with one of his front teeth missing, Caleb spat more blood inelegantly on the floor. "*Goddamn* it, Connor."

"Tell him!"

"No, I didn't fucking mean it. I didn't think he'd lose his fucking head over it either." Disgusted, Caleb glared. "I could have you up for assaulting an officer."

Adrenaline filled his veins, a potent drug affecting all his senses. "I'll put you in the ground, brother." The emotional stress of the past two days rolled inside him like a tidal wave of destruction. "Try take her away from me and we're done, Caleb. We're fucking done."

"Connor, calm down. No one's taking anyone away. You need to go get cleaned up and cool off before you go near Jenna. If she sees you like this, you'll scare her," Sarah murmured in his ear. "I'm going to take Cal next door and fix him up. This is the end of it, you hear me? Both of you. No more arguing, no more brawling."

Growling, Connor fought to release the energy bloodlust had gathered. It took longer than he thought to shake it off, to be able to loosen his fists and relax. His right hand stung like a bitch, no doubt, but looking at Caleb's face, he wouldn't be suffering quite as badly as his brother.

"Shake hands. No more bad blood." Still in place perched on Connor's broad back, Sarah waited until they clasped hands, shook once. Satisfied they'd managed to divert a disaster, she slid down to the floor and brushed herself off. "Oh, fuck me."

The three of them froze, almost comically to Connor's mind, and he automatically stepped toward Jenna. She sat on the side of the exam table, pale and sweaty, hunched over.

"Don't, Connor. You're covered in blood. Take Caleb, go get washed up. I'll get her settled down again." Hurrying forward, a bright smile on her face, Sarah waved a hand at him. "Now, Connor."

"Fuck," he hissed. Torn between seeing to Jenna and not scaring the shit out of her, he turned on his heel and walked out of the room, nudging Caleb along ahead of him. "Sarah, Cal needs the *goddamn* samples!"

"I'll get them," Caleb muttered, but Sarah was already in the doorway with tubes in one hand and a haphazard set of printed photographs in the other.

"Nice seeing you, Caleb; don't hurry back." She shut the door with a snap, and Connor heard her talking to Jenna in a cheery, over the top tone

that told him Jenna wasn't amenable to Sarah's company.

"Think I pissed her off."

"It's an everyday occurrence, trust me." Connor studied the face he knew like his own. "Can't do much for the tooth, but I can improve the rest of it. Want me to kiss it and make it better?"

Caleb scowled, but a snort escaped, resulting in a grimace. "Only you would offer to fix what you broke. You're good at your job, Connor. It's what you were put here to do, I shouldn't have called that into question. Insulting that girl was below the belt, even for me. I didn't mean it. I'm sorry for it."

The last of the angry tension eased. Clapping a hand on Cal's shoulder, Connor steered him toward the kitchen. "Me too, Cal. Me too."

Blood. Splatters and streaks of blood.

Dazed, Jenna stared at the droplets on the floor and wondered where she was bleeding from this time. How badly had Sire hurt her for the blood to be over there while she was here? Didn't take much, she knew from experience, for blood to travel, not when the velocity behind the hit was strong enough.

"You shouldn't be sitting up, sweetheart." The nurse stood in front of her, blocking the blood from view. Soft hands cupped Jenna's face and tipped it back. "I honest to God don't know how you keep doing this. I know Connor only sedates you lightly, but you're sat up and your eyes are heavy enough to sink a ship."

Connor. Where was Connor? He'd been here a minute ago, hadn't he? Jenna frowned with the effort of remembering. Yes, he had. He'd been shouting and...the blood had been on him. His hands, his face, his clothes.

Shouting...at her?

"Breathing's good, sweetheart. That's a start. Let's check your pulse, make sure your heart's playing the game." Firm fingers gripped her wrist.

No. Jenna tugged half-heartedly.

"How much of that conversation did you hear, Jenna?" Sarah's eyes bore into hers as though she could pluck the thoughts right out of her head. "I'm guessing not much. Good. Those idiots want their heads knocking together. Always been a volatile pair when their tempers are riled. Cain, now he's fiery when it's warranted. Likes to keep his own brand of law and order in the bar."

Images pinged through her brain. Hands on her, groping at her. Her fingers clutching at a lifeline; the lifeline gathering her up and carrying her away. She needed her lifeline.

The floor seemed to be miles away from her toes. She leaned forward, stretching to reach the white tiles with her bare foot, but they ebbed and flowed, smooth white waves taunting her.

“Whoa, Jenna!” Arms came around her as she pitched forward, held her in place when she sagged against a warm, small body. Not the tall, strong one that usually caught her. “Time to get you back down, sweetheart, before we both end up in a heap.”

She had to mop the blood up before Sire came home and saw it. She knew he liked to see the marks of her punishment on her flesh, but he hated it—*hated it*—when evidence of her transgressions remained in the sanctity of his home.

The world tilted on its axis, simply rolled onto its side. Stayed there for a few moments while her body rocked on the table. Something cool and comfy slid under her cheek.

“Took you long enough, Connor. What did you do, run to Helena and back for new clothes?”

“Caleb took longer than I thought. Jenna okay?”

“Aside from the last twenty minutes where she’s been staring at her feet and trying to stand up, she’s okay. I don’t think she’s heard half of what I’ve said to her, and I only managed to get her down about ten minutes ago after she toppled off the table.”

“Let’s get this done while she’s quiet. I need a shot of painkillers and antibiotics. Make sure we have a small dose of sedation to hand in case we need to slide her under at any point. This suturing could take some time.” Rough, warm skin skimmed over her shoulder. “Jenna, baby, are you awake?”

Drifting again, she curled her fingers in response. There was a hum in her throat, poised to break free if she just gave it the freedom.

“Nearly out. Start cleaning the wounds. They’re deep, so we’ll have to dig down. The infection’s starting somewhere.”

Hands tipped her, adjusted her, until she sprawled on her belly again.

Her lovely drifting was jarred by liquid fire racing over her shoulder. Oh, she didn’t like this. This was worse than when Sire found the bathmat

in the master bathroom askew with a drop of bleach on the corner of the fluffy purple material.

He'd beaten her with the dowel rod of the towel rack until the welts blistered and split, then rubbed them with bleach. Of course, the bathmat had been ruined with blood and bleach by the time the lesson was over, but Sire had just ordered her to clean up the mess and use a new set from the cupboard.

She'd been unable to scream, though her lungs were fit to burst from agony, and barely able to move. Her skin had felt as though it bubbled, raw flesh melting under acid. Ever the obedient one, she'd dragged herself inch by inch to complete the task he'd set her.

But this was punishment for something she hadn't done, a mistake she hadn't made. Her broken fingernails dug into the solid surface of the table, pushing against it to arch away from the pain.

"Shit! Stop, stop!"

Something cold pressed firmly to the burn, stealing the intense pain. She dropped back onto the table, a mere inch that seemed eternal, and gasped for breath. Plastic slipped over her face; she clawed at it, terrified it was another of Sire's methods to keep her in line, but warm skin touched her forehead.

Delirious, she stared blindly at Connor, watched his lips move before her brain homed in on his voice, drank it in.

"You've had it on before, baby. Breathe now, nice and slow." His other hand kept the mask over her mouth and nose as refreshingly cool air hissed into the plastic cover. "Good girl, Jenna. Good girl for telling us." He slipped a band around the back of her head, keeping the mask in place. "Leave that there, baby. Keep breathing."

"What the fuck was that?" Sarah demanded. "My goddamn hands are shaking, Connor. I thought you said she was out."

"She damn near was. Near enough it was risky to give her more." He paced, rubbing his face, shaking his head.

"She can handle it. Her system's burning through what you're giving her too quickly. I understand your reticence in giving her a standard dose, Connor, but my nerves won't take another experience like that. This needs to be done, here and now, so it's over with. Sedating her every day to treat the fucking mess on her back isn't going to do her any good."

“Trust me, I’m not getting a kick out of this myself. She’s just so underweight, it won’t take a lot to push her under.” Connor pressed his fingers to his eyes.

“Her heart rate’s good. Pulse is strong, even under sedation. We’ve got heart monitors, Connor. Hook her up, keep the oxygen going. The only reason you’re doubting yourself with this is because of who and what she is.” Sarah patted his arm. “Set aside the fact she’s Jenna. Put it to one side. She’s a lovely young woman in pain. You’re a doctor, you can ease the pain. For the next hour, she’s not Jenna. She’s Patient Omega.”

The oxygen cleared her senses enough for Jenna to get the gist of the conversation. Enough for her to know they were stripping her of her name again, leaving her...nothing. Her lips quivered, hidden by the mask, and she turned her face into the pillow to hide the sudden wash of tears sheening her eyes.

She heard more words, blocked them out. Anything that was nothing didn’t have the right to listen to conversations. Anything that was nothing wasn’t human, and she was used to being anything but human.

“I’m sorry, baby, we’re flipping you around all over the place. I just need to stick these on your chest so I can make sure your heart doesn’t give up the ghost on me, okay?”

The voice she loved was so close. In a fanciful world, she could have reached out and caressed each word as they tumbled from his lips in a waterfall of flowers and cuddly animals.

Jenna sighed miserably as she was turned onto her side, kept her eyes closed when cold patches pressed to her skin. Somewhere close, a machine began to beep in a strong, even rhythm. Her heart, she realized, when the beeps matched the thud in her chest.

She wondered if she could stop it through will alone.

“Baby?”

He couldn’t even use her name, because she wasn’t Jenna anymore. He couldn’t even give her the illusion of being someone. She decided she was tired of being no one, of being anything that was nothing.

Her eyelid was pried open, a light flashed into it. She cringed against the bright flash, refused to look at the man behind it. For once, she was looking forward to losing herself in the darkness that scared her so much.

“Heart monitor is on and working. Stats look good. Oxygen mask in place, tank is three-quarters full. Antibiotics and painkillers, check.

Sedation, check. Suture tray at the ready.” There was the briefest of silences, then Sarah said quietly, “We’re set, boss.”

Jenna stiffened when Connor took her hand, squeezed it. Fierce need for him kicked off an internal struggle inside her to open her eyes, to look at him one more time. To show him, if only through a meeting of eyes, that anything that was nothing could still feel love.

Fingers smoothed over the crook of her arm, tapping gently, and she resisted the urge to fight. Fighting was tiring, she’d learned that quickly enough with Sire. Capitulate, surrender, roll over and show your belly... pride and dignity took a hit, but the pain and humiliation came faster, didn’t last quite as long.

“Little scratch, baby. This is just some painkillers and the antibiotics to stop the infection from the inside. You’ll be sore when you wake, and I’m sorry. But this is the last time, God willing.”

Her lips twitched in a grimace as the needle pierced her skin.

The beeping of the machine picked up a beat, just a little faster. She cursed it, hated it for revealing her nervousness when she was trying so hard to be brave and hide her emotions like a good nothing.

“It’s okay, baby. Deep sleep this time.”

No. No. Shaking her head, she bolted upright. This wasn’t right, wasn’t right at all. She couldn’t go into the darkness, into the deep sleep as nothing. Eyes wide open, she slapped her hands on either side of Connor’s startled face and pressed her forehead to his.

Mind to mind, she threw all her thoughts at him, desperate in her panic, conveying everything she couldn’t say through hands and eyes.

She began to slip into the black, Connor fading away despite her clinging attempts to hold onto him. His hands were on her, holding her, but she could hardly feel the strength of them, the heat of him anymore.

“It’s the sedation, Jenna. A little more than last time, but you’re going to be fine, I swear. Just relax, baby. That’s it. That’s it, Jenna. Such a good girl...”

For a moment more, she floated.

When the darkness consumed her, someone called her name.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Light from the muted television washed over the bed. Some comedy program, one he usually enjoyed, played out in silence on the screen but his attention was on Jenna.

Two days had passed since that defining moment between them in the exam room. Connor could still feel the conviction in her hands, the imprints of her fingers on his jaw where she held onto him. She'd been so frantic and still unable to utter a single word, but he'd seen terror in the depth of her eyes. Terror he couldn't fathom, not the seed or the root.

But he had said something to quell the fear. He'd witnessed the change in her in the seconds before she slipped away...yet couldn't put his finger on what had turned the tide.

She slept now, natural and quiet. Most of the last forty-eight came down to routine—check her back, feed her, use the bathroom, sleep. She had a sleep cycle of four hours, and Connor was sneakily finding ways to extend it. Four hours was not enough rest.

There was the faintest blush of color over her skin, a sweepingly light pass of a blusher brush kissing her otherwise pasty flesh. It was better than when she first arrived, especially now the bruises were on the right side of healing, and Connor was determined she'd be glowing within a couple weeks.

On his back beside her, Connor kept an eye on her as he let himself drift. Catching a few z's here and there while she slept was his only shot at resting; when Jenna was awake, he doted on her. When she was sleeping, there were so many thoughts in his head he struggled to set them aside long enough for sleep to take him as well.

Nightmares came often. He wasn't sure if she was aware of them, the sheer number and ferocity of the hellish dreams he usually shook her out of.

Not unprepared, he'd rapidly picked up the signs of an imminent strike, stirring from his doze when her breathing changed, hitched sharply.

Everything went downhill from there. That little hitch unleashed a maelstrom of emotion, every damn time, and he couldn't grasp any of it. Vocal nightmares were so much easier to deal with than the almost ghostly apprehension that came with what plagued Jenna.

Even her subconscious knew better than to make a sound.

Closing his eyes, he tucked his hands beneath his head and willed the busy little brain bees scurrying around in his head to fuck off. They were determined to raise questions that, of course, couldn't be brought to light during the daylight hours.

Caleb hadn't been seen since Connor bloodied his face, but he had taken the time to call and let Connor know the search was on. The list was long, but he'd brought in two deputies to work alongside him, was considering taking it higher up the chain of law enforcement to access more useful resources.

No leads yet from the messed-up rag of a shirt Jenna had been wearing. DNA on the samples taken from it so far matched Jenna. Only Jenna. Sweat and blood, tears.

Downstairs, the hallway and kitchen smelled of gerbera daisies, courtesy of the bouquet from Cain. The immense arrangement of flowers must have cost his youngest brother a pretty penny—some of the blooms were colors Connor had never seen, intensely vibrant, and they added warmth to the living room where Connor had finally decided to put them in the window.

Step two of his rehabilitation plan for Jenna was coming up, and the flowers were a handy aid to boost her lagging spirit. Not to mention they made him smile, recalling Cain's mortified blush as he shoved the heavy vase into Connor's chest and mumbled something about Jenna and good wishes.

Light from the TV flashed over his closed lids, irritating him a bit. He liked to have it on through the night—it offered softer light than the lamp so Jenna didn't have to wake in the dark; it kept his thoughts from stifling him during the few minutes he concentrated on the damn thing; sometimes he found things he just had to buy from the infomercials that hit the screen at three a.m.

Automatic vegetable peeler that could also dice cheese, devil eggs and suck an orange dry with more finesse than the hooker who worked the corner of Main and Fifth? The infomercial sold it so smoothly, Connor's sleep-deprived brain had already placed the call and handed over his credit card details before he knew what he'd done.

He did like his vegetable peeler, though—it was hypnotic to watch.

Thinking of the test carrot spinning around and around, the skin curling away, Connor's head finally switched off.

He jerked awake not ten minutes later from a twisted dream of naked carrots running screaming from a murderous vegetable peeler gone mad. Already his body turned to the right, his arm reaching for Jenna.

She wasn't there.

Chest tight, he reached for the lamp. Before his numb fingers could press the button, a shadowy figure tottered across the foot of the bed. Backlit by the TV, Jenna's hair haloed around her head, and he caught a glimpse of open, blank eyes.

Frowning, he sat up and leaned against the headboard. This was different to anything she'd done before. Always, it was the change in breathing kicking things into motion, then her limbs twitching until the situation escalated.

She'd never sleepwalked before.

Not good, he thought as Jenna dropped to her hands and knees, gathered the clothes he'd thoughtlessly stripped off and discarded just a few hours ago. This new pattern meant he had more signals to learn. Maybe he should tie bells around her ankles.

He watched quietly as, still on her knees, she meticulously folded his clothes and made a neatly stacked pile in size order, sweater on the bottom and his socks turned into one another on the top. Shuffling on her knees to the nearest chair, she set the pile on it, then crawled to the bathroom.

The light flashed on. Intrigued, Connor slipped out of bed and eased toward the door, leaning around the jamb. Oh hell, no. Sleeping or not, this was something he wouldn't tolerate. "Jenna."

The toilet brush clattered into the bowl. Jenna dropped flat, her arms stretched out in front of her as best she could with the toilet in front of her, and left her naked butt raised. Trembling, forehead touching the tiles, she tensed.

Connor padded over to her, crouched down. He hated how her body braced for pain, how she cowered when he laid his hand on her nape and rubbed gently. “Good girl, Jenna. You’ve done a lovely job tidying up, but it’s time for bed now, okay?”

She wouldn’t look at him. Could she tell the difference between his voice and her captor’s in this state, or was that asshole’s voice spinning around in her head?

Scooping her up wasn’t the easiest task when she was rigid. She didn’t move a damn muscle—not to fight, not to help. Fear froze her solid and talking to her wasn’t getting him anywhere. “Jenna, look at me. Look at me, beautiful.”

For fuck’s sake, was that her teeth chattering?

Swearing a blue streak under his breath, admittedly not helping the situation, Connor swept her back into the bedroom and put her carefully on the bed. He turned the lamp on, barely restraining himself from hurling it across the room.

She blinked like an owl, still wouldn’t look at him.

“Eyes!” he snapped.

The sharp edge of his tone turned trembles into shudders. Connor blew out a slow breath, reminded himself this wasn’t a bratty sub acting out for attention. If he was tired down to the bone, so what? Physical and mental exhaustion wasn’t a valid excuse, wasn’t a shadow of a good reason, to lose his fraying temper with a half-pint woman who currently wasn’t even consciously awake.

Asshole.

Shadowed eyes lifted hesitantly to his. Inside them lived a girl he didn’t know. This was the girl he caught fleeting glimpses of when panic drove her into madness. How hard, he wondered, did Jenna work to keep this wildness under control? Especially now, faced with strangers and situations she wasn’t prepared for, how did she cope with this hellion fighting inside her?

Connor edged a hip onto the mattress, held his hands up, palms out. Moving slowly, he reached to cup her cheek. Her skin was stone cold. She didn’t move, but the pulse in her neck was visibly erratic. “Jenna, I think it’s time you woke up now. Do you understand me?”

Had the fucker who’d trained her into his whipping bitch written a fucking manual on how to command her? Key words to control her every

move?

“Abra-ca-fucking-dabra,” he muttered bitterly, stroking the strong jut of her cheekbone with his thumb. “Neither of us is going to like this, baby, but you have to snap out of this shit.”

Jenna just stared at him.

“Okay then. Jenna,” he commanded in his deepest, most effective Dominant voice. “Wake up, now!” It wasn’t quite a shout, only a decibel off, but it resonated in the room and shut Jenna down like flipping a switch. “Fuck. Bad idea, you moron. Shout at the traumatized woman, what a bright idea.”

He tapped her cheek. Shook her, ever mindful of the condition of her body. Set his hand on the top of her thigh and pinched the pathetic muscle as hard as he could stand.

Those damned eyes told him she’d had all that and worse in the past.

Hurting her was beyond the realm of possibility. He physically couldn’t bring himself to slap her, to cause her yet more pain. Arguing with the heart desperate to have her wake and smile at him, Connor summoned the doctor to the forefront of reasoning and took a good, hard look at her.

She wasn’t in pain or distress. No thrashing or struggling.

“Sleep it off, baby. Maybe that’s the only thing to do.”

Muttering to himself, Connor switched off the light and climbed into bed beside her. He debated for several moments, then threw all caution to the wind and tugged her inert form on top of him, hissing as her icy skin made contact with his warm flesh.

It solidified his decision, and he dragged the covers over them, tucked them in tight. Hugging her closer was an impossible dream, so he draped one arm carefully over her back where he knew it wouldn’t hurt her and held her hip with his other hand.

Her heart drummed against his chest. Cold as ice, stiff as a corpse, her only movement was the short, shallow breaths of the prey animal. Eyes open, staring blindly. Waiting, watching, poised.

Connor closed his eyes, discovering his own comfort in holding her. The words of the song she loved ran through his head, and he hummed the tune under his breath. A little off-key—he’d never be a singer—but the depth and soul of the melody was clear enough.

Jenna shivered as warmth began to circulate through her. Her skin lost the nasty chill, her muscles relaxed. Connor kept humming, smiling to

himself as the weight on him grew heavier, more malleable.

Risking a peek, he studied her face in the dim light of the television and sent up a prayer of sincere thanks to anyone listening.

Face tranquil, breathing easy, Jenna slept.

Connor wasn't far behind.

"You remember the rules for eating, right?"

Smothered in the T-shirt she adored and refused to relinquish, Jenna sat at the kitchen table and nodded. They'd been over the eating rules several times, especially when she forgot to abide by them.

Connor kept telling her it wasn't her fault when she forgot she wasn't supposed to eat like a dog with her hands behind her back and her face in the bowl or on the plate. He didn't shout at her if she guarded her food with her arms, back raised, teeth showing.

He just reprimanded her in a kind voice and taught her patiently how to eat like the human being she was.

"Rule number one: no gulping food until it makes you sick."

Jenna blushed. That was one of her worst violations. Sometimes the hunger was so acute—or she believed it was—she just...inhaled the food. No chewing, just stuff and swallow.

"Rule number two: you're not a dog. Knife and fork, baby."

A smile curved her lips. Tapping the ends of the utensils in her ready hands on the table, she bit her bottom lip to keep her excitement from overflowing. Already her mouth was watering from the smell of whatever was on the plate in Connor's hand.

"Rule number three: no snarling, snapping or possessive behavior. This is yours; you don't need to protect it." Connor set the plate down in front of her. "Slow and careful, baby. There's more if you can manage them."

The squeal almost pushed past the sound barrier. Wide-eyed with joy, she looked up at Connor with a question in her eyes, and her chin wobbled when he nodded. She waited, barely, for him to fetch his own plate and settle opposite her before she ripped into heaven.

Pancakes.

Connor nudged the syrup toward her, and she took it, dribbled several circles of gold on her breakfast. She must have been *really* good. Nice things only happened if she was really good. One time, she hadn't done *anything* wrong for a week and Sire had patted her on the head.

Not with a belt or his fist, but with his hand.

The fluffy pancake in her mouth turned to ash at the thought of Sire. He didn't belong here. She didn't want him here in this sunny kitchen, when she was trying her hardest to please Connor and follow the eating rules.

"Jenna? Everything okay?" Concerned, Connor paused with his fork halfway to his mouth, gray eyes dark with worry.

Sire didn't belong here, Jenna told herself firmly. He *wasn't* here. Only if she let him sour the peace she had with Connor, and one day she would be strong enough to block out the monster. Connor was her world now, and Sire couldn't beat her bloody for thinking it.

She chewed slowly, swallowed. Offering Connor a hesitant smile, she banished bad thoughts and concentrated on cutting a small piece of pancake, dabbing it in syrup, putting it in her mouth. A little of the joy had been lost, but what was lost could be found again.

Wasn't she proof of that?

"You're going to have an easy day today. Clinic opens in an hour, so I'll have some patients to see. I've got Netflix on the TV, pillows and a duvet on the couch, and pizza on order for lunch."

She brightened. She liked falling asleep with him. Waking meant having strong arms around her, his scent everywhere, the power of his big body guarding her against dreams.

Like this morning. Her head cushioned on his chest so the first thing she heard was his heart under her ear, the slow rhythm of his breathing. She much preferred it to being dragged from her shed by her hair, through mud and grass to the house.

No bad thoughts, she reminded herself.

"I want to check those sutures before we settle you down. Sarah should be here soon. She helps me with the clinic, so we'll both check in and make sure you're okay." Connor rose and cleared his empty plate. "More pancakes, baby?"

Wait, what? Jenna frowned at him, shook her head. Her fingers linked together nervously as he took her finished plate, stroked his hand over her head.

"Come on, then. Quick check over, then rest."

Her frown deepened. He was leaving her? No, he wouldn't leave her. She could sit in the corner and be quiet as a mouse. She'd fit under his desk,

could hold onto his pants, and no one would know she was there. The thought of being apart from him was...distressing.

Taking his hand was easy. She slipped hers into it, felt safe when his fingers closed around hers. She followed docilely, almost hugging his arm to support her unsteady legs. It felt so nice when he carried her, as though she was weightless and floating through the air. No risk of falling, crashing, dying. Just drifting along in the arms of an angel.

Unease filled her at the doorway to the exam room. She stopped on the threshold, dug her heels in at Connor's persuasive tug on her hand.

"No needles, baby. Not today, I promise."

Mouth dry, she studied the innocuous room with wary eyes. She'd been in here often enough it should have been a second home, but it still upset her stomach. She was vulnerable in here—Connor didn't know how vulnerable she became when she was on the table, at his mercy, trusting him not to hurt her.

Because he could. Whatever he chose to do, she couldn't stop him.

Her breath wheezed.

"None of that now." He turned, sighed. His fingers squeezed hers gently then released her. "I'm not forcing you to go in, Jenna. I'm going to start preparing for clinic. If you feel brave enough to come in, that's good. If you can't today, it's not the end of the world."

She reached for him as he walked into the room, missed. Brow furrowed, she eyed the table, the counters, the cupboards. Nothing jumped out to stab her. Breathless, her toes edged over into the room.

Connor hummed her song as he did something that had the computer humming to life. He bent over the desk rather than sit in the chair, and Jenna watched him rifle through some papers, set them aside.

She made it another inch.

He moved along the counter, checking drawers and cupboards. He seemed happy, competent. Humming away so the lyrics joined in inside her head, drawing her to him.

Before she knew it, she was standing beside the exam table. Biting her lip, her hands throttling each other in the hem of the T-shirt so the shaking wouldn't show.

"Well now, someone's a brave girl this morning."

The pride and pleasure in his voice was as effective as a caress of his hand. She glanced at the door, wondering if she'd been too hasty in her

decision, but Connor was there. Her eyes closed as his lips touched her forehead.

“Brave girls get a treat. Can you take the shirt off while I get you a treat, Jenna?” So persuasive, the smoothness of his voice, the gentleness of his tone. Persuasive without demanding pressure.

Jenna fumbled with the hem, untangling her fingers from the material. Her wounds grumbled when she lifted it over her head, but the pain was hardly enough to complain about. She stood stiffly, cuddling the shirt, unsure what she should do next.

“Jesus, you amaze me. Do you have any idea how fucking proud I am of you right now, baby?” Connor stared at her, eyes dark with undecipherable emotions. “Don’t think I don’t understand how much trust you have in me to do this, Jenna. It humbles me.”

She shifted nervously, unused to praise.

“One more thing I’d like you to do for me, okay? Just one, and it won’t hurt.” He stepped closer, obviously gauging her reaction, and she mournfully handed over the shirt. “Not that, baby, but thank you. You can have it back in a minute. I just want you to hop up on the table for me.”

She wanted the shirt back. Her toes flexed into the floor, her fingers knotted into each other. Could she have the shirt back? Reaching for it, she gave him a pleading look.

Fingertips brushed her temple, tucked her hair back. She leaned into the touch, into the spread of his palm as he cradled her head. And felt the shirt nudge her linked hands.

“Trust is rewarded, Jenna.”

She sighed. Hesitating seemed unfair when he was so patient with her. Hating the table was less important than pleasing Connor. Trusting Connor was easier than breathing.

Breaking away from his touch hurt. Gripping the material in her hands, Jenna edged to the table, sucked in a deep breath. The surface was cold on her front as she leaned over it, wiggled onto the hard, black surface. That sensation of vulnerability washed over her. Naked, facedown, her nerves simmered on low boil.

Connor crouched in front of her. “Five minutes, beautiful, and we’re done. Close your eyes, breathe, and relax. I’m so, so proud of you.” He kissed her fingers, slipped a lollipop between them, and winked. “Brave girls, remember?”

She held onto the lollipop as he disappeared from view. She shivered in the chilly air, jolted when heavy warmth draped over her legs, her butt. Relaxed under the butterfly kiss of fingertips over her skin.

Flesh ached when Connor prodded carefully at stitched wounds. No pain, just the discomfort of healing skin. Soon the itching would start, and she knew just how irritating that was.

He touched a spot near her spine. Heat flared, spread up into her head, speared down between her thighs. Her hips arched sharply, and she blushed as she grew damp.

“Must be a happy place right there,” Connor chuckled. He didn’t touch there again, but the blush only deepened. “Baby, it’s a natural reaction. The nervous system is interconnected, and everyone has an erogenous zone or two hardwired into them.”

She buried her face in her arms.

The front door opened, shut. “Morning, boss!”

Oh no. Suddenly mortified, even though Sarah had already seen her this way, Jenna groped back for the blanket. Connor stilled her hand. “Morning, Sarah. We’re in the exam room, would you mind waiting there for a minute?”

“Ah...sure?” A brief pause, then a sunny, “Want me to put the coffee on?”

“Yeah, that’d be good, thanks.” Connor tapped Jenna’s hand until she released the blanket. “That’ll take her a couple minutes, baby. I want to put some cream on these wounds. Are you okay with Sarah coming in if I’m not finished?”

He didn’t patronize her, didn’t make her feel like an idiot for a moment of uncertainty. Jenna couldn’t have loved him more in that instant. She was being silly, after all. Sarah had seen her, all of her, and didn’t think any less of her, did she? It wasn’t the earth-shattering issue she expected.

Jenna nodded slowly, settled back down. Closed her eyes as music whispered into the room. Laid there, Connor’s fingers dabbing cool cream on hot, uncomfortable wounds, she relaxed. The song went around and around, building inside her.

Building to a pinnacle.

Connor lifted a hand in the air when Sarah poked her head around the open door. He couldn’t speak, didn’t want to, for fear the magic of this

moment would snap off and be lost forever.

He took a measured step away from Jenna, waited.

The noises emanating from her throat were weak, croaky, broken. They took effort, and he wasn't sure Jenna knew what she was doing. Completely limp, the smallest of smiles on her lips, she looked peaceful despite the state of her body.

Sarah slipped into the room, silent as a shadow. Her voice barely a whisper. "Is she sedated?"

Connor shook his head.

"She's humming."

The grin split his face. He'd been worried about her vocal cords. The keening noise she'd made during her panic attack had been reassuring in a sense, but not like this. This smashed the lock off one of his boxes of stress and kicked it open. This offered so much hope, he didn't know what to do with it, where to go from here.

"Have you tried talking to her?"

"No. It's a beautiful moment. One I'd rather didn't end."

"Try. The impulsion is there, she's relaxed."

When he didn't move, Sarah patted his arm. She whispered away, feet silent as she crossed to Jenna and balanced on the balls of her feet, arms folded on the edge of the table. She rested her hand on Jenna's wrist. "Jenna, sweetheart?"

"Hmmm?"

There wasn't a chair close enough to sit in. Connor's knees dipped and he sat on the floor with a heavy thud. He saw Sarah's concerned glance, took her frantic thumbs-up, then dropped his head on his knees and just breathed.

"Are you feeling okay, sweetheart? Warm enough? Happy?"

Jenna nodded sleepily. "Mmm-hmmm."

The music, that blessed fucking song, started again. Connor had every intention of bronzing the damn thing and hanging it on the wall.

On the verge of laughing, tears in her eyes, Sarah grinned. "Okay, sweetheart. That's good. Do you want me to get you anything?"

Jenna's fingers worked against the material she held. She snuffled, wet her lips, sighed. "C-C-C...onn...or."

It was the most mangled pronunciation of his name he'd ever heard, but to Connor, hearing it in Jenna's voice was the most beautiful thing he could

ever hope to hear. Cracked, stuttered and drawn-out, his name had meaning today.

Sarah celebrated with a subtle fist pump, tears streaming down her face. Shaking her head with the wonder of it, she pushed again. “Sorry, sweetheart, I didn’t quite catch that.”

Jenna whimpered, obviously rising from the peaceful place capable of overriding ingrained training. “C-Connor.”

“I’m here, baby.” Fuck, his voice choked him. It took a second to gather his wits, steady himself against the sheer shock of hearing her talk, then he was beside her, his hand on her arm. “I’m right here.”

She smiled and opened her eyes. “Connor.”

“That’s right, baby.”

Things went distinctly awry from that point. Connor winced when her eyes popped wide. Her mouth moved as though tracing every word she’d said, and horror cast a translucent pallor over her skin. He caught her as she flailed, shoving up and off the table on the side opposite to him. Stretched, he had to let her go as gently as possible, unwilling to mark her further as her flight instincts kicked in.

“Sarah.”

The nurse was already at Jenna’s side, soothing her as she landed on her ass on the tiles. Hands clamped over her mouth, Jenna shook her head frantically, looking as though someone was going to lunge through the door and cut out her tongue.

That motherfucking training had kicked back in.

“Sweetheart, you’ve done nothing wrong. There’s no reason to freak out. No one’s going to hurt you or shout at you.” Sarah’s voice was low, calm, easy. She was the solid rock in a storm, rarely flustered. “Jenna, just take a deep breath. You’re starting to hyperventilate. Just breathe, sweetheart.”

The broken girl on the floor *whined*. Fucking shattered Connor’s heart in his chest, and if the look in Sarah’s eyes was any indication, ripped hers into shreds. The sound stripped him down to the bone, to the soul.

“I’ll get something to calm her down.”

“No. No, this she needs to process.”

“She’ll make herself sick, Connor. Or pass out before she can take a full breath.”

Connor didn't bother walking around the table. It was in his way, so he just tossed it aside. The fury inside him had no match, no cure. Later, he'd destroy something with his bare hands to alleviate the worst of the burn, but for now...

"Arms around my neck, baby," he crooned as he dropped to one knee in front of Jenna. Expecting hesitation, he was surprised by her immediate reaction. They locked around him like chains, gripped tighter when he rose. Her legs banded around his waist without a word from him. "Sarah, can you —"

Hand pressed to her heart, she stared at him with devastated dark eyes. The absolute joy from moments ago eclipsed now by grief. "Go. Do what you have to do. I'll see to the clinic until...just take care of her."

Jenna sobbed into his shoulder, her cries loud and oh-so fucking real. Every breath laced with that terrified whine. Maybe Sarah was right and he should give her something to take the hysteria down a notch, but he knew dealing with the fear was the only way to take the next step forward.

Connor took her to the living room, settled himself onto the couch and the nest of pillows. He yanked the duvet around them, covered Jenna's head, and couldn't give a shit about the cream now slicked over him, the duvet, damn near everything.

"Cry it out, Jenna. Use that pretty voice and give me the weight." Hands stroking, body rocking, Connor anchored her as the vicious hurricane of emotion chewed her up and spat her out. "Good girl. Good girl, baby. Let me take it. Give it all to me."

Her fingers kneaded into his shoulders, the sharp edges of her nails drawing blood through scratches. Her sobs were shattered, breathless. Keening wails, so savage he felt them tear through her, would shadow his dreams for some time to come.

She was silent no more.

His watch told him over thirty minutes of hell had passed before the noises died down. Thirty long fucking minutes of wordless recollection, an accounting of what she'd suffered. Half an hour of endless tears, grief and terror.

His shirt was wet from the neck down, an effective handkerchief. She was slick with cold sweat, huddled against him now as his hands urged her to unfurl, relax, breathe. She'd gone through the wringer and not come out unscathed.

Connor nudged the duvet back, kept it tucked around her. He needed to get fresh blankets, stop her getting a chill on top of everything else, but right now, she just needed to be held. To know she was cared for, and not alone on what would be an incredibly frightening step on the journey to living life as she was meant to.

Breathing hard, her head rested on his shoulder. Blonde hair matted with sweat, eyes swollen and red. Snot and tears were the least of his concerns. He touched her wet cheek, then gave in and rested his forehead against hers with a sigh.

Hollow green eyes locked onto his, heavy with fatigue and misery.

“You’re going to be okay, baby. I know it doesn’t seem like it right now, but you are. I’ve got you now. We can only go forward from here.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Being wrong wasn't something Connor liked to admit. Admitting he wasn't right meant he'd done something to entice failure, and God knew he was failing Jenna. He couldn't understand how they'd gone from progressing slowly but steadily forwards into hurtling back to hell in a matter of minutes.

It was killing him. Physically, emotionally, mentally, it was sucking the life from him in thick, greedy gulps. Two weeks of torture was enough for anyone, so Sarah told him with sadness and a sense of resignation. His stalwart, ballsy nurse who refused to relinquish a challenge unless she had her teeth pried off it was on the fence.

Leaning forward would cost him, maybe more than he had left in reserve. Forging ahead with hours of self-recrimination, endless cajoling, taking care of a woman who had turned her back on her existence.

Falling back gave him no option but to surrender completely. He would lose the future he dreamed of with the same woman who no longer smiled, who couldn't exist outside of her past.

Pacing the kitchen, Connor ran his hand over his beard—why bother shaving was his new motto—and twisted his phone in white-knuckled fingers. One phone call. One phone call and the nightmare would be over.

For him.

“Fuck!” He spun, slammed his fist into the hardwood cupboard door. The crack in the wood mirrored the one in his heart. Physical pain distracted him momentarily from the agony of making a choice. “Just fuck it.”

“You made the call?” Sarah asked softly, then tutted when she saw the blood on his hand. “You need to be more careful, Connor.”

He dropped his head against the cupboard door with a thud. "I can't do it, Sarah. I can't tell them to come get her, lock her away. How do I explain I'm throwing her away? I just...I can't."

"You're one of the best men I know, Connor. They're few and far between in my book, but you get a whole page to yourself. I'm looking at a man pulling himself into pieces, trying to move in every direction, to do what's right. The question is, what's right for you, and what is right for her?"

Miserable, he shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know anymore."

"Can you give her what she needs?"

"Yes." No hesitation, he knew he could. "If she'd let me."

"How long do you think you've got left in you to try?"

Twenty questions of Jenna soothed ragged nerves, forced him to think. Specific answers, not just fleeting ones that brought more questions into his chaotic brain. "A few days, maybe. My temper's shot, I'm exhausted and stressed. Functioning like a human being, even with a shitload of coffee, is becoming difficult."

"Okay, so this is what's going to happen." Hands on hips, Sarah turned on her strict, no bullshit face. "Today's Tuesday. Clinic will be closed until Monday. Go upstairs, pack a bag. You'll be gone until Friday night."

"What the hell, Sarah, you know I can't just waltz off for the best part of a week! Shutting the clinic is a bad idea, and Jenna..."

"Be quiet." She jabbed a finger at him. "If you don't do this, you'll burn out. Sooner than you think. Either you pack your bags and get away from this clusterfuck for a few days, or I do what you can't and call your ass-hat brother to make arrangements for Jenna to be hospitalized."

"What about Jenna? Am I supposed to leave her in her own filth for days, make a pile of food and hope she eats? She won't go the fucking bathroom unless I drag her there and sit her on the goddamn toilet!"

"Do not shout at me, Connor. Haggard or not, I won't hesitate to deck you. Jenna will be taken care of in your absence. I'll move in here myself and make sure of it." Sympathy flashed in her eyes. "You need this, boss. A corpse has more charm than you right now."

Seemed fitting that he felt like one. "I can't ask you to do that. You have a husband, a family. Zeke won't be happy if you leave him with the boys until Friday."

Sarah waved that away. “Zeke is a grown-ass man, Connor. If he can’t handle two four-year-old devils, who incidentally came from his loins, he’s gonna have to grow a pair and get on with it. It’s not like I’m miles away. It’ll be a learning curve for him.”

“And you? What if Jenna has a bad turn, a nightmare, and hurts you?”

She snorted, shook her head. “That girl couldn’t bop a gnat on the head if you paid her to. She’d let it drink her dry first. Stop stalling and go, Connor. I have things here.”

Stunned, he stared at her. “Where am I supposed to go?”

Her smile was sly and amused. “Don’t ask me. Cain’s got you covered there.”

Oh, so it was a conspiracy. While it was nice his brother and his nurse were so concerned about him, leaving didn’t sit right. The setback Jenna suffered was too severe. Abandoning her now was more of a betrayal than anything else he could think of.

Wasn’t sending her away to a hospital worse than that?

Goddamn it.

“Fine. I’ll go. But you call me if she so much as sneezes, Sarah. Those sutures came out clean but keep an eye on them. The last of her antibiotics are—”

“Connor. I love you, but fuck off.” Hands on his cheeks, Sarah touched her lips to his furry face. “Cain’s waiting outside. Jenna will be here when you return, in one piece and smelling fresher than a daisy. Now go.”

“But—”

Chocolate eyes narrowed dangerously. “My bags are in the hallway, boss. Don’t trip over them on your way out.”

“Thank you.”

She just pointed at the doorway and winked.

Connor made his way upstairs, paused outside his bedroom. Jenna was curled up downstairs, but he braced for her scent to assault him as soon as he opened the door. Not overly sweet and floral, just...just Jenna. She was everywhere—on his sheets, the pillowcases. A subtle fragrance in the air that said *woman*.

She no longer slept in the bed at night. No matter how hard he tried to stay awake, keep her where she belonged, he always found her curled up on the floor or in the closet, her bed a nest of his clothes he couldn’t bear to disturb.

He'd done it once or twice, tidied them up and put them away. Her distress had been so palpable, he could have crushed it in his fist. Moving the nest onto the bed hadn't worked—she'd painstakingly carried each garment back to where she needed them on hands and knees, flinching at the sound of his voice as he begged her not to fall back into old habits.

The bathroom was spotless, thanks to her nightmares and the routine of whatever her captor had demanded of her. She rarely came up off her hands and knees now; she crawled everywhere, head down, and made eye contact with nothing but the floor.

Connor pushed the door open, breathed deep. He was in love with a woman who didn't exist anymore. The fearful animal inside her had devoured her, consumed her, taken her far away from him where words and touch made no difference.

It took ten minutes to pack his rucksack. God only knew where Cain would spirit him off to, but he knew his brother's penchant for the outdoors and physical exercise. They'd probably be camping on a mountain top for the next few nights, hunting deer and rabbits, and freezing their asses off when the sun went down.

Honestly, it sounded...ideal.

Rucksack on his shoulder, Connor grabbed a thick jacket from the closet and shut the door. Heading back downstairs, he found Cain loitering at the bottom, easy smile in place.

"Ready to head out?"

"Just need a minute."

"Sure. Give me your shit, I'll wait in the truck." Cain snagged the rucksack, cruised out the front door with the nonchalance he'd been born with. "A minute, Connor, not ten!"

Chuckling, Connor flipped him off. He loved Cain. Might be bad to admit, but his youngest brother held his heart and his loyalty far more than Caleb. He was young and charming, but he hadn't let life sour him. Connor thought of what Caleb had admitted, the heartbreak that came with it, and didn't have to wonder whether Cain could have dealt with the situation better.

Cain dealt with everything better.

Hard hits shook him, no doubt. He had the O'Malley temper, they all did. But hard knocks and the shit life threw at him didn't stick, didn't change who he was at the core.

Connor approached the living room, steeling himself against the punch he always took seeing Jenna in her present state. A fist to the jaw, imprinting *failure* into flesh.

The curtains were open, as were the windows. Cool, fresh air swept inside alongside the afternoon light. Winter was nearly on them, so close he could taste it. The TV was on, some crime drama bleating away. Murder mystery, he thought, and wondered if Jenna should be watching such things right now.

He found the remote, switched the programs over until tinned laughter filled the room. Maybe it would entertain Jenna, if she could hear it through the dense walls keeping her caged.

The couch was empty. Pillows scattered along the leather, the duvet draped half-on, half-off as though she'd been under it and crawled out. The glass of juice he'd put out for her remained on the coffee table, condensation dripping down the sides into a puddle on the wood. As full as it had been when he brought it.

Untouched, her soup was covered in skin. The fruit and biscuits, hunks of cheese and chocolate were all exactly positioned as he'd left them.

If she hadn't eaten by the time he returned, he was going to get mad. He hated the idea of using the feeding tube on her, but she really wasn't giving him any fucking choice. What little bits of food and fluid he was getting into her wasn't enough.

She watched him from the corner.

Time ticking down, he walked over to her and sat down within touching distance. Hoping she'd take the plunge and reach out for him. He missed her in ways he couldn't describe; how she tucked her hand into his, the light in her eyes, the way she talked to him without saying a word.

"I wanted to say goodbye, Jenna."

She blinked slowly, whether in acknowledgement or protest, he didn't know. The hollow cast around her eyes made her look like the wraith Caleb once called her. While she was clean, cared for, she wasn't healthy. In his opinion, she looked worse than the first time he laid eyes on her.

"Sarah will stay here with you. If you need anything, you ask her. She'll know, likely before you do, because that's what she does best." Connor sighed and pressed his fingers to his eyes. "I'm sorry I've let you down, baby. No matter what I do, I can't seem to find a way to make this right."

A tear slipped down her cheek. At least she was listening to him, could hear him. For days, she'd seemed oblivious to his presence at times, spiraling in the mire of her demons.

"I miss you," he whispered.

He stretched over, feathered his fingers over her downy hair, then pushed to his feet. There was so much to say, yet nothing more would come. He was tired of talking to himself, of expressing his feelings, without a flicker of response. Just because he was aware it wasn't her fault didn't alleviate the frustration.

The resignation.

Walking away hammered the nails into his coffin. Every step was leaden, even as rocks tumbled off his shoulders. How did someone cope with this? How did they excuse feeling profound relief at leaving someone they loved, when their heart crumbled to ash?

Cain waited in the truck as promised. Engine running, heaters on, the local radio station on low. "Got everything you need?"

"Fuck knows. Depends where we're going, I guess."

The cab door shut as Connor settled into the deep seat, and Cain floored the massive truck into action before he got his belt on. "Calm and quiet were the orders, brother."

"Ah hell, we're headed for a strip joint?"

Cain's laugh boomed. "No, more's the pity. Sexy nurse got jab-happy with that finger of hers, so orders have been followed to the letter. Time we got those panties of yours unknotted, big brother, and that clever brain back into working order."

"There's nothing wrong with my brain, Cain."

"Your cock then. Something sure ain't right with you."

"My cock is in perfect working order. If this is all we're gonna talk about for the next few days, drop me off here. I'll hide out at the bar until Friday."

"Yeah? When's the last time you got laid? I know you're not getting any from the pretty young thing you picked up off my floor." Cain drove carefully down the street, as aware as Connor of their brother's tenacity regards speeding in town limits. "Sexy nurse said she's not doing so well, I'm sorry for that. That's what's got you all tangled up?"

Tangled up was an understatement. Connor knew Sarah would have given Cain the rundown on what was happening, and he cut straight to the

chase. “Don’t play the redneck idiot with me, Cain. You’re smarter than Caleb and me put together. You know what the deal is.”

“Caleb and I,” Cain corrected smugly. “Just trying to lighten the trip, Con. I get you’re in a bad place. It’s rough and I can’t begin to imagine what it’s like bringing someone back from the brink of hell, only to have them slip away again. But I know *you*. You don’t take no fucking prisoners when you set your mind on something, Connor. Don’t turn into a pussy now when that lass needs you to be a fucking hero.”

Hero. Pfft, he was miles away from earning that title. He stared out the window as the town he grew up in flashed past. Howler’s Creek would never make the map for tourists, didn’t draw anyone’s attention for landmarks or historical reasons, but it was home.

Here was where he’d scored his first touchdown on the lawn of his childhood home, broken his arm saving a catch and stumbling in front of Mrs. Callister’s Ford with the ball still in his mitt. Kissed his first girl down by the creek, had sex in the same place with the same girl, made love with Louisa in his first apartment.

Howler’s Creek and its people had honed him, made him a man and given him a solid foundation to grow into a respected member of the community, a competent doctor, and be someone who mattered.

Raising a family here was the dream. He thought he’d struck gold with Louisa—pretty girl, content with small town life, with a kinky side that matched his own. They’d discussed children, both being happy with the idea of two, and Connor’s dream appeared to be in the sprouting stage.

She hacked him off at the knees and finished the job off with a kick to the balls when he discovered her kink ran to more than just one-on-one scenes. He’d never divulged the reason why he’d dumped her ass so quickly when everything appeared hunky-fucking-dory on the surface, but what man wanted to admit he’d caught his girlfriend in the middle of an organized gangbang in his own fucking house.

Coming home three days early after the medical seminar in Big Sky was cancelled due to a flu outbreak, Connor had been tired, eager to get home, and homesick for his girl.

Apparently, Louisa had neglected to tell him she liked dick in multiples. The dozen strange men in his living room, buck naked and gleaming with sweat, had obviously been very busy giving her exactly what she liked.

Too busy sucking off the college boy in her mouth, she hadn't seen him. The half circle of men waiting for her manicured hands to jack them off while two of their friends fucked her in sync blocked her view of him as he stormed into the clusterfuck of his relationship.

She'd sure as hell seen him when he punched college boy. The guy's cock had all but taken her cheating teeth with it when he staggered back and dropped like a stone.

Oh, she'd tried to explain. Scrambling after Connor with streaks of other men's come splashed over her lithe figure, lashes of it in her long brown hair. She'd wept false tears, assured him it was *the first time*, and her words rang hollow.

Walking into that had brushed away the veil blinding him from her true colors. Where he'd seen light and vitality, there was nothing but murky distortion. A mimicry of his idea of what a Dominant-submissive relationship ought to be.

He'd turned his back on her, on the mess she brought into their home, and cut her out of his world. So he'd believed, until she strolled into Caleb's office with the remnants of their last scene together and destroyed his existence with well-conceived lies.

Luckily, the details of the whole sordid mess hadn't gone beyond Caleb. Family loyalty versus official duty hadn't gone down well, but Caleb had at least obliged Connor's privacy during the investigation in spite of his disgust.

"Stop thinking about her," Cain snapped, punching Connor's arm.

"I'm not doing anything. Fuck off."

"Bullshit on a stick. Everyone knows your Louisa face. That bitch was a cancerous tumor gnawing through your life, Connor. That young lass of yours might be broken, but she's twice the woman Louisa will ever hope to be."

"I'm in love with her."

"Yeah? She know that?"

"The world went to hell before I got the chance."

Cain tapped his fingers on the steering wheel to the rhythm of the Garth Brooks song playing on the radio. "Well then, guess we'd better make the most of the next few days and get you back on your A game, brother. I've got just the thing."

"The suspense is killing me," Connor said dryly.

“Beer, bucking bulls, and hot tub. The ultimate trifecta in blowing off steam, big brother.” Cain’s grin was wicked as he hit the interstate and put his foot on the gas. “Been a long time since you sat your ass on some class, Con.”

Ah fuck, Connor thought. He’d be lucky to see the week out without ending up in a cast.

The footsteps wouldn’t stop.

Curled tight in her ball, Jenna squeezed her eyes shut. The TV couldn’t drown them out, the screaming in her head wasn’t enough to halt the constant pacing. She knew what they meant, and she cowered from it.

Sire was coming.

She’d forgotten herself. Let the music and Connor take her to a higher level. How could she be so *stupid*? She’d ruined everything and now Sire ruled her thoughts, dictated her actions.

She didn’t deserve to eat. She was a bad girl and bad girls slept on the floor like the bitches they were. They didn’t get to cuddle; they weren’t allowed to touch what wasn’t theirs.

Bad girls who spoke lost their tongues.

The window was open. She could smell fresh air, hear the birds outside and the chatter of children in the distance. Not enough to catch the words, but their laughter was water on the last embers of her fire. She was cold, always cold, but to complain was to hurt.

When she complained about being cold, Sire used the belt to warm her up. Warmed her from head to toe, until her skin blistered and wept. Kept right on *warming her up* so she couldn’t walk on the soles of her feet, lay on her back, move without fire setting her nerves alight.

Her stomach rumbled, the dark grumble she was so accustomed to. So hungry she felt sick, the food just feet away served as punishment. Eating was a privilege only obedient girls were given.

Bad girls got nothing but water from the brown toilet bowl.

Connor was gone.

That was the last straw. There was nothing left to hold on to without him. It had hurt worse than a kick in the stomach when he’d gotten up, left her when her fingers reached for him. He hadn’t seen, hadn’t known, and she was glad.

It was one less thing for him to mourn when she died, if he mourned at all. She wouldn't blame him. The voice in her head raged at her when she wanted to crawl to him, berated her when she yearned for the comfort only he could give.

All Connor knew was that she'd turned from him first.

A shadow fell over her. Jenna threw her hands up weakly, certain Sire had finally found her. So strong was her fear, she tasted bile along with copper in her mouth.

Small, strong hands grasped her wrists and yanked her unceremoniously to her feet. Before she could drop again, an arm snaked around her waist and dragged her to the couch. She was shoved down, her legs tucked up, and the duvet bundled around her before her mind caught up.

"You stay there, madam. You and I have a long talk coming."

No, she didn't belong in the warmth. Jenna struggled free of the comfort, kicked it away. She blinked when a hand slapped against her forehead gently and pushed her back. Squinting up at the figure scowling at her, she saw the disappointment in Sarah's eyes.

"I mean it, Jenna. Come to Jesus ain't nothing on what we're gonna have," Sarah drawled, rearranging the covers again. "Two people I have strong feelings for are killing themselves. One because she's been disciplined into non-communication. The other because he's exhausting himself down to the bone to try and save her. It stops now."

Jenna broke eye contact.

"So does this shit. We both know you can talk. I don't know who you think controls your tongue, but you are the only one who gets to dictate whether you speak." Arms folded over her chest, she resembled an angry faery. "If you move from where I've put you, you won't like the consequences."

Jenna sank into the cushions silently. Evidently, Connor's sidekick was not someone to mess with when her dander was up. Her eyes tracked Sarah's movements as she stalked out of the room. The urge to crawl back to her hovel hole in the corner was phenomenally strong, the voice in her head getting louder and more insistent the longer she remained on the couch.

You don't belong here.

"That's a good start. You can obey orders when it suits you." Sarah slipped back into the room, quiet as a ninja. She carried a tray and the

scents that came with her sent Jenna's cramping belly into fits of delight. She set several plates on the coffee table, cleared the old dishes from earlier, then was gone again.

Oh, it smelled so good. Hunger gripped Jenna in an iron fist, pooled saliva in her mouth. The penance of a bad girl was suffering, and Sarah really was skilled at twisting the knife in a broken body.

"What baffles me," Sarah said quietly from where she leaned against the doorway, "is why you're starving yourself. I know Connor's worked his ass off cooking up every meal known to mankind to entice you to eat, and you've barely touched any of it—only what he's shoved into your mouth and made you swallow. Yet I can hear your stomach growling from here, and your eyes are so big I could fit one of those dishes in them."

Bad girls don't eat.

Sarah pushed off the jamb and sauntered to the coffee table, dragging it within a foot of the couch. She sat on the wooden surface, gestured to the array of plates with a raised brow. "Connor might be a soft touch with you, Jenna, but we're down to the wire now. You're not going to like what I have to say; I sure as hell aren't looking forward to saying it."

It was so close. She could taste the soup from the scent alone, imagined the rich tomato on her tongue. Her eyes roamed greedily over pancakes and waffles, buttered toast, a bacon sandwich.

"Connor left, Jenna. I know he came to say goodbye. I know you cried when the door shut behind him." She reached for Jenna's hand, grasped it in both of hers. "We can't help you if you don't help us, sweetheart. I mean it when I say we're at the wire—if you don't eat, if you don't make an improvement, we have to let you go to someone who will help you whether you want it or not."

Shock struck her, front and center. Jenna recoiled, struggling to comprehend the meaning behind Sarah's earnest words because the angry faery was right—she didn't like what she had to say. The implications were too horrific to think about.

"I don't think Connor will survive giving you up. If he does, it'll take time. Hospital isn't the answer, Jenna. We can do everything they can and more, but you have to want it. Think it over, carefully." With a little pat of her hands, Sarah released her and rose.

Common sense warred with Sire's apparition. They were sending her away because of him, him and his stupid rules. How many times was she

going to give him power over her? She wasn't on his leash anymore, controlled by vicious words and swift repercussions.

Was she willing to lose everything?

Anything that was nothing wasn't human, she reminded herself.

Anything that had nothing was damned.

"W-Why?" she choked out.

The angry faery sagged with relief. Tension seeped from her slim body as she turned back to face Jenna. Some of the sternness eased from her delicate features. "She speaks. Why what, Jenna?"

God, her mouth was Sahara dry. "B-Because I was b-bad?"

Sarah sat again. "How do I get through to you, Jenna? You haven't been bad. No one is angry with you, blames you, faults you. Is that what all this has been about, you think you've been bad? By whose standards?"

Did she dare say his name after all this time? Had any of the girls he'd taken over the years had an opportunity to surrender his name before they died? Jenna doubted it. If this was her only chance, would she take it or let it float past? She hoped to God and all the pretty angels her tongue didn't turn black and fall out. "S-Sire."

Eyes sharp, Sarah cupped Jenna's face in her hands. "He's the reason for all this? Not eating, scaring the shit out of all of us, refusing to sleep in bed or on the couch? Sire is the man who did this to you?"

The biggest secret of her life was in the open. *He* wasn't a secret anymore. Surely, he lost some of his power through exposure. If people knew about him, he had no control over her. Maybe the link was broken.

Maybe she was free.

Jenna nodded slowly, trapped in Sarah's keen gaze. Cat was out of the bag now—she'd like to see Sire get the feral bastard back in.

"Okay. Okay, that's something to work on. There are new rules in this house, Jenna. We've got three days to set you back on the right track. It's not much time, but we can swing it. You with me?"

Another nod, a little more eager this time.

"No, we use words from here. You have a voice, Jenna. For God's sake, let it be heard. We need to get weight back on you, pronto. You'll eat what I put in front of you. The floor's off-limits for sleeping. I don't care what this asshole Sire drummed into your head; people sleep in beds or on couches. No more hiding, Jenna. You've been hidden away for too long."

Jeez, her chest was tight. Jenna swallowed. "Yes."

“We’ll fight for you, Jenna, if you fight for yourself. I promise you that. I have to go make some phone calls. Eat, sweetheart. We’re coming out of the gate swinging.” Smiling tightly, Sarah dashed off.

Jenna was under the impression Sarah had come out, swung, and scored a direct hit. The discussion left her muddled, a bit disorientated as she replayed the conversation back.

One thing was for sure—if Sire hadn’t been hunting her down already, he sure as hell would be now. She’d just declared open season on herself, and Sire was nothing if not dedicated to the hunt.

Sick at the thought of facing him again, Jenna pulled the duvet over her head. Her memories were still barricaded away, held hostage to protect them from the poison he exuded. Because that’s what he was, in essence. A toxic viper in a classically handsome face. Beautiful, lethal, and dead inside.

Perfectly styled mahogany hair cut artistically short with just a fraction more length on the top. Smooth, flawless skin, lightly tanned—by machine, not sunlight. Somehow that fashionable tan highlighted her blood more effectively when it splattered over him.

His eyes...she shuddered. The easiest part of keeping her head down was avoiding meeting the void of his soul. Blue as a summer sky, harder than flint, and completely vacant of anything resembling humanity.

Eyes that smiled when her body went rigid with agony. Darkened to black when his body jerked to a finish inside his victim, his hands around a fragile throat while she danced in the throes of death.

God, what had she done? He wouldn’t let this go. She could run fast and far, and still never outrun him. She held a guillotine over the heads of people she cared for, loved, because Sire would have no qualms about killing them to get to her. To make a point.

She wished Connor was there. He’d know how to reassure her, calm the rising flood water of anxiety working its way into sheer panic. She brought his voice to mind, the cadence and tone. Imagined he was behind her under the covers, his arm secure around her waist, his lips at her ear.

Curled up beneath the duvet, her imaginary Connor guarding her from the demon coming to end her existence, Jenna fell asleep for the first time in days.

Sire slammed the phone down and felt little satisfaction as the plastic shell exploded beneath the force. He needed bigger things to smash, more malleable forms to pulverize into bloody mush. Bones to twist and break, blood to paint on the walls.

Twenty-Two's tally was growing rapidly, big black marks slashed through her name in his book of records. From a blank sheet of misdemeanors to a whole fucking page of sins, she would have to pay for each and every one tainting her record, shattering his faith in her.

She'd run. She'd evaded his search parties for nearly three weeks. Now she'd signed her death warrant in her own blood, daring to speak—major strike one—and having the audacity to give his name to the police—major strike two.

Sire didn't offer second chances. Minor infractions were punished by violent means, often pushing his temper past breaking point. Major infractions were an automatic trip to the woods with the replacement in tow to witness the dispatch of his property. Luckily, most numbers fucked up royally toward the end of their term when their usefulness already waned.

Twenty-Two's time was running into overtime. Not for much longer.

CHAPTER NINE

By the time Thursday night rolled around, Connor was battered, bruised, a little drunk, and back on an even keel. He'd been a young, fit teenager the last time he'd settled on the back of a bucking bull, full of piss and vinegar, but with an aptitude for the sport.

Several years down the line—definitely not as young, not quite as fit, and with considerably less piss and vinegar—the thrill of hurtling through the air on the back of a two-thousand-pound bull hadn't waned in the slightest.

Of course, the landings were enough to rattle his teeth, and he'd taken a hoof or two in places he wished he hadn't, but for the most part he remained unscathed.

Christ knew he hadn't laughed so much or as hard for far too long.

Jenna remained a constant thought in his head.

He wondered if Sarah had persuaded her to eat while he and Cain enjoyed barbequed beef. Worried over whether she would have a nightmare and look for him as he drank himself into a drunken, stumbling stupor and almost drowned himself in the hot tub.

She'd woven herself into every fiber of his being.

"Ready to go home tomorrow?" Cain leaned back in the hot tub, beer in hand, and gave Connor a thorough once-over with assessing gray eyes a shade lighter than his own. "Gotta admit, you don't look ready to hang yourself anymore."

"I needed this," Connor admitted, settling deeper into the bubbling water. Muscles ached in ways he hadn't felt in forever. "Maybe I was closer to breaking point than I thought."

"No *maybe* about it, Con. You were done."

Yeah. Yeah, he'd been done. He hadn't wanted to acknowledge he'd pushed himself well past his limits. What man did? Pride came from the knowledge he was able to support himself, his mate, a family. It was a primal response.

"I failed her, Cain. We took some small steps forward, all was good. Made a huge leap and sent her spinning back. Left her spinning, couldn't find a way to help her, get through to her." He chugged half the beer, sighed. "We'll both have a rude awakening when I get home."

Cain lifted an eyebrow. "Going to let the Dominant out for a play?"

Connor choked on a mouthful of beer. What the hell? "How the fuck do you know that?"

His brother shrugged nonchalantly, as unaffected by the knowledge as he was about anything else that might rock the waters of his world. "I spend my life in a bar, bro. I hear everything, see everything, and have my finger on the town pulse. Rumors started around the time that bitch slunk her skank ass back to wherever you found her; I canned most of them. None of the Creek's business how you get your rocks off. Caleb was harder to convince."

Now his jaw dropped. Jesus, he'd thought...everyone knew? All the effort he went through to conceal that side of himself, bottling up an innate part of himself, and the damn town *knew*? "You went up against Cal?"

"Head to head." Cain snorted and drank. "We have a pious asshole for a brother, you know that right? Gave me the third degree on my own sexual exploits, wanted to know if I'd taken the same track as you. I told him what you needed was nothing to do with either of us, and the fact I'm basically a male slut shouldn't bother him. He sure can turn a dark shade of red when he's pissed."

"Why didn't you tell me you'd gone a round with him?"

"Wasn't worth mentioning. I shut him down, told him to keep his mouth shut if he didn't want personal details of his own migrating around the Creek. Besides, you're a world apart from me and Cal, Connor. Things like this, you take to heart. Fret over. Worry over them from every angle." Kicking his legs out, Cain leaned his head back against the edge of the tub. "Caleb, he doesn't give a fuck about much anymore. He's bitter, rotten at the core. Don't know if it's police work, or just general dissatisfaction with himself, but he's not the brother we grew up with. Me? I live my life how I

want, fuck who I want when I want. My theory is, I'll get what I want until I get what's coming to me."

"That's a lot of wanting," Connor murmured. He took a slow sip of beer this time, mulled over the data bomb dropped into his lap. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Seems like the night for answers."

It took a second to formulate it without coming across like a dick. They were brothers, but even brothers could take offense. "Did it change your opinion of me, when you found out what I am?"

"What, like was I prepared to kneel at your feet and kiss them?" Cain laughed uproariously and, amazingly, Connor felt his lips curve in response. "Dude, I get it. I've dabbled. The whole control thing doesn't work for me. There're facets, I know, but...it's nice for the woman to be in charge sometimes, you know? Without all that topping from the bottom shit or wondering if she's crossed a line. I'd rather be the one chained to the bed, letting her do what the fuck she wants with me, than deal with the tending afterwards. Aftercare, right?"

"Yeah," Connor confirmed absently.

"I've seen you work. Taking charge isn't an issue for you. Aftercare comes naturally to you. All the dots connect, and the shape they make is the kind of guy you are. Take your lass, for example. You want to fuck her, right?"

Images of Jenna beneath him, her slight frame cradled in his arms as he moved inside her, had Connor's cock stirring eagerly to life. He gave it a mental slap, told it to behave. "That's not happening for a long time, Cain."

"That's an affirmative on the fucking. Say she's ready, gets those legs spread and that pussy wet. Most guys, they jump right in. Fuck her good, maybe give her an orgasm if she's lucky, then poof, off they skedaddle. But you, no, you close those legs, hide that pretty pussy away, and spend the night watching movies and cuddling her on the couch. Because those instincts you have as a Dominant are telling you she ain't really ready, she's not prepared for the magnitude of what being with you entails." Cain watched him with a quirk of his lips. "When she is, you spend all the time in the fucking world getting her worked up, so worked up she can't remember her own goddamn name, before you claim that pussy. One orgasm isn't a lucky hit on the G-spot. Sheer skill gives her three minimum—we're blessed in the cock department, Con, you can't deny that."

Connor just slapped his hand over his eyes in exasperation and gave up any hope of controlling his cock. Cain had a way with words, the rhythm and imagery rolling into an incredibly lifelike vision.

“That little thing’s sprawled out beneath you, still shuddering and whimpering from the trip to Orgasm City, and you’re not staggering off to the bathroom to take a piss and find your clothes. You? You’re running her a bath, carrying her like some motherfucking princess so you can tend to her. Because she *is* your motherfucking princess, bro.”

“Hate to burst your fantasy there, Cain—it’s a good one, don’t get me wrong—but I’d do that for any woman I slept with. It’s—” *Part of who I am.* Fuck, Cain was good. “It’s the nature of the Dominant to care for what’s his.”

Cain nodded sagely. “Exactly. The town is yours, Connor. People come to you sick and sorry. Shit, most of the births are overseen by you unless there’s a problem and the mother needs to be shipped off to Helena or Big Sky. You sit with the dying, hold their hands as they take their last breaths. You go to every fucking funeral the Creek has the misfortune to hold.”

“Doctor,” he reminded his brother.

“Dominant,” Cain shot right back. “You wanna know if finding out you’re a Dominant changed my opinion of you? Damn straight it did. It solidified my opinion that my brother is a fucking legend, who sets everyone around him as a priority. Above himself and his needs. Howler’s Creek doesn’t know how goddamn lucky it is to have you, Connor, and if Caleb’s assholery opinion made so much as a dent in that white knight armor of yours in the eyes of the community, I’d call the fucking lot of them on it.”

Speechless, Connor blinked. He’d never heard Cain be so vehement about anything, but the hard undertone of his voice spoke volumes. He wasn’t bullshitting, he was stating a truth he fully believed.

That, to Connor, meant everything.

“I don’t know what to say to that.”

“What is there to say? My opinion wouldn’t change if you were gay, transgender, whatever the fuck. You are who you are, and who you are helps more people than you realize. Your Jenna, for one. Think she’d still be here without you?”

“There are good doctors at the hospital, Cain.”

“Good doctors, good people, not disputing that. But none of them are *you*.” Cain tipped his beer back, scowled. “Damn it. You want another?”

“I’ll get them. I need to make a call.”

Smirking, Cain tossed the dead can over the side of the tub to be picked up in the morning. “I’m under strict instruction not to let you call a certain sexy nurse. Think she’ll spank me if I disobey?”

Connor shoved himself from the water, shivered in the cool air as it hit his wet skin, and breathed deep. Tomorrow he’d be bruised and sore, but he was ready to jump back into the fray. “Knowing Sarah, she’ll ask Zeke to smack you around. She’s got a thing for watching her husband wipe the floor with reprobates.”

“And he’s back!” Cain crowed, splashing his fist into the water and cheering. “Fuck the beer, break out the champagne!”

“Reprobate,” Connor confirmed, stepping from the tub and snagging a towel. He headed inside, wiping off the worst of the wet before stepping inside the borrowed cabin belonging to one of Cain’s many friends, and to the phone he’d stashed in his bag.

For emergencies only, he’d promised himself. Just in case Jenna needed him urgently. But it had remained quiet in the time he’d been away—which was a good thing, he reminded himself. No texts, no calls, were a *good thing*.

He sat on the bed with its pretty handmade bedspread and put the call through, waiting impatiently for Sarah to pick up. He counted seven rings before she answered and was nearly beside himself, plagued by visions of everything that could have gone wrong in his absence.

“Your brother is a dead man.”

His forehead dropped into his palm. “Jesus, Sarah, it took you forever to answer.”

“More like forty seconds, boss. Don’t be dramatic.” But her voice gentled. “My phone was in the kitchen, Connor. I wasn’t. Everything’s fine, I promise.”

“Jenna?”

“She’s...” Sarah paused, and Connor heard the phone jostle, followed by low murmuring. “Hang on a minute, Connor.”

Was she joking? In disbelief, he pulled the phone from his ear and stared at it. Hang on for what? He heard his name, rapped the phone back against his ear. “I’m here, Sarah.” Silence greeted him. “Sarah?”

“C-Connor.”

Fingers numb, he dropped the phone. It hit the floor, bounced across the room, with Connor scrambling after it. He snatched it up as his heart twisted into a savage knot of hope in his chest. “Jenna? Baby?”

He heard weeping, shook his head desperately. “Baby, don’t cry. Don’t cry. I...shit, I’m coming, baby. I’m coming home, Jenna, right now.”

Already calculating how long it would take to get Cain’s ass out of the hot tub and into clothing, plus the hour’s journey back to the Creek, Connor lunged for his clothes and fought his way into them as Jenna’s soft breathing hitched down the line. “I love you, Jenna. I should’ve told you before. I thought I missed my chance. I love you, baby. I’m coming home.”

“Maybe you should tell her that to her face, Connor.” Sarah’s voice replaced his woman’s quiet weeping. “And you’re not coming home until tomorrow. I know you’ve been drinking,” she interrupted sharply, “and if you have, so has Cain. Getting arrested for a DUI is the last thing we have time for.”

Fuck. Connor kicked at the bed, cursed as his toes caught the post. The beers he’d drank no longer gave him a sense of pleasure but sickened him. “I can...throw up,” he said, seriously considering the idea of purging if it got him back to Jenna sooner.

“Vomiting won’t reduce your blood alcohol levels, Connor. It isn’t worth wrapping Cain’s truck around a tree or Caleb coming down on your head if he pulls you over.” Right as ever, it still rankled. “Jenna is doing well, Connor. She’s eaten a little, she’s sleeping on the couch. Talking is hit and miss, but she’s trying her best.”

He eased back down to the bed as it dawned on him that Jenna improved once he’d left her alone. Was it his presence sending her into turmoil? How much improvement could she achieve if he didn’t go home? “It’s me, isn’t it? I’m the one fucking her up.”

“What? Hell, Connor, that’s not it at all. She thought Sire would come for her, punish her for speaking. She regressed because she was afraid.”

The cold wash of fury wiped away every vestige of self-pity. “Who the fuck is Sire?”

Her voice lowered. “Sire would be the very nasty, very sadistic fucker who kidnapped and tortured her. She hasn’t told me many details but reading between the lines...we thought she’d been through hell, Connor. We underestimated it. Considerably.”

“Has she given you a description?” Was that his voice? It had the power to dissect steel. “Anything we can use to catch the motherfucker?”

“You’ve been with Cain for too long,” she sighed. “No. Just Sire. Before you ask, I informed Caleb. There’s not much he can do with it, but he’s running a search anyway. It’ll start coming together from here, Connor. Once Jenna feels safe again, she’ll remember more details, pertinent details, the police can use.”

“I should be there.”

“You’re where you need to be. You sound stronger, Connor. There’s no hollow ring of despair in your voice. Cain did a good job. Not that it’s going to save him from an ass-kicking, but I’ll give him kudos for pulling you back from the brink of self-destruction.”

“Kudos to you both,” he murmured. “I’ll be home in the morning, Sarah. I’m not waiting until tomorrow night. Whatever plans Cain’s made will have to be cancelled.”

Sarah harrumphed. “I guess I can’t argue after watching Jenna’s face light up for the first time in days hearing your voice. Be prepared for tears, Connor. She’s a little emotional at the minute and she’s missed you.”

Damn it, his throat tightened. “Is she there?”

“She is. Want me to put her on?”

“Please.” He cleared his throat, loosened the constriction as the line went quiet. “Jenna, can you hear me, beautiful?”

A whisper of sound. “Yes.”

Connor squeezed his eyes shut. She was beautiful, down to the soul. So innocent even after everything conspired against her. Willing to trust despite being shattered. “I’ll be there when you wake up in the morning, baby. One more night and I’ll be home, okay?”

“O-Okay.” A whimper trembled down the line. “I-I’m sorry, C-Connor.”

“No, Jenna. There’s nothing to apologize for. There’s *nothing* you take blame for, do you understand me?” Christ, he wanted to be there, fold her into his arms and just *hold* her until the dark cloud over their heads disappeared. “I miss you so fucking much, baby. One more sleep. Just one more sleep, baby.”

“One more sleep,” she repeated slowly, carefully. “I miss you, Daddy.”

Well, hell. Where did that come from? He’d never had urges to dabble in the Daddy Dom scene, had always admired those he’d watched and the

littles they cared for. Was that what she needed from him, or did she just see him as a Daddy figure?

A protector, someone who cared for her, loved her, offered strong arms and comfort.

It didn't matter. Daddy Dom or Daddy figure, he was hers.

"Did she just say what I think she said?" Sarah demanded.

He could deny it. The option, the lie, was right there on his tongue. But Cain's words remained at the forefront of his mind and Connor decided in that moment denying who and what he was, was an insult. He wasn't going to insult himself anymore, hide away an innate part of himself, for other people.

He sure as hell wasn't going to deny Jenna what she wanted.

He was prepared to give her the world if she asked for it.

"Is that a problem for you?" He wasn't abrupt, didn't snap the question, but he made damn sure it was direct.

"Not for me," she answered cheerfully. "I think it's kind of cute, actually. Judging from the happy glaze in her eyes, Jenna's thrilled by the concept. Are you happy being her Daddy?"

Connor glanced sidelong at the phone. Sarah was a chilled-out person at the best of times, but surely this should be freaking her out at least a little. "Never gave it thought before, but I'm happy if she is."

"You sound disappointed, Con. Were you waiting for me to get my *you're a sinner* panties on and give you a lecture on the sins of BDSM?"

"Now that you mention it..."

She laughed, long and hard. "I'm a big girl, Connor, and I read. A lot. Romance, of all genres, happens to be the sole occupant of my Kindle. Daddy Doms included. You're both adults, and while Jenna might be... stunted in how to be an adult, she knows her own mind. That doesn't mean to say I won't cut your dick off with a stone saw if you upset her."

Connor winced and cupped a hand over his crown jewels through the towel. Most women would say it threateningly; Sarah would probably come to work one morning with Zeke's stone saw already revving. "I'd offer to do it myself if I fucked up that badly with her, Sarah. She's...she's..."

"Okay, big guy, I get what you're not saying. But I've got my eye on you," she warned. "Look, I've got to go. Jenna's dead on her feet and she's not going to go to bed if you're still on the phone. Don't give me puppy eyes," she said firmly, away from the phone, and Connor smiled. "Bed,

Jenna. Connor will be here tomorrow.” She came back and sighed. “I’ll see you first thing, boss. Safe travels.”

When the line went dead, Connor stretched out on the mattress and grinned up at the ceiling. Lighter than he’d felt in months, he took a deep breath and blew it out.

This turned out to be one hell of a trip.

She couldn’t sleep.

She twisted and turned, tossed and kicked at the covers until Sarah slipped across the room silently and rearranged them. A quick stroke of a small hand over her head, then the nurse retreated back to her own bed in the corner, Connor’s huge reclining armchair.

Sarah had become a...friend.

Jenna hesitated to use the word because, well, she couldn’t remember ever having one and she didn’t really know what having one entailed. She liked the notion of being friends with Sarah. The woman was calm, even when she used bad language, and had firm hands that didn’t hurt if she pushed or pulled Jenna into doing something she didn’t really feel like doing.

The day after Connor left, when Jenna could barely lift her head, Sarah had sat with her on the couch for hours, Jenna’s head in the woman’s lap as she gently combed through her shaggy locks with her fingers and watched TV. She’d talked to her, explained about post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, and told her how she was never alone, even if she believed she was.

Not long after, Sarah had excused herself for a phone call, and minutes later a man she’d introduced as her husband, Zeke, stood awkwardly in the kitchen with a plush toy in his hand.

It shamed Jenna to think she’d taken one look at the massive man in his checked shirt and worn jeans, and urinated before running into the living room, tripping over the coffee table and hitting the floor hard. She’d crawled the last few feet into the corner and rocked herself with her thumb in her mouth, her leg bruised and bleeding, and her palms scuffed with carpet burns.

Sarah had been white when she came in a few minutes later, full of apologies, and began the process of tending to Jenna’s wounds. She’d gotten angry with her when, after Sarah rushed to the exam room for

supplies, Jenna gave in to the overpowering need to fix the mess she'd made.

The angry faery had not been pleased to find her charge mopping up urine and scrubbing the kitchen floor like a whirling dervish, as she called it.

Now Jenna had a long scrape and wicked bruise on her left shin—not a prize-winning mark by her standards, Sire often inflicted worse with his eyes shut—and her hands were sore. Again, she'd had worse from scrubbing her hands bloody cleaning up blood, from the chemical burns of bleach.

Sarah had been tight-lipped as she tucked Jenna into her nest on the couch but had presented her with the amazingly soft elephant with velvet fur the color of Connor's eyes. She'd said how he was hers to keep, a gift from friends, and how no one could take him away from her.

Jenna hugged him close now. His fur was warm and comforting against her cheek and holding him so the empty space inside her wasn't quite as big quietened her anxiety.

But the darkness seemed huge and shadows from outside drifted over the closed curtains. The wind was picking up and memories of it screaming through the gaps of her shed assailed her. She'd spent many a winter's night huddling for warmth as icy winds cut through the planks and into her bones. More than once she'd woken with snow flurries and icicles on her numb body.

She supposed it was a miracle she hadn't suffered any permanent damage from frostbite or hypothermia. Sire probably would have just sliced off the affected areas anyway and slapped her around before she got back to work.

When she got the flu, he'd flogged her through ten days of hell. Sipped hot tea laced with whiskey she'd made for him and forced her body to scrub and clean and polish while she died an inch at a time.

Sarah slipped out of her chair, disappeared down the hall. Uneasy at the sudden isolation, Jenna clutched her nameless plushie and bolted upright. If she'd had long ears, they'd have been pricked and at full alert for danger.

She jumped and cried out when the shadows moved, then dropped her face into the plushie when Sarah sighed and rubbed her back firmly. She looked like an idiot, every damn time. Felt worse than one when Sarah hushed her sympathetically.

Warm fingers brushed her hair away from her ears and the familiar buds popped into place. Music was already playing, the magic voice crooning about muddy waters, and Sarah's capable hands laid Jenna back into her safe place.

The music box clutched in her hand, Jenna snuggled into the duvet Sarah pulled around her. Lips brushed over her damp forehead, fingers touched her cheek, and the music carried her away.

She didn't know what time it was when she woke. The music still hummed away in her ears, but she could smell bacon frying which meant Sarah was already up, as usual. The woman was a machine, often up at the crack of dawn.

Jenna knew because she'd woken one morning at the same time. Her friend could move stealthier than the shadows themselves, her tiny feet making no sound as she went from one room to another.

Sarah said it was something she'd learned after having her twin boys. Necessity when they'd been such light sleepers. Jenna just thought it was the brilliance of the faery in her.

The curtains were still closed, and the sunlight behind was muted. Already she could tell it wasn't going to be a sunny day—there was a cast over the room she thought suggested clouds, if not rain. A gloomy day then.

Her nose twitched and she breathed deep, her eyes tracking around the room for the source of the scent burned into her soul. Excitement and trepidation filled her as one entity.

Connor was home.

Leaning forward in the armchair, his elbows braced on his jeans-clad knees, his bearded chin rested on his linked hands. Watching her with shadowed eyes she couldn't see, but she felt the assessing weight of his gaze on her.

"Daddy," she whispered before she could stop the word.

Connor sat up straight, pushed to his feet and stalked to the couch. With one hand he plucked the buds from her ears, with the other he cupped the back of her neck. His mouth covered hers without warning, fierce and demanding. One long, beautiful melding of lips that ended long before she was ready and left her following his lips when he drew away.

He lifted her easily, sat and settled her on his lap, tucking the covers around her shoulders as she curled into him. The last dregs of sleep were

clearing when he picked up the plushie and dangled him in front of her. “And who might this be?”

Shyly, she reached out and took him. “Sarah said he was mine. He doesn’t have a name yet.”

“Can’t think of one?”

“He doesn’t deserve one,” she said without thinking.

Connor stiffened, then ran his hand down her back. “Why doesn’t he deserve one, baby? What’s he done?”

“Only people deserve names. Everything else is a number.”

“Everything deserves a name, baby. Were you a number before you had a name?”

“Twenty-Two,” she murmured and rested her head against his shoulder, her face pressed into the curve of his neck. “I’m Twenty-Two.”

“No, baby, you have a name. What’s your name?”

Every discussion she’d had with Sarah over the last few days came back to her. It was bad to think of herself as nothing. She was not nothing, she was someone special. She was a person and a person was loved, respected, and cherished. She breathed in his scent and hummed. “Jenna.”

“That’s right, and who is Jenna to me?” he asked tenderly.

“A person?”

“Jenna is beautiful,” he corrected and tapped a finger on her nose. “She is sweet and brave. Sometimes she’s sad, and sometimes she smiles so brightly she makes the sun seem weak. Jenna is strong, and the world turns for one man because she’s in it. Because she’s *it*.”

She peered up into his eyes, blinked. His face was serious, his eyes dark and stirring with emotions she didn’t have names for. “Me, Jenna?”

Connor nodded soberly, his lips twitching. “You, Jenna. My Jenna.”

She snuggled closer to him, almost crawling inside him with the need to be near him. *His Jenna* sounded like a promise. Promises were forever, so Sarah said. Breaking a promise brought bad luck, so people didn’t make them lightly.

“Breakfast time,” Sarah announced cheerfully. She smiled at them, placed the ever-present tray on the coffee table. “That has to be the longest conversation I’ve heard out of you, young lady. You were holding back on me.” She winked and settled into the vacant armchair with a cup of coffee and a slice of toast.

“We still haven’t solved the problem,” Connor commented as he leaned forward and grabbed the glass of juice off the tray. He lifted it to her lips and, besotted with him, Jenna drank slowly. “Good girl.”

“Problem?” Sarah asked curiously.

“A certain young elephant doesn’t have a name. I think he needs one before breakfast is over.” Setting the glass on the table, he perused the plates and brought a piece of crispy bacon to Jenna’s mouth. “Don’t get grease on him, baby. He’s too handsome to spoil.”

Obediently, she opened her mouth and bit into the bacon, chewing slowly under Connor’s approving look. She remembered the eating rules and was abiding by them as best she could.

“We had this conversation, but it didn’t end well,” Sarah murmured, sipping her coffee. “Bad elephants don’t get a name, apparently.”

“Hmmm. Well fortunately, this little elephant is a good elephant,” he stated in a tone brooking no argument. “He’s trusting someone special to give him a name he deserves.”

Finishing the last bite of bacon, Jenna looked into the plushie’s black eyes, imagined her own staring back at her. Having no name left scars no one could see. Wasn’t it easy to throw away something without that basic connection? Anything that was nothing...

She’d never named anything before, what if she did it wrong? Connor just shook his head and kissed her temple when she asked him and told her there was no wrong name if she believed it was the right one.

“How did you know I was Jenna?”

She didn’t understand the look shared between Connor and Sarah. There was a whole discussion flying from one to the other, indecipherable apparently, if you weren’t in it. But she waited patiently until Connor cleared his throat. “You got this...spark in your eyes, baby. Everything else about you was sad and pained, you were hurting, and when I said Jenna, you just...breathed.”

Jenna mulled that over, tried to see it in her head. She couldn’t drag the memory to the surface; it was mired among so many others and they were all stained with panic and pain. The plushie tilted in her hands and she studied him intently, focused on him with the intensity of a child figuring out a complex puzzle.

“Moose.”

Connor choked, coughed. “Well, it’s different. Certainly different...” He stroked a hand over Moose, then chucked her under the chin with a finger. “I need to talk to Sarah in the kitchen, baby. You going to be a good girl and finish your breakfast?”

She squirmed in silent protest. She didn’t want to be apart again, what if he left and she didn’t get to say goodbye? Good girls don’t pout. She nodded and pouted anyway.

Connor eased her onto the couch and slipped from beneath her. His lips were warm against her temple as he whispered, “Daddy’s not going anywhere, baby. I promise.”

A little more secure in herself, clutching that promise as tightly as Moose to her chest, Jenna watched Connor and Sarah leave the room, and picked at the food on the tray.

She wasn’t alone anymore.

CHAPTER TEN

Connor leaned against the counter next to the sink and crossed his arms over his chest. “Go ahead and say what you need to, Sarah.”

She sipped her coffee with all the innocence of a teenaged boy with porn DVDs poorly concealed beneath his shirt. Looking tired and unkempt, there was still no disguising her raw beauty. Flaunting it might not be her style, but Zeke was a seriously lucky guy. “Are you sure?”

He rolled his eyes, one ear zoned toward the living room. “Absolutely.”

With a wicked grin, she squealed girlishly. “You are so *cute* when you’re Daddy. Like, oh my God, adorable. I didn’t know you had that in you, boss. I’m impressed. And the way Jenna responded? We’ve talked, but she’s been hit and miss with answering. You actually *conversed* with her.”

“You did good, Sarah. Using your witchy powers for good instead of evil.”

“No magic necessary. I just told her the truth.”

He cocked his head. “You what?”

“Both of you were ignoring what was in front of you. You were too stubborn to admit you’d reached the end of your tether. Fighting so hard to hold everything together that you let yourself fall apart.” Sarah shrugged. “Jenna was stripped of her humanity by sheer terror. Hit rock bottom, didn’t know where to turn, who to trust, when she sank deeper into the abyss. All I did was remind her who you are and what she faced without you at her back.”

“You told her,” he said quietly, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“I warned her we’d lose her if she didn’t buck her ideas up. I had to take the risk, Connor. Everyone had their goddamn head in the sand.”

Jesus, how fucking close had they come to shutting Jenna down completely, he wondered. One misstep, the wrong word, a simple miscalculation, and he might not have gotten her back.

Connor wrestled his temper under control. Without Sarah's bluntness, he could very well have returned to a haunted, lifeless shell. It galled, especially when he should have had the balls to take that gamble himself, but perhaps he should be grateful Sarah had bitten the bullet instead. No one had a way with people she did. "Thank you."

Watching him through narrowed eyes, she set her mug aside. "Thank you? Not ripping me a new one for taking a chance with your baby girl, Connor?"

"How can I when you were the only one strong enough to take it?"

She flushed, blossoming with pale pink color. "Well."

Connor couldn't express his gratitude, there wasn't words for it, but he'd be damned if Sarah felt unappreciated after the miracle she'd worked. The rumble of vehicles outside drew his attention, set his hackles rising as they stopped outside, engines idling a few moments before they cut off.

Turning, he pried open one slat on the kitchen blinds, and cursed under his breath. "Sarah, take Jenna upstairs. Don't panic, don't upset her, but get her upstairs and keep her quiet."

"What is it? Who's here?"

"Now, Sarah. Ask questions later."

He didn't need to turn his head to verify she'd obeyed. The tone of his voice conveyed the urgency he tamped down. With a steel spine and hard eyes, he watched Caleb step from his official police vehicle, straightening his leather jacket, adjusting his weapon on his belt, setting his hat firmly on his head. The picture of a small-town sheriff on duty.

It was the big black SUV parked at the curb worrying Connor most. If Caleb's tan-colored jeep said *lawman*, the hulking black beast screamed *government lawman*.

"Jesus Christ, he brought the feds in," Connor muttered, hands fisting on the counter. "Why the fuck is he such a prick?"

A lone man disembarked from the SUV, suit pristine without any adjustment from the wearer. Standard dark glasses, concealed weapon—not so concealed to Connor's eye, and the guy checked his phone before he slammed the door closed, striding across the lawn to join Caleb.

"Daddy?"

Connor spun, finding Jenna stood in the doorway, clinging to Moose with one arm and holding the jamb with her free hand, knuckles white. Behind her, Sarah was tugging at the wide-eyed woman, her own eyes just as wide. Hers, though, carried far more awareness of the situation.

“Go upstairs with Sarah, baby. Everything’s fine.”

Her hand migrated to her mouth, thumb slipping between her lips to suck.

God bless a babygirl.

He crossed to her, took her face in his hands and kissed her forehead, the tip of her nose. She was trembling, and it gutted him he didn’t have time to soothe her. Not without exposing her to Caleb and his new best friend.

“Promise?” she mumbled around her thumb.

“Promise,” he agreed, hoping to high hell he could keep it. He urged her to go with Sarah, counting down seconds in his head. Ready for the knock on the door, he told her, “Do as Sarah tells you, baby. She’s got you.”

His shoulders dropped with relief as she let Sarah usher her upstairs and out of sight. He heard the click of his bedroom door closing an instant before the expected hammer of a fist on wood drove a spike down his spine.

Showtime.

Making them wait gave him satisfaction. He counted two minutes before he stomped to the door and yanked it open. He welcomed them with a scowl, and maybe just the barest hint of a snarl. “Guess I should be thankful you knocked.”

Caleb’s jaw tensed. “Let’s not get on the wrong foot straight out of the gate, Connor. This is a friendly visit, but it doesn’t have to be if you keep up with the attitude.”

“Friendly visit?” he scoffed and used his body to block the door. “Turning up unannounced with a fed in tow is friendly? Fuck me, Caleb, I’d hate to see what you do with your adversarial connections.”

“Just let us in, Connor. There’s been a development in the investigation. Not something to be discussed in the open,” Cal stated flatly. “The FBI is involved as you can see.”

Connor nodded slowly. Brother or not, sheriff or not, he wouldn’t allow an armed stranger to waltz into his home on faith. “Identification. Both of you,” he added, glaring at Caleb. “Jenna’s off-limits. Check your guns at the door.”

“Doctor O’Malley, I value your concerns.” For the first time, the fed spoke. He held out a tanned hand, a silver watch around his wide wrist, and offered his I.D. without hesitation. “My name is Cyrus Hadley, I’m the Special Agent in charge of the investigation involving Jenna. I understand there’s some family conflict between yourself and Sheriff O’Malley. I’d like to reassure you the sheriff is here as a goodwill gesture, and he won’t be interfering with our meeting today.”

Didn’t like that one bit, Connor decided with a glance at his brother. Good. Caleb needed a slap down off his high horse now and then. He took the identification, studied it carefully. Determining it looked correct, he handed it back to Hadley. “Thanks. Doesn’t change my mind about Jenna, but thanks.”

Straight white teeth flashed in a smile while keen blue eyes gave Connor a thorough once-over. Hadley’s dark hair was short, almost militarily, with not a strand out of place. Overall, a good-looking man with impressive bone structure and from what Connor read from his body language, confident in his job.

“Show the doctor your badge, Sheriff. He has a right to demand identification.” Hadley spoke quietly, eyes still on Connor. “Is Jenna on the premises?”

Connor’s gaze hardened. “She is. She won’t be present for whatever conversation you have in mind, Agent Hadley. You’re bigger than me, Agent, fitter and stronger, no doubt, under that suit. But you try anything, I’ll haul you out of here and kick your ass down the drive back to that gas-guzzler parked down by the curb. Understand me?”

“Sweet Mother of Christ, you can’t threaten an FBI agent, Connor.” Caleb closed his eyes and groaned.

“Can and am. If he’s not a complete asshole, he’ll understand.”

Hadley held his hand up to silence the spluttering response from Cal. “Not once in my career have I had sole charge of a surviving victim from a case as...disturbing as this, Doctor. Can’t say I’ve ever wanted to; it’s a huge responsibility and quite honestly, I prefer the dead. Caring for victims takes a depth of character I don’t possess; I’m a hunter at heart. But I would like to think I would be as emphatic in my defense of my charge as you. I’ll offer my word I won’t demand anything of Jenna unless absolutely necessary. Meeting her today would be helpful; I’m going to be in town a

while and she's a vital part of my investigation. It's inevitable she's going to make my acquaintance at some point."

The stand-off continued for several long seconds while Connor examined his conclusions about the agent. Running his tongue over his teeth, he stepped back and allowed the suit to walk into the house, then raised his eyebrow at Caleb when his brother tried to follow. "I asked for identification, *sheriff*."

If looks could kill, Agent Hadley would have arrested Caleb for fratricide on the spot. Cain was right, Connor thought as he held his ground; their brother was not the man they'd grown up with. Connor wasn't sure that man still existed inside the seething person in front of him.

Caleb snapped his jacket back, exposing the badge on his belt, and shoved past Connor into the house, acting every inch the spoiled child embarrassed by his sibling. Maybe it was cute in a five-year-old, but in a man approaching forty, it was rude.

As he led them through to the living room, Connor winced, recalling the state of the place. Maybe they'd wait while he picked up...he stepped into the room and mentally kissed Sarah. The duvet and pillows were folded neatly and stacked on the floor at the far end of the couch. The breakfast tray—surprisingly nearly empty of food—was tidy, the dishes stacked and waiting to go into the kitchen.

He waved a hand toward the couch. "Have a seat."

Connor took his recliner so he could an eye on both men. Caleb's eyes searched the room as though Jenna might be stashed somewhere, while Hadley's were direct on Connor's.

"How much has the sheriff told you about the investigation this far, Doctor?" he asked without niceties or preamble, a tactic Connor appreciated.

"Nothing. I don't know if he's made any headway in identifying Jenna's real identity, whether any leads on this Sire have been found. I've been kept in the dark, but to be honest, my sole focus has been on Jenna. I'm not a detective, I'm a doctor."

Hadley's eyes closed for a brief moment. When they opened again, the blue glittered with simmering anger. Respect for the agent came quickly; Connor wasn't sure he'd be capable of containing his emotions quite as efficiently. "The FBI created a task force eighteen years ago. It was

assembled after the discovery of four female bodies in a twenty-mile radius of each other, within a short time span.”

“Eighteen years? That fucker had Jenna in his grasp since she was a child?”

“We don’t believe so. All four victims were only dead a day or so before they were found. There was no correlating pattern to indicate the killer had a physical preference in his victims, but his method of murdering them alerted the authorities to his presence. He had a signature, and the victims’ wounds seemed to be an integrated part of the pattern.” Hadley took a deep breath. “Over the last eighteen years, no less than fifty-three bodies have been discovered over the length and breadth of the country. Each one with similar physical abuse and a brand over the left breast.”

“Whore,” Connor murmured, thinking of the brand on Jenna’s breast.

“Yes. I’ve seen the photo of Jenna’s brand, and our experts are confident the same implement was used on all the victims. Including Jenna.”

Connor gripped the arms of the recliner. “How does he kill them?”

“I’m not sure I should—”

“I’m a medical professional, Agent. I’ve seen dead bodies, autopsied several. Graphic details aren’t going to phase me.”

“He beats, rapes and strangles them. Around a dozen over the years were sodomized. They appear to have been more rigorously beaten than the other victims.”

“They did something to piss him off.”

“I believe so. We’ve been able to identify forty-six of the fifty-three women from missing person’s reports. The other seven remain Jane Does. The fifty-third body was the day after Jenna came into your care, Doctor. Twenty minutes outside of Big Sky, in a farmer’s field. She wore the brand but hadn’t been raped or sodomized. He eradicated her face.”

“You’re sure she’s one of his?”

“Yes.”

Connor blew out a long breath. “The day after Jenna got here. Sire has a temper, and the means to hold more than one girl at a time. What else do you know about him?”

“Very little at this point. The psychologists have several theories, mostly conflicting but with a few points they’ve all confirmed unanimously. A sadist who takes pleasure in the torture of his victims. Kills them when they hold no more purpose. Jenna is the first real lead we’ve had in nearly two

decades. Her revelation of the name Sire hasn't helped yet, but it has opened up a few more avenues of investigation."

"Eighteen years and that's it? Fifty-three women dead and buried, and all you have is his alias?" Connor snorted and shook his head. "You're what, early forties? Younger, maybe. Thirty-five? You haven't been on this case from the start."

"Thirty-seven, and no. My mentor in the Bureau was lead investigator from day one. He retired last year and recommended I take over as lead agent. I'm well-versed in the details, Doctor O'Malley, trust me."

"Might as well call me Connor. Looks like you're here to stay for the foreseeable future."

"I'm basing myself in the Creek as of this week, yes. If more bodies turn up, I'll attend the scene, but consider me one of your community from here." Hadley leaned forward, hands hanging between his thighs. "My belief is Jenna is an anomaly for this perp, Connor. The only surviving victim of a serial killer with two decades of experience under his belt. That girl should consider herself one of the luckiest individuals to ever walk God's green earth. It also means she has a tag on her head."

Apparently, there was a greater emotion in the field of fear, one proficient enough to knock terror out of the park. "Oh fuck," he breathed. "Oh, fuck me. How the hell would he even find her? There's no paper trail, no hospital records, she hasn't even got her real name for Christ's sake."

"She was on foot, Connor." Caleb cleared his throat as Hadley gave him an arch look but continued. "Wherever she's come from, she's come barefoot and hardly dressed for the weather. Unless she struck a huge pot of fucking gold, she covered maybe, what, twenty miles if you want to be over-generous in a guess. That gives this Sire a small area to search, and gossip travels fast. Her arrival at the bar, the altercation, it makes for entertaining news. This guy isn't an idiot, far from it. If he doesn't already know where she is, he's off his game."

Connor resisted the urge to charge upstairs and make double damn sure his girl was exactly where she was supposed to be. He'd wondered whether the asshole would be looking for her, hadn't taken all the details into account. His focus was Jenna, and he'd left her wide open from several angles.

No longer.

"Jenna's been in my care for almost a month."

“She has.”

“Why hasn’t he come for her then, if he knows where she is? The house isn’t exactly a fort, and there’s me protecting her. Easy enough to walk in under the pretense of being a new patient or a tourist with an ailment, dispatch me, and take her.”

Hadley sighed. “Would you like my take on it?”

“If it’s going to give me answers, yeah.”

“Okay. Sire likely knew what condition Jenna was in when she ran. She was a mess, judging by the photos, your written reports and physical evidence. If I was a serial killer intent on reclaiming a lost victim, I wouldn’t want to spend time fixing something I was going to break again. I’d let someone else do the healing, then take greater satisfaction in ripping it to pieces.”

“He’s letting me put her back together so he can torture her again.”

The sympathy in Hadley’s eyes confirmed Connor’s fears. “I believe so. This is a successful man, Connor. Over eighteen years, he’s honed his craft without alerting the authorities to his identity. Left a chessboard of bodies over the country without leaving behind a stray hair, a strand of evidence to track him with. There’s a reason he hasn’t come for her yet, and my experience with both the Atlanta PD and the FBI leads me to that conclusion.”

“She needs to come into protective custody, Con. Her recovery can be completed under a fully trained FBI staff with qualifications you wouldn’t believe. Doctors and nurses with self-defense and arms training. The bastard wouldn’t get near her.” Caleb whipped his hat off belatedly, dropped it on the center section of the couch. “I know we haven’t seen eye to eye on this, over the...over Jenna. I’ve been harsh and I’ve been out of line. But this is how you give her the rest of her life, brother.”

“No. Jenna’s struggling with several things. Changing her routine, her surroundings, the people dealing with her...she has nightmares,” Connor told Hadley. “She needs stability and the people she knows. I won’t make her give that up.”

Hadley nodded. “We’ve narrowed the list of missing people resembling Jenna down to a manageable number. At present, I have someone comparing physical attributes, DNA. Once we have a match, we’ll make a concerted effort to trace her family.”

A subtle warning, Connor noted. Once they found her family, the FBI would take custody of her, pass her over to people she didn't know, couldn't remember, and they would be her guardians. They would make the choices for her, and he would have no option but to step back. "Jenna has the right to choose whether she stays here or goes with them in that eventuality."

"That will be taken into account, yes." Hadley checked his watch. "I have an appointment coming up soon. I would appreciate it if you would allow me to say hello to Jenna. Possibly ask her a couple of questions, if they won't upset her."

He rebelled against the idea instantly, his mind straining against the notion of setting Jenna firmly in the middle of the shitstorm. But he mulled it over. One girl had already died since Jenna escaped; how many more did Sire have at his disposal, or have intentions of kidnapping for his own sick ventures?

She could help. He thought she'd want to help save other girls from a fate worse than hers. Well, some might not see it that way—the victims who died at Sire's hands were gone, no memories to haunt them or pain to suffer through every damn day.

Luck was in the eye of the survivor.

"All I'm willing to do is ask her to come in here. I can't guarantee she will, and I won't force her to. She doesn't like Caleb, and she doesn't know you. Don't be surprised if you receive an adverse reaction."

"I value your cooperation, Connor."

"It's not mine you need to value." Connor pushed out of the recliner, stalked to the bottom of the stairs with dread curdling in his belly. This could go so, so wrong in an instant. He called up the stairs. "Sarah?"

A few seconds, then the bedroom door clicked open. "Connor?"

"Would you ask Jenna if she would come down here for a minute, please?"

"I...are you sure?"

He rubbed between his eyebrows. "Yeah. It's important, Sarah."

Her disapproving grunt echoed down. "I'll ask."

Connor drummed his fingers on the bannister. Part of him wanted Jenna to refuse to come down. Another part knew she would come because he'd requested it.

God, he had a headache brewing, painful enough to drop a donkey. It didn't feel like he'd been back from his quick restorative break for only a

couple hours.

“D-Daddy?”

He looked up, saw her standing at the top of the stairs, and his breath seized in his lungs. She was so damned beautiful, a little heartbreaker in the making.

Sarah had been busy—Jenna wore another of his shirts, and he wondered how much persuasion his nurse had used to get Jenna to part with the bull one. This one was checked, gold and blue, one of his dress shirts for nights when he felt like socializing. It was buttoned to the top, hung down her lean frame to her knees.

Her hair was clean, freshly brushed—Sarah again—and he couldn’t get over how much she looked like an innocent pixie. Huge green eyes peered at him over the elephant’s head as she cuddled it, her face almost buried in Moose’s soft fur.

“Hey, baby. There’s someone I’d like you to meet, if you want to. Would you come down and say hello?”

Her toes curled over the top step. “Are they scary?”

The agent would likely intimidate the hell out of her, he thought, but wisely said nothing. She needed to learn how to make her own mind up about people again, instead of relying on others to decide for her. Another step towards regaining her sense of self. “He’s not a bad man, baby.”

She scuffed her foot on the carpet. “Does he look mean?”

“Ah...no, I don’t think so.”

Jenna turned her head, nodded. He saw Sarah’s hand cup her jaw, the thumb stroke her cheekbone. A bonding moment he memorized. His girl had made a friend, and Sarah was renowned for ensuring her friendships lasted, no matter what trials they went through.

Jenna trudged down the steps, reluctance clear in the set of her body. But she took his hand when she reached him, curled her fingers into his trustingly.

“Don’t be scared, Jenna. If he asks you a question, try and answer honestly. As best as you can remember. There’s no right or wrong answers.” Connor kissed her gently, rested his forehead against hers. “I’ll be right there with you, baby. I won’t leave you alone.”

She followed him when he led her into the living room. Paused when she stopped dead in the doorway, shaking her head when she saw the two men seated on the couch. He watched her eyes dart from Caleb to Hadley,

weigh them up. Her gaze only landed on Caleb once before she edged behind Connor's back, almost peering around him at the imposing man in the suit.

He moved toward the recliner, testing the bond between them as she stood her ground for a few tense seconds, then breathed a sigh of relief when she scurried along with him, glued to his side. When he sat, she threw herself onto his lap and huddled in close, her thumb popping straight into her mouth.

Moose was tucked between them, as though she protected him as well.

Acknowledgement flashed in Hadley's eyes, followed swiftly by a sadness Connor understood well enough. A pitying sadness for a young woman stripped down to her inner child.

"Jenna, this is Special Agent Hadley with the FBI. He's been working hard trying to find out who you are and where your family is. He wants to find the man who hurt you so he can lock him away. He wants to help, baby."

Loud, nervous sucking noises emanated from her mouth.

Connor ran a hand over her back, nape to butt, in an effort to stem the tremors building under her skin. He offered Hadley a small nod, an invitation to speak.

"Jenna, it's very nice to meet you." Hadley blinked when she jerked at the sound of his voice. "I've heard a lot about you, about how brave you've been through all this."

Her head ducked away; her cheek pressed against Connor's chest as she sucked harder. Her eyes were closed, and the tiniest of frowns marred her brow.

"We don't know the full story of what happened to you before you found Connor," he continued quietly, lifting a hand to silence Caleb before he could interrupt. "It would be very helpful if you could tell me anything you remember about the time you spent with Sire."

Jenna froze, the barest whimper dropping the room into complete silence. Connor closed his eyes in despair as wetness soaked through his jeans. It didn't matter, fuck, it was only a pair of jeans, but understanding how vulnerable she was in that moment struck him viciously.

When he gathered himself enough to open them again, he saw disgust written plainly on Caleb's face, and nearly snapped. Not for the first time, he thought his brother was in a position of power he didn't deserve. He had

no empathy, no kindness in him to connect with people, women, like Jenna. Whatever had driven him to be a cop, to protect and serve, had died.

Hadley, however, was a different kettle of fish. The suit was on his feet, the empathy missing from Caleb alight inside the agent. In a low voice, he asked, "Where can I get a towel?"

Grateful, Connor gave him a nod of acceptance. The suit had his approval. He saw in Hadley what he felt in himself, and the connection made itself known. "Door under the stairs."

Hadley walked out.

"One word, Cal, and I'll smash your teeth down your throat." Connor pressed his face to Jenna's hair. "It's okay, baby. You've done nothing wrong." He winced at the wetness spreading over the front of the shirt at the apex of her thighs, knew the side beneath her thighs would be just as soaked.

Hadley came back with two big bath towels. "Need a hand?"

"No, I've got her, thanks. Stand up, baby. Need to get rid of that wet shirt." It took a lot of coaxing to get her on her feet, and he made sure her back was to the agent when he stripped off the shirt, quickly bundled her in a towel. Hadley's shocked grunt didn't go unnoticed—by Connor or Jenna.

Misery washed over her face.

With the second towel on his thigh, soaking up the urine drowning his jeans, Connor settled her back on his lap and cuddled her tight. "You understand?" he asked Hadley coolly.

The agent inclined his head. "I have a little girl at home," he replied slowly. "A *little* girl. It would seem we're not as unlike as I assumed. She's given consent?"

"Does she look like she can give consent at the moment?" he snapped, then shook his head, altered his tone. No point getting shitty with the one person in the room who had some comprehension of the dynamic of his relationship with her. "There's no sexual component, Agent. Jenna has needs traditional therapy won't help. This, for now, is how she copes with the shit she's been through."

"I can see that. He tried his damndest to ruin her, didn't he?"

Connor gritted his teeth. "Tried and failed. I don't know what you were expecting, Hadley, but you might not get the answers you're after for some time. She's not ready to go back there yet."

Jenna wriggled deeper into Connor's arms, sniffing softly. He hummed under his breath until she settled again, shivering under the warmth of the towel.

"You're very good with her. Your first?"

Connor nodded. "First and only."

Hadley smiled, changing the planes of his face into something charming and approachable. He still carried the air of authority that came with carrying a badge, and the dominance Connor recognized was lurking beneath the surface, but Connor saw the man in an alternative light. "So many firsts become the only. Would you mind if I gave this another attempt?"

"Once more," Connor said with a sigh. "She's had enough."

"Coddling her isn't helping," Caleb muttered sourly, shooting Connor a vicious look. "She's not a little girl, Connor. She's a woman who's been through a rough time. Treat her like an adult, she'll fucking behave like one."

Jenna cringed, shuddered.

Before Connor could stand and rip his asshole brother's head clean off his shoulders, Hadley intervened. Blue eyes deadly cold, frost dripping from his tongue, he responded in a stony tone. "Sheriff, your presence is no longer required here. I suggest you vacate the premises and return to your office. I'll meet you there when I'm through talking to the doctor and his patient, and we'll have a long and thorough conversation on your conduct."

Caleb snarled. "My conduct? He's all but fucking the witness in one of the biggest kidnap and murder investigations in the US, and *my* conduct is in question?"

"Leave," Hadley repeated. "Now."

Jenna whimpered and grasped Connor's shirt, Moose, with shaking hands. He started humming again, as much for her as to calm his own rage before it burned the house to ash.

Caleb snarled, opened his mouth to speak, then snatched up his hat, shoved to his feet and stormed out when Hadley set his hand on his weapon.

The slamming of the front door made Jenna jolt and keen under her breath.

"What an unpleasant individual you have for a brother," the agent said stiffly. He looked at Jenna, shook his head sympathetically. "Would you mind if I made some coffee? Give you a few minutes to settle your little."

“Go ahead. Kitchen’s through there on the left.”

Hadley walked away, loosening his tie as he went, and Connor decided maybe there was hope for a productive relationship between the law and his situation.

Special Agent Daddy, he thought. Almost as good as Doctor Daddy.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

If Connor didn't want to throw her out now, Jenna thought he must not be right in the head. Who wanted to keep someone around who repeatedly wet themselves? It was horrifying. The most degrading part was she didn't even know it was about to happen. It just...no, she just felt a spasm of panic and then, mortifyingly, her bladder released.

She hated it.

Her fear wasn't unfounded. Connor had introduced the FBI agent and her world spiraled into a pinprick. Then the agent spoke Sire's name and the pinprick blinked into nothing. The name she'd held secret for so long, the name of the master she'd obeyed for fear of the repercussions, was finally in the wind, another link of her chains gone.

Sire would kill her for the betrayal, but she'd die a free woman.

It was all she could think of now when she thought of him.

Death and Sire were synonymous.

Connor cuddled her tight, careful to keep her covered and warm, with Moose sandwiched between them once more. Long, calloused fingers massaged the base of her neck where a rope seemed to tighten around the base of her skull every time her head moved.

Mellow, leaning into him, Jenna sought the added comfort of her thumb. Connor, Moose, and her thumb were her grounding points. Connor headed that trio, the gallant warrior with sword in hand and dragons slain at his feet.

With his hair and beard, she imagined he could be a pirate as well, but much preferred him as a warrior. He'd protect his princess, no matter what the danger, and destroy anything that threatened her safety.

Pleased with the image, she relaxed fully into his body, her faith in him absolute. Mouthing her thumb, she watched the doorway through half-

lidded lashes. Connor said the agent wasn't a bad man; if he believed that, she trusted his instincts.

"My little girl likes her juice," Hadley commented as he came back into the room, two steaming mugs gripped in one hand and a glass of OJ in the other. "The sugar's good when they've had a shock. Hope you don't mind."

"She likes juice. She's a good girl." Connor's lips brushed her hair.

"I can see that." Hadley's eyes asked a question as he handed Connor the glass, then the mug when he placed them carefully on the table beside his chair. Content to abide by Connor's decision, he situated himself back on the couch and lost all trace of the agent and gained an edge not unlike Daddy's. "My little girl likes to help people. Would you like to know what she does, Jenna?"

She peeked curiously, fascinated by the change in the agent. In one respect, he reminded her eerily of Sire, the almost reptilian shedding of one personality into another. But Sire only morphed from cruel to vicious to murderous sadist; there was nothing to spread out his poison.

The man on the couch mirrored Connor's body language, easy yet protective. He was another warrior, she realized. With a bow in his hand instead of a sword, and a quiver of arrows down his back.

Two warriors joining forces for her.

Courage and valor couldn't stand strong with venom eating away the base of them. Eventually, they would corrode, tumbling into the abyss to join her in the dark, or they would evolve *into* the dark. Become it, embrace it, be the heart of it like Sire had become.

"My girl hasn't had your hardships, Jenna. There's not many who can say they have. But she—Delilah—is a good person, just like you. Her biggest wish is to help girls like you find their way in life after they survive hell. Daddy rescues them, Delilah does the hard work and puts them back on track."

Still listening, Jenna studied his face, drawn to the honest earnestness he displayed. He had a cadence to his voice, slow and deep, and she just knew he'd be calm no matter what calamity happened.

"I think you're someone who likes to help when she can. Would you help me, Jenna?"

Submissive ears pricked. She liked being useful, although she hated how Sire made her do things under duress. Pleasing people, especially

Connor and Sarah, gave her a warm feeling way down deep in her tummy. She looked at Connor, gauging his reaction.

“Do you want to help?” he asked quietly.

Jenna nodded. The adult part of her brain she sheltered behind her little facade objected, well aware of what was needed to help. Stripping her down to the bare bones of the knowledge she contained about the man who terrorized her dreams, whose scars embedded in her flesh down to the soul.

Hadley beamed at her. “Would you mind if I got my toys out, Jenna?”

Connor’s hand rubbed her thigh as Hadley reached inside his jacket pocket, pulled out a palm-sized tablet and his phone. “Came prepared for a friendly visit, Agent.”

“Hazards of the job, Doc. Fully prepared at all times, on duty or off.”

Jenna watched him press buttons with long fingers. Connor had long fingers as well, with broad palms. Magic hands that made her feel good when she was upset, soothed away pain and fear with confidence.

Sire had heavy hands. Not thick and clumsy, but he wielded them without thought. No, that wasn’t true. He took great delight in considering just how to use them to maximize his desired effect.

Particularly when he was killing people.

She shuddered.

“Could you pass me that duvet?” Connor asked the agent, tugging her firmly against him as the tremor rippled through her from head to toe. He wrapped it around her, leaving half hanging over the recliner arm, but ensuring she was snuggled tight. “You might not get it all today, Hadley.”

“Honestly, I’ll take what she can give me. Dribs and drabs are fine. This isn’t about breaking her into pieces, Connor. She’s the only real lead I’ve got to take this fucker down.”

Jenna giggled to herself. Such bad language.

“Well, that’s a pretty sound. Ready if you are, Doc.”

“Tread carefully,” Connor warned. “She struggles enough with nightmares; this could open the floodgates.”

Hadley nodded and pressed a button on his phone. He stated the date and time, their location and the people in the room. Some jibber-jabber about case numbers which Jenna didn’t pay much mind to, and he described her current condition as *exhibiting childlike regression*.

“Jenna, can you tell me where you were before you came into Connor’s care?”

Hell, she thought as the word fell from her lips, then, “Shed.”

“You were kept in a shed? Can you describe it for me?”

Connor’s body stiffened under hers, and she shook her head. They didn’t need to know about the tiny wooden hell she’d lived in like a dog.

“It’s okay, baby. No one’s going to be upset if you tell us.” Connor murmured. “It’s in the past, and you’re never going back there.”

She pulled Moose nearer, tucked her legs up. Made herself smaller so her anxiety wouldn’t show. “Dark. Cold and dark. Hot and dark.” She thought about the bitter cold in winter, the stifling heat in summer when it was so hot she couldn’t breathe. “There were bugs.”

“Was there anyone else in the shed with you, Jenna?”

“Sometimes.” She didn’t want to think of the women who’d shared that space with her. Particularly her replacements. While Twenty-One had been as resigned about Jenna’s presence there upon her arrival as Jenna had been about the introduction of her successor’s, the stench of their fear and endless weeping had nearly driven her mad. “Twenty-One was nice.”

“Twenty-One?” Hadley straightened slightly.

“She trained me. Sire killed her.” She leaned her head on Connor’s shoulder and brushed away the image of pale blue eyes, bloodshot and distended, staring blindly at her from a purple face. “He likes killing.”

Hadley’s tone gentled. “Did you...train anyone, Jenna?”

Wide eyes, she recalled. Confusion and terror rolled into one devastating expression. They hadn’t understood—neither had she, at first—and hadn’t been willing to learn. They couldn’t survive Sire’s wrath. “Two. I trained two.”

“What happened to them?”

Her throat vibrated with a horrible sound. “Killed them. Not suitable replacements. Twenty-Two was better.”

“Who is—was—Twenty-Two, sweetheart?”

The surge of panic didn’t catch her unaware this time. She sensed it rise, tried helplessly to stop her bladder from releasing. “Me. Me.”

Connor whisked her up and away in an instant. “We’ll be back.”

Leaving a trail of duvet and towels in their wake, he rushed her to the bathroom. Too late to contain the majority of her fear reaction, Connor got to work cleaning her up while she sat numbly on the toilet, trying not to cry.

“I’m sorry.”

Connor nudged her chin up. "Actions cause reactions, Jenna. This is nothing more than a physical reaction to emotional distress. I don't want you to apologize for being scared, baby; you experienced something no one can relate to. We're making you relive that, and it has consequences. This is one of them. If this is the worst, I'll happily take it."

"Daddy. Connor."

"I can be either, baby. I can be both." He brushed the hair away from her face, tilted it back to study her eyes. "Just like I see you in there, Jenna. My little girl and my Jenna the woman. Both so brave. Both trusting me."

She wondered how he could tell them apart, the child and the woman, when they both controlled her. The child was content to hide until Daddy drew her out of her shell. The woman had urges she quelled, was a maze of confusion and uncertainty.

His fingers traced beneath her eyes, down her nose. His eyes dropped to her mouth. He leaned forward, kissed her slowly, sweetly. Broke away before the fire simmering in her blood could erupt into an inferno and piled more sweetness into the moment by rubbing his nose against hers. "If it's too much, Jenna, you don't have to go back in there. I can make your excuses, ask Agent Hadley to come back tomorrow, the day after."

"No. No, I guess it's time." Time to tuck the child, the frightened little girl back into her safe place and let the woman take the stage. The woman might have more control over her bodily functions, Jenna hoped. "We should go back. Agent Hadley will be wondering where we are."

Connor's brow furrowed. His head cocked. "That's not my little girl."

Jenna sighed and scrubbed her hands over her face. "She's not who you need for this. I can't hide behind her when you need answers from me."

"I meant it, Jenna. I can stop this, right now."

"It's been a month, Connor. Sire already had my replacement when I ran away. He's always looking for the next. He can't be allowed to take any more girls away from their families, their lives."

Gray eyes narrowed slightly. "Do you remember who you are, baby? Your life before him?"

"No. I locked them away, forgot them. I couldn't stand to think of them while he did what he does best." Her breath shuddered over trembling lips. She looked down at herself. "I should get dressed."

Connor picked up her hand, brought it to his lips and kissed her fingers. "I'll get you my robe. Do you need anything else before we go back?"

She grabbed his wrist and gripped it. “Just you.”

The atmosphere in the room changed when they walked back into the living room, Jenna clinging to Connor’s hand. Hadley sat up straighter, curiosity in his eyes as he studied her. “You’ve lost your little, Connor.”

Connor snagged a blanket from behind the couch, draped it over the recliner before he sat as Jenna flushed, then pulled her onto his knee again. She leaned into him rather than curled this time, the woman using him as a crutch to brace herself on as opposed to a wall to cower behind.

“She’s not lost.” Jenna bent and picked up Moose from the floor, settled him in the chair beside her. The child might have been hidden away from the ugliness to come, but the woman found solace in the soft plushie as much as the little girl. “She just can’t help you. I can.”

“Are you okay to continue, Jenna?” Hadley watched her as though she might break apart again, and she couldn’t blame him. “I know this is a lot to ask.”

“No, I’d like to get it over with, actually.” She blew out a breath when Connor’s arm curled around her waist. “Are your...things ready?”

The agent checked his phone, picked up the tablet. “If you are, yes.”

Jenna breathed deep, prayed her heart would stop its manic beat so she could calm down enough to think, and waited until Hadley hit the button on his phone that would start her long, painful ride back to hell.

“I spent most of my time in the shed,” she began slowly. Speech still came hard after so long a time without it. Her throat was already showing signs of overuse, and her tongue felt thick and uncooperative. “Normal shed size, I guess. Not very wide but long enough for me to lie down. The boards were weathered, had gaps between them. In winter, it was cold. The wind came straight through; snow and rain as well. I had a scrap of cloth for a blanket if I’d been good. Summertime, it was awful. Hot and stifling, and the bugs were...there were a lot.”

Hadley nodded. “You mentioned before there were others?”

“Other women, yes. S-Sire,” she stuttered over his name, “always has at least one to do his bidding. Cooking, cleaning, whatever he wants doing. I was Twenty-One’s replacement. She trained me. When I was proficient at my duties, Sire killed her. He brought two replacements home to take my place—not at the same time—but they disappointed him. They died instead of me.”

Connor ran a hand down her arm. “Take your time, baby.”

“There was a third who came. She learned quickly, and I knew my time was up. When Sire tires of his current...slave,” she said after struggling for the right word, “he disposes of us. He brands us, beats us, gives us numbers instead of names. We work ourselves bloody, then he kills us.”

“How?” Hadley tapped quickly on the tablet.

Her body turned to stone. This part of her memories was one she hated. Not only because of the deaths she’d witnessed, but because it was a stark reminder of what her fate had dwindled down to. “He takes us—the current one and the next one—into the woods. He ties the replacement to a chain grown into a tree, then rapes the girl he’s going to kill. Some of them scream, some of them plead. Others are so grateful to be escaping him, they’re happy no matter what it means when he tightens his hands around their throat and throttles them to death.”

Connor’s big hand fisted in her lap; Jenna took it in both of hers and held on.

“You escaped before he could kill you.”

“Barely. The night I escaped, Sire told me I’d served him well, he was pleased with me. He gave me a crust of bread—I hardly ever got food—and said he would be sorry to see me go, but that our goodbye would...our goodbye would be exciting. He’d been waiting for it a long time.” Sickness rose in her throat, adding sourness to the growing ache. “I knew it was my last night in that shed. He’d taken my replacement into the house for the branding. I hadn’t heard her scream, so he hadn’t done it yet.”

“So you ran.”

She nodded. “He beat me with anything and everything he could find from the day I woke there. Hammered every rule, every boundary line into me until breaking one of those rules was akin to ripping my own flesh off with my fingernails. We weren’t allowed to talk; talking meant losing your tongue. Running away came with a punishment I’d never dared risk, until that night.”

Exhausted, she slumped against Connor, closed her eyes. “The shed was ramshackle, falling apart. The door was rotten, the locks set in dead wood. I tried pushing at it, but I couldn’t move it. I tried to stand. Got to my feet, staggered and fell. Hit the door, smashed it open, ended up sprawled in the mud outside.”

Connor's body was rigid beneath her, but his hands were moving now, stroking and petting in that way she'd come to rely on. She opened her eyes, blinked slowly.

"Do you know how long you were with him, Jenna?"

She sighed. "I lost track of time. There was no time there. Day rolled into night, into day. An eternal cycle of pain and misery, cleaning and degradation. I know there were twenty-six full moons. I remember because full moons made the night lighter, and I'm afraid of the dark."

Hadley's eyes lifted, dark and turbulent, meeting Connor's above her head. They flashed with fury. "Twenty-six months. Two years and two months of torture, and you survived it."

"In the beginning, when you're still a person, you hold on because there's hope someone will come find you and take you back to your life. After a few days, the hope dwindles, and you start to forget you were ever a person. A couple of weeks...there is no person left, and any life that might have been waiting would never be the same again anyway."

"Jesus Christ." Hadley reached out and hit the phone. "Take a break, sweetheart. Have a drink, settle yourself. You're shaking like a leaf, and you're ashen." He looked at Connor again. "You want to take a quick walk, air it out?"

Voice thick and tight, Connor said, "I'll deal with it later." He picked up the glass of juice, wrapped Jenna's jerky hands around it and guided it to her mouth.

Sweet, cool orange hit her tongue, soothed the burn in her throat. She drank deep, slow. "This is hard for you, Agent?"

"Yeah. Yeah, this is hard. I want to beat the shit out of this guy. I want to gather you up and bundle you into cotton wool. You've not given me a fraction of the details of your incarceration, and I'm already reeling from the cruelty one man possesses."

Connor took the glass from her when she nearly dropped it, pressed his lips to her nape. "This might be a good place to stop, baby. Give yourself time to recharge."

Jenna rubbed her eyes. "Can I ask a question?"

Hadley nodded. "Ask as many as you like. I'll answer what I can."

"How many has there been, do you know? I'm Twenty-Two, and Twenty-Three was trained. But the ones he brought in who didn't make his

grade, the ones he killed because they disappointed him, they weren't given a number. They died without a name."

Hadley ran a hand through his hair, eyes shadowed. "You would have been the fifty-fourth, over an eighteen-year timespan."

It left her reeling. She stared at him blindly, imagining how many women had suffered the way she had. So many lives disrupted, ruined. So many fragile throats in Sire's hands.

"I didn't know."

"No one could expect you to, Jenna."

She couldn't process it. Couldn't fathom it. She'd seen evidence of his sickness, experienced it first-hand, but this? This went beyond sickness into insanity. To steal fifty-four women, abduct them and *teach* them, only to snuff out their lives when he got bored of them...he was a bored child ruled by the essence of the devil.

"Can you remember how far you walked, Jenna? What direction you approached the bar from? Any landmarks you could identify your route with?" Hadley had already clicked the recorder back on, looking a little green.

Moving onto safer topics, giving himself—and her—time to level out again.

"It was night when I ran. Not fast, I couldn't go fast, I was too weak, and it was so cold..." Images of the darkened wood came to mind, the shadows where she imagined Sire lurked, waiting to pounce. Remembered how fear had driven her faster than she'd thought capable, boosted by her imagination. "I think I dozed for an hour maybe, near dawn? Couldn't do anything but stumble along, nearly crawling at one point. Then it grew dark again."

Hadley pinned Connor with a look. "Can you recall what time Jenna came into the bar?"

"Eleven-thirty or thereabouts. I wasn't far off leaving. I'd had a beer, nursed it a couple hours while I talked with Cain as he handled the bar. I go in once a week to catch up with him if we haven't seen each other. I'd have been on my way home ten minutes later."

Ten minutes. Jenna clutched his jeans in her fingers as it dawned on her things could've been a lot worse if he hadn't been there. If she'd tripped and fallen, lain on the frosty ground for ten minutes summoning the will to get up...he wouldn't have been there.

“Cain would’ve had your back,” Connor whispered in her ear as Hadley typed his notes. “He would’ve saved you from Joe and his idiots and brought you to me. You were coming to me, one way or another, baby.”

“I’m not going to keep you much longer,” Hadley interrupted. “Jenna, I have a lot more questions for you, but for now, I just need you to answer one.”

The child skipped back to Jenna, slipped her hand into the woman’s and tried to tug her away from the turmoil brewing inside her. Jenna sensed the change, the subtle switch of personalities, and battled against it.

“Sire.” God, she hated how weak his name was on her lips. Surely if a name could make someone, it could destroy someone just the same.

“I need a description, sweetheart.”

“How do you describe evil in human form?” she asked almost petulantly, the child’s dislike of the subject shimmering through. “He’s a bad man.”

The agent’s blue gaze narrowed on her face. “He is, which is why he has to be stopped. You’re the only one who’s seen his face, Jenna. The only person who knows who he is.”

“He’s the monster,” she whispered and angled her head away from Hadley. The child was stronger than she’d thought, yanking at her hand now and replacing the woman bit by bit. “The monster in the dark.”

“Please, Jenna,” Hadley said desperately. “Anything, anything at all.”

“Blue eyes,” she bit out, squeezing her own tightly shut. “Sky blue eyes turning black when murder gives him release. Tanned skin making him look younger than he is.” How old, she thought frantically. How old was the devil inside him? “Middle forties, early fifties. Older than he seems. Brown hair, short and long.” Her hands lifted, fluttered around her head. “Tall, strong, but not as tall as you. Wide shoulders, muscled. More power to hit with.”

“Glasses? Facial hair?”

“No, didn’t see. Beards, body hair, are dirty.” In the next breath, the child took her over fully and she embraced the simplicity of how she saw things. She rolled onto her side, buried her face into Connor’s neck. “Daddy, don’t want to do this anymore.”

The silence in the room made her squirm uncomfortably. Silence was bad, it was usually the calm before Sire stormed into the shed and snatched her up by the first thing he could grab, dragging her outside while her

fingernails dug into the rotten floorboards, the earth, to slow her descent into torture.

The one time she'd managed to latch onto the doorframe and jerked her ankle free of his hold, Sire had stomped on her fingers until they turned black and purple, then tied them all together, interlinked, so her hands were completely bound and useless.

Her attempt at rebellion, at self-preservation, had cost her more than just the original punishment would have. Her silent objection earned her a whipping that left oozing wounds open for days, swollen hands so badly bruised she couldn't clean with them for weeks—a fact Sire complained about relentlessly, berating her for her stupidity.

Still, he'd forced her to clean the toilet with the brush clamped between her teeth, the floors with sponges strapped to her hands and knees while using her mouth as a soap dispenser. She'd gotten sick from the chemicals, burned her gums and tongue and throat until it became hard to breathe, let alone swallow.

"Eighteen years," Hadley said reverently. "Eighteen years and a trail of death and destruction without a lead to follow. An investigation stalled while bodies wait in the morgue, until today. Today marks the beginning of Sire's downfall."

The beginning, but not the end. Sire was cunning and clever. There wouldn't be an end to his reign of torture and murder until there were handcuffs around his wrists or his body buried six feet deep. There were ways and means to avoid capture, and Sire had planned every last one down to the last second.

"With this information I can set things in motion. I'd already requested my team relocate here; I'll be submitting my report to my superior when I return to the sheriff's office and adding a request for additional back up. I want a guard on Jenna twenty-four hours a day, beginning immediately. That may mean I have to utilize the sheriff's department for the next few days."

Connor snorted. "You'll be lucky. If Caleb doesn't shut you out after this morning's episode, he hasn't got the manpower available to provide round-the-clock protection details. He has two deputies who I wouldn't trust to guard an empty vending machine, and a volunteer who's barely scraped the legal age limit."

“Unfortunately for Caleb, he doesn’t have the option of shutting me out. The federal government doesn’t take kindly to obstructions being thrown in its path, particularly when it comes to investigations of this magnitude, and especially not when I’m the special agent in charge.” Hadley slipped his toys back in his jacket. “If your brother gets in my way on this, he will regret it. I’ll bring the full force of the FBI down on his head. He won’t have a badge or two deputies incapable of defending an empty vending machine. I’ll make sure of it.”

Jenna put her hands over her ears to block the hard tone. The agent wasn’t shouting, but that tone sent needles of ice down her spine. She didn’t want to be responsible for a man losing his job, even a man who made her skin crawl. Which was ridiculous when she knew he was cut from the same genetic cloth as Cain and Connor, but everything about Caleb kicked her instincts onto red alert.

“Jenna, baby.” Connor pried her fingers away from her ear and curled them around Moose. “Why don’t you take Moose upstairs and see if Sarah would like some lunch? I’ll see Agent Hadley out, and then we’ll eat, okay?”

She hugged the plushie close to her chest. Her stomach revolted at the thought of food, and something of her distaste must have shown on her face because Connor’s hardened into a light shade of stern.

“You’ll eat, Jenna. There’s nothing on you, and it’s not good enough.”

She sighed through her nose so she huffed loudly. If she wasn’t hungry, she wasn’t hungry. What was the point of eating if she was just going to throw it up again when her belly decided it didn’t like food?

“Waffles,” Connor said persuasively, a purr in his voice. The purr was more appealing to her in that moment than the idea of waffles and syrup. “There might even be some bacon.”

Jenna pouted, considered. *Maybe* she could choke down a waffle or two... She held Moose up to her ear, tilted her head. “Moose would like ice cream.”

“He would, would he? Is Moose going to go upstairs and fetch Sarah?”

She twirled a lock of hair around her fingers. “No.”

“Then no ice cream.”

“But Daddy...”

“But Jenna.” He lifted her off his lap and, to her surprise, gave her a sharp tap on the butt with the flat of his hand. It didn’t hurt, didn’t even

sting, but that firm connection made her knees weak. “Off you go, baby.”

Confused by her body’s reaction, she wobbled to the doorway, paused in the hallway to gather her sensibilities.

“Do you think she’s a natural submissive?” Hadley asked quietly, low enough she had to strain to catch the words. “A true little? Is that what drew that fucker to her?”

“Natural submissive, at a guess. I think that would appeal to the likes of him. A young female predisposed to please? She’d be a wet dream for him. She’s not a masochist—pain is the stick to her, not the carrot. Combine the two and she would be easy to manipulate into doing whatever he wanted.” The slightest pause, a thoughtful sigh. “She’s not a little, even if she has tendencies. This is a coping mechanism; you saw how easily the child usurps the adult. Until she feels strong enough to take full control of her life again, she’ll use the child to hide behind.”

“You don’t sound disappointed by that.”

“I’m not. I enjoy tending to her, caring for her, looking after her, but Daddy Dom isn’t my kink. I’m with her every step of the way, but one day—if, when, we ever reach for the next rung on the ladder—sex with a child isn’t on my bucket list. All I want right now is for her to be happy, healthy and safe.”

“Happy and healthy is down to you, Doc, but safe falls under my responsibility now, too. Don’t leave her alone and try not to leave your nurse alone with her either. Two women won’t be a deterrence to this guy if he makes his move. I’ll get men in place as soon as I physically can, but you need to take precautions from today. Lock windows and doors, set alarms, keep your eye out for strangers in the area. I imagine Jenna would recognize Sire if he comes anywhere near, even in disguise, but don’t take any risks. All it takes is one split second and she’s gone.”

Connor’s voice was a sharp blade. “I’ll take precautions, trust me. That bastard’s not getting his hands on what’s mine. He’s not going to have an opportunity to hurt her again. I’ll rip him into shreds with my bare hands first.”

Cuddling Moose to her chest, Jenna smiled into his fur. She blocked out the talk of Sire and concentrated on the one sentence filling her with unrivalled happiness.

That bastard’s not getting his hands on what’s mine.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“**T**his kills two birds with one fucking stone, Con. Trust me, you need this.” Cain made himself at home in the recliner, a beer in one hand and the other rubbing his chin with amusement. “Your lass there needs it.”

It was after nine p.m. and what Connor needed was his own beer, his currently still-little girl tucked up beside him in bed, and a couple hours sleep before the goddamn nightmares hit. Since Hadley’s first visit a week ago, Jenna’s bad dreams were a relentless stream throughout the night. She woke anywhere up to half a dozen times a night, dripping in cold sweat, screaming, and so disorientated she’d mistaken Connor for fucking Sire more than once.

Right now, she was curled under her new duvet—complete with the duckling cover Sarah had found her online—with her attention riveted on the TV from beneath half-lidded, glassy eyes. The last seven days had proved testing for them both—Jenna with the new routine Connor set in place after Hadley’s departure, and Connor himself with laying down the law in a manner she couldn’t skirt around with big green eyes and that ridiculously cute pout she’d learned worked wonders on him.

Despicable Me was halfway through for the...fifth time that day, Connor calculated. He could recite a good third of the script already; he feared for his sanity by the time the week came to a close.

Another reason for his beer.

“It’s a solid idea, Cain. I’m not arguing that, but what the hell am I supposed to do with it? I have enough on my plate trying to get little miss over here to eat, let alone remember to feed, walk and play with a damn dog.”

Cain shook his head. "Use your head, smart man. When Jenna eats, the dog eats. Jenna has lunch, she gives the pup a treat after. Dinner? Well, she has to clean her plate before she can feed her best friend. Walking's a little more difficult with the constraints the agent's put in place, but as long as you're with them, I don't see the problem. It gets Jenna out into the yard, back into the outside world. Has she even been past the front door yet?"

Connor scowled. "Can't get her anywhere near. She grabs hold of anything she can get her hands on and clings to it, usually the banister."

"There you go. Encourage her to explore. This isn't a floppy-eared mutt that comes up to your ankle, brother. With a word, this thing will rip the throat out of anyone who poses a threat to her." Cain sipped his beer, tipped the bottle toward Jenna. "My friend has four you can choose from. All over a year old, all house-broken, trained to police specifications, and soft as fucking butter until they go to work. Couldn't ask for better protection."

In theory, it sounded like a good plan. Solid, as Connor told Cain, and it had merit. Companionship and personal guard service rolled into one. While he had no intention of leaving Jenna unsupervised, another pair of eyes on her would be beneficial. Particularly if those eyes came with a set of sharp teeth.

"And if this dog decides it doesn't like me, Sarah, the fucking mailman? Hell, if it takes a dislike to Jenna?"

"You'll be introduced as top dog," Cain replied easily. He swigged again, swallowed, looked at Jenna. "Sarah could charm the rainbow off a goddamn tight-assed leprechaun, and who the fuck *does* like Chad the mailman? The man's a narcissistic prick with a God complex. Holding people's mail hostage," he muttered with a snarl that brought Jenna's attention swinging over to him. "Sorry, beautiful, go back to your movie."

She checked to make sure Connor was still there, then wiggled deeper under the duvet. Moose's ears popped over the edge as she cuddled him beneath her chin.

"As for her...dogs are damn good judges of character, Connor. The right dog, a loyal dog, is gonna take one look at her and become her shadow. Let's face it, she inspires loyalty. You and Sarah immediately became her guardians the moment she fell into your care. Partly because of who you both are, but mostly because of who she is."

Well, that he couldn't deny. Jenna brought out his nurturing instincts more than anyone else of his acquaintance. "I guess you better ask her if she

likes dogs, then, hadn't you?"

His brother's smirk warned him of incoming snark. "I'm not her Daddy, am I?" He flipped the foot of the recliner up, kicked back. "That's the privilege of a Daddy, not an uncle."

Connor blinked. Would it never cease to amaze him how easily Cain accepted...hell, everything? Caleb would be shitting kittens if he knew the sharp turn Connor's relationship had taken with Jenna, yet for Cain, it was just a slight bump in the road, one he cruised over without taking too much notice.

And always with a sense of humor.

"I'll keep that in mind, *Uncle Cain*, when I need someone to babysit." Connor drank deep. Once he'd asked the question, his life would undoubtedly become more complicated in a short space of time. A dog, for fuck's sake.

It could be a poor joke in the wrong hands.

A little, a dog, and a psychopath meet in the middle of the woods...

He shook his head clear of the thought. There'd be a bullet between Sire's eyes before he got within reach of Jenna. He ran his hand over the dainty lump beside him, smiled as she stirred. Sleepy eyes peered at him.

She wasn't getting enough sleep. What little she achieved wasn't enough to boost her appetite or keep her energy levels raised. Maybe tonight he'd give her half a sleeping tablet, see if that would navigate her through the torment of dreams for an easy night.

"Baby, Cain would like to get you a present." Without taking his eyes off hers, Connor heard the recliner ping back into an upright position. He smiled to himself as Cain choked on his beer and spluttered a protest. "How do you feel about dogs?"

"Connor—"

Jenna squealed and erupted from her cocoon like a rampaging butterfly. Moose went flying, tumbling over the floor, while his little girl turned into a missile, launching herself at him with another joyous squeak. Arms locked around his neck, her forehead cracked into his chin hard enough to make his teeth ache, but she stuck to him like glue in her pretty pink cotton pajamas.

She leaned back, clapping her hands on his face and hers alive with such innocent jubilation it took his breath away. Tears gave her green eyes a shimmering beauty, but he saw no sorrow, just happiness. "Puppy?"

“Not quite, baby. A little older than a puppy, but it would be yours.” He could no more deny her the damn dog now as he could punch her in the face. Hell, if she wanted a puppy, he’d go to the pound and bring her home ten just to see this look in her eyes. “But there are stipulations, Jenna.”

She nodded eagerly.

“Thank you, Daddy.” Sweeter than any child, she kissed him. The first time she’d kissed him of her own volition. “*Thank you.*”

“You’re welcome, baby. Why don’t you thank Uncle Cain; it’s his present to you.” Connor’s grin flashed wickedly as Cain curled his lip at him. As Jenna scrambled off his lap, Connor added hastily, “Not like that, baby. I want to be the only one you kiss like that.”

Her answering smile was shy. “Yes, Daddy.”

He watched her skip over to Cain. She’d gained a fraction of weight, a pound or two, since he’d last weighed her. It wasn’t much but it took the edge off her gauntness, the sharpness off her bones. His eyes narrowed when she bounced onto the recliner in her excitement and babbled to his brother.

He still couldn’t get over how her behavior toward each of his brothers was so dissimilar. Caleb sent her to the verge of a breakdown; Cain brought out the playful side of her. She was a ball bearing between two magnets—repelled by the force of Caleb, drawn to the magnetism of Cain.

When Cain arrived an hour earlier, she’d been in the bath—along with her rubber ducks and some floating hippo thing—singing to herself as she played. Sarah was spoiling her, he thought resignedly. He hadn’t yet dared use the pink glitter bath stuff his nurse swore would make Jenna’s day. He feared for the condition of his bathroom once the sparkly crap was released from its prison.

Jenna had come downstairs in her towel, pale skin rosy with heat and still wet where she’d missed spots, seen his youngest sibling in the kitchen. When she’d stopped dead in the doorway, Connor recalled wincing, fully expecting the hesitant step back and urination her body used as a warning sign of mental overload.

Instead, she’d dropped eye contact and sidled over to Connor, sneaking behind him and peeping shyly at Cain with a bashful smile.

Cain being Cain had answered her with a wide, flirty grin and matching wink, until Connor cleared his throat meaningfully.

From there, things settled into her normal routine. Back upstairs so he could dry her more thoroughly and wiggle her into her PJs, checking her back even though she was almost fully healed. The stitches and creams had worked wonders, and although she now had yet more scars to add to her vast collection, his work there was finished.

Dressed in her cotton candy PJs, feet snuggled into fluffy fleece slippers he'd found her online in a similar shade of pink, they'd retreated to the living room so she could watch Gru and his minions get up to their antics.

He missed Jenna the woman more than ever but hadn't seen a glimpse of her since she gave her description of Sire to Hadley. That was okay, he told himself. Hiding away meant she was healing, right? Jenna the child was hard work, but she was worth it, every step of the damn rocky way.

His thoughts scattered when the woman in question crawled back onto his lap and curled contentedly into him with a happy sigh. "Did you thank Uncle Cain properly, Jenna?"

"I've shot myself in the foot with the uncle crap, haven't I?" Cain muttered, but didn't sound too displeased at the thought.

"Deal with it," Connor replied, lips twitching.

"Guess I'll have to," he said cheerfully and polished off his bottle. "I'll get another beer, you want one?"

"Please. I'm going to get this one to bed while you do that." Connor nuzzled her ear, smelling the scent of vanilla and raspberry from her hair. "Say goodnight, baby. We have a quick stop to make on our way upstairs."

"Night, Cain," she told him dutifully, then her eyes sharpened. He peered closer, staring deep into them. Was that the woman he hoped to see staring back at him? But the instant passed, and the child frowned at him. "Where are we going, Daddy?"

He gave her a pat on the ass, urged her off his lap so she stood in front of him as he rose. He offered his hand, grateful she took it without hesitation, and led her out of the room as Cain followed them. "I just need to grab something from the exam room, Jenna. It'll take two seconds, I promise."

She balked, and the octave of her voice rose. "Not the needle?"

"Not the needle. I know how much you hate the needle." His response was low and calm. He really did understand how deep her hatred of syringes went; the last time he'd taken blood from her, she'd almost knocked his teeth out with an inadvertent backhand as she resisted.

“Hate it, Daddy. *Hate it.*”

He flipped the light on in the exam room, heard Cain keep walking with a chuckle. The two seconds he’d promised her were all it took to find the sleeping pills in the cupboard; he popped one from the sheet, snapped it in half.

He wouldn’t risk giving her a full one just yet. If it mired her down and kept her pinned in a nightmare instead of helping her cruise beneath it, he didn’t want to fight against a higher dosage to fetch her back to reality.

“To the kitchen, baby. Let’s get your juice.” Light off, door shut, they continued to the kitchen where Jenna found her special glass—Hello Kitty—and filled it herself with juice from the refrigerator as Cain plucked a six-pack from the shelf.

Connor gave him an arch look.

“Hey, you just volunteered me to buy your girl a fucking expensive dog,” Cain murmured as Jenna put the juice bottle back into the fridge and shut the door. “I’m damn well cleaning you out of beer tonight, bro. I’ll just crash on the couch.”

That reminded him. He snagged the glass from Jenna’s hands, smiled at her wide-eyed look. “Who’ve you forgotten, baby?”

Puzzled, she frowned, then gasped. “Moose!”

She was off like a flash, a vibrant shock of pink on the move.

“You’re a lucky fucker, you know that, right? Please tell me you understand just how fucking honored you are to have that girl in your life?”

“Oh yeah, I know.” Connor nodded soberly. He did, he really did, and it was like waiting for an axe to drop on his head. Hadley’s team was still scouring the missing person’s list for a match for Jenna, and the agent had assured Connor they were narrowing possibilities down as fast as they could.

How hard could it be, he wondered. They had a description, photographs, DNA and a rough time period for her disappearance. How many women resembling Jenna had been abducted in that same time?

“I’ll take her upstairs, read her a story.” At Cain’s snigger, he reached out and punched his brother’s arm. “It settles her, asshole. The sleeping tablet shouldn’t take long to kick in.”

“Not laughing at her, bro. Whatever works for her on that score. I was thinking more about you being all domesticated and shit. I’ll just go make myself comfy, see what manly sports are on the TV. Need something to

establish your balls are still in position.” Sniggering again, Cain strolled out with the six-pack as Jenna dashed in with her elephant plushie in her hand. “Night, sunshine.”

Connor let her bounce upstairs to the bedroom, carrying her juice for her as she clambered into bed and nestled Moose into bed beside her, his head on the pillow. When Connor held out the pill, she eyed it suspiciously. “Something to help you sleep, baby. Swallow it and get comfy.”

Mulishly, she accepted the tablet, dutifully obeyed with a big gulp of juice, then wiggled into her side of the bed.

“Which story would you like tonight?” he asked, patting the stack of books on the bedside table. Sarah had raided the thrift store and brought over a selection of books for varying ages.

It had been a profound relief to discover Jenna was capable of both reading and writing, although both were very rusty skills that needed honing again. Her handwriting was nothing more than a scrawl, barely legible, and that had upset her.

“Brothers Lionheart,” she told him, and her choice amused him. The book followed two brothers, one fit and healthy, one disabled, on their travels through the afterlife. It had quickly become her favorite, and it had so many facets to the story he didn’t have to wonder why.

He slipped it off the pile, settled his hip beside her, and set the book on his lap. As was her habit, Jenna inched her hand over the covers until her fingers hooked around his. She liked him to hold her hand while he read to her, that little gesture of comfort while she eased away into dreams.

He’d gotten into his own habit of adapting his voice to the character’s, giving each one their own. He’d felt like a fucking idiot the first couple of times, but Jenna’s obvious enjoyment kept him going.

Two pages in, Jenna was out.

“Fingers crossed for peaceful dreams, baby,” he whispered, setting the book aside and standing. Leaving the bedside lamp burning, Connor stole from the room and left the door open in case she needed him.

There was a football game on the TV, the six-pack on the coffee table, and Cain had staked his spot on the couch. Tidy bachelor that he was, he’d folded the duckling duvet at the end. Or maybe he just didn’t want to mess with Connor’s little’s possessions.

“She down?” he asked, handing Connor a beer as he passed and dropped into the recliner.

Top already off the bottle, he noted as he sprang the footboard. “Down and out for now. We’ll see how long the sleeping pill lasts.”

“She tell you what the nightmares are about?” One eye on the game, Cain twisted in his seat to look at Connor.

“Sometimes. What she can remember, anyway. Mostly, she wakes screaming, mumbles something unintelligible, and drifts back off when I reassure her. There are some things she keeps close to her chest.”

“Sucks.”

Yeah, Connor agreed, it sure as hell did.

“Caleb shown his face around since Mr. Eff-Bee-Eye embarrassed the hell out of him? Miserable fuck hasn’t been into the bar, and it’s been mentioned he’s taken a couple weeks’ vacation by a few patrons of my fine establishment.”

Connor snorted, drank absently. “I deal with Hadley now. Jenna’s case falls under his purview; she’s officially part of the FBI investigation. Apparently, our special agent in charge went back to Cal’s office and actually took charge. Caleb didn’t like it, spouted off, and got himself removed from the case along with a three-week suspension. I think Deputy Arnold found himself with an unexpected promotion to sheriff.”

“Arnie made sheriff?” Cain slapped his leg and guffawed. “Good ole Arnie, ten years as Caleb’s bitch and he bags himself a promo. I’ll have to buy the sonofabitch a drink on the house.”

“Shouldn’t the self-proclaimed king of Creek gossip already know this juicy titbit?”

“Who says I didn’t?” He winked. “Some things are told to me in confidence, bro. Apparently, the town council want to keep it all hush-hush. There’s speculation Caleb will throw his hat in for good, and Arnie’s promotion will become permanent, but no one wants to jinx it.”

Connor laughed. “Oh, ouch. I know people think he’s a strict sheriff, but they always seemed to appreciate it. Lowest crime rate in years and all that.”

Cain tapped his finger against his nose. “You’ve not got your finger on the town pulse quite like you used to, Con. His popularity took a dive round about the time he came down on you for, you know. Never really got it back. Word got out about Jenna, his attitude toward the case, and he bombed again. His public persona hasn’t exactly been favorable either—he’s gotten shitty with a few folk, and we both know that doesn’t fly around

here. It's a fucking friendly town, and a sheriff who thinks he's above the rest of us sinks like a goddamn stone."

Connor watched several men built like tanks tackle another on screen, wincing as all five skidded across the turf using the ball-toting player as a surfboard. He mulled over Caleb's self-made problem, drinking quietly as Cain flicked his attention back to the game, cheering when one team scored a touchdown.

College football. Those were the days.

"Think he'll resign over this?" he asked eventually.

"Gonna feel sorry for him if he does?"

"Are you?"

"Fuck, no." Cain waved that away with a soft *pffft*. "He had something good, he fucked it up. You're that stupid, you do one of two things, to my mind, anyhow."

Connor waited. His brother could hold his weight in beer, but he was approaching the blurred line between sober as a nun and lightly buzzed. He could tip back a bottle of whiskey now and still walk off, albeit not in a straight line, if he wanted to.

"He can take the three weeks, figure his shit out, and come back with his head pulled clear of his ass and screwed back on straight. Seems to me he'd need to take a time machine back a decade to do that, but who knows, he might do it without. The council would reinstate him most likely, unless Arnie proves himself to be more of an efficient sheriff. Then he might have to do some serious groveling, make promises he may or may not be able to keep."

"Or?"

Cain rubbed his chin. "Or he comes back with that big-ass chip on his shoulder, adamant he ain't answerable to no one, and gets his ass canned before he can sign his letter of resignation. Moves out of town and becomes the miserable old fuck who lives in the middle of nowhere, chasing people off his porch with a .22, and eventually gets himself tossed in jail on a murder charge when he finally loses his shit and shoots Chad the fuckwit mailman."

Nail on the head, Connor decided. Caleb wasn't a man who tolerated losing, not in anything or to anyone. "What's your guess?"

"Chad the fuckwit will end up with a big hole in his chest one sunny morning," Cain predicted easily. "Big brother's got a slick trigger finger."

“Yeah,” Connor murmured quietly, wondering just how far losing his job and the respect of the community he’d served for so long would push Caleb over the edge of sanity. And who would be in the firing line of his slick trigger finger when he took the fall.

“Think I’m calling it a night,” he told Cain with a glance at his watch. Rolling on eleven, he noted. He had maybe an hour before Jenna’s screams ripped him from sleep, if he was lucky. “Look, if you hear screams—”

Cain’s eyes slid to Connor’s, knowledge in their depths. “I know you won’t be ravaging your little one, brother. More’s the pity. Seems to me, you’d both feel a lot fucking better if you made her officially yours, but I get what you’re doing. If the lass has nightmares tonight and my beauty sleep’s disturbed, I promise I’ll do my best not to look too haggard come morning.”

Connor scowled. “Do you make all your female conquests *officially yours* when you fuck them, Cain? Don’t see any of them hanging off your arm.”

His brother’s eyes grew serious. “Sore point, huh? Okay. We’re not alike in the fucking department, Con. Fun and games is all it is for me, for now. But you, you claim. When she comes alive under your hands and you’re finally inside her, you know she’ll be yours, just as you know she’ll give everything to you to make sure of it. It’s not a bad thing, brother; I’d say it’s quite honorable.”

“Honorable,” Connor repeated with a shake of his head. The thoughts in his head when it came to Jenna and sex were far from *honorable*.

“Don’t look so confused,” Cain told him. “It’s not an archaic word, Connor. There’re few people left in the world it applies to, that’s all. She’s lucky to have you, brother. Now, you look like shit so off to bed you go. I’m gonna catch the end of the game, finish off my beers, and scratch my ass before I see just how comfy this couch is.”

“Scratch your ass on your own couch, asshole.” Connor sat the recliner up, shoved to his feet as he downed the last of his beer. He gripped Cain’s shoulder as he passed. “Thanks, Cain. I knew there was a reason I’ve kept you around so long.”

Cain grinned and flipped him off. “Har-de-har-har, motherfucker. Fuck off and cuddle your girl, see if you can get some sleep.”

With the sounds of the game following him from the room as Cain boosted the volume, Connor headed upstairs. One day in the future, he

would carry Jenna up these stairs. Her head would rest on his shoulder, huge green eyes awake, aware, and on his.

Not the child. Not the sweet, innocent little girl who saw him as her Daddy. For as long as he lived, he never wanted to see that precious soul sullied by any of his actions. That bright spark inside her was too special to extinguish, and whether Jenna knew it or not, she'd sacrificed all she had to give to keep it hidden from the vulturous Sire.

Connor craved the woman sheltering beneath the fear. The eager female whose primal nature kissed him back without thinking, whose thoughts made her blush. He wanted to feel her shudder against him as his hands and mouth brought her to the pinnacle, had an insane urge to hear his name break free on a cry when—yes, damn Cain to hell and back—Connor claimed her the way a man should always claim his woman.

Did he fully comprehend the weight of responsibility that came with taking her to bed? Connor mused over the question as he reached the top of the stairs and paused, listening for any signs of disturbance. Only silence greeted him.

He crept into the bedroom, stared at Jenna. She'd kicked the covers off and was laid on her belly, her knees pulled up under her so her pink-clad butt perched in the air. Her arms hugged her pillow, squeezing it tight, and her thumb resided yet again in her mouth.

Did he fully comprehend the weight of responsibility? Yes, he did. Because life with her wasn't normal. May never *be* normal. It wasn't the usual timeline of events in a standard dating scenario.

Making love with Jenna wasn't about two people coming together in an expression of fondness or love, it wasn't a quick tussle in the sheets for fun. For Connor, making love with Jenna was a statement. A fucking pledge to cherish each part of her, and to bring them together as a whole.

She hadn't told Hadley everything, not yet. He knew the agent wanted more details to solidify the case, lock Jenna in with the deceased victims by matching injuries inflicted. But Connor saw her, watched her, studied her. She'd seen things, experienced things savage enough to leave claw marks on her soul.

How did someone witness a rape, a murder, and continue to fight to survive, knowing they were next in line for the same fate?

He went to the bed, readjusted her into a more comfortable position. She snuffled at him, rubbed her face against his hand, and continued to

sleep soundly.

Underestimated at every turn, he decided. They all underestimated her inner strength, the full fury of her willpower. So did she, and when she discovered just how resilient she was, how determined she could be, she would shine.

He beelined for the bathroom, taking a leak before stripping down to his boxers. He finished his night-time ritual by brushing his teeth, washing his hands, and praying to God Jenna would sleep through to the dawn. The same prayer he always gave and that, so far, hadn't been answered.

When he eased into bed beside her, the sheets cool under his back, he sighed and closed his eyes against the light. With Jenna's slow, even breathing to reassure him, Connor let himself start the slide into sleep and wondered what carnage would befall come tomorrow.

"You need to lay low, Sire."

Phone to his ear, Sire lifted his whip and flicked it lazily over the pale, naked rear in front of him. His newest acquisition—as yet unnumbered and likely to remain so—was unequivocally the most useless of any of his numbers throughout his history.

Simpering, begging, whimpering...the pathetic cunt couldn't breathe without making some sort of noise. His patience was dwindling with the bitch, but to his disgust, even his cock was deterred by the incessant whining.

"Since when do I lay low? In the twenty years you've known me, when have I ever shown cowardice?"

"It's not cowardice to protect yourself." The voice on the other end emanated with frustration. "That stupid mute bitch disobeyed you and blabbed her mouth to the fucking feds. The feds, Sire. Not to some Podunk PD cop, but to the fucking Federal Bureau of Investigation."

Seated comfortably beside the fire, Sire snapped the frond of his whip up between the sniveling brunette's thighs so it connected with her pussy. The resulting crack was satisfying, as was her shocked leap. Her mewling wail, however, spoiled any enjoyment he might have gained from her discomfort. "I'm aware of the FBI and their involvement, boy. They'll run around after the scent I've left them for a few more weeks yet. Ample time to send them in the wrong direction and finalize the trap I've set around my little songbird."

He cracked the whip again, drawing blood along the girl's spine. His teeth ground together when she squeaked. How difficult was it to follow a goddamn order, particularly when he added threats to ensure obedience? "We'll see how well she wants to sing when she's back here with me, her tongue dancing alone on the floor."

"I can kill her now. I have an inside contact with the feds, an admin willing to destroy vital parts of the evidence gathered on the case, for a fee. Without the evidence, without her and that flapping mouth, they'll have nothing. We can relocate; Montana's too fucking cold in winter."

Sire considered it. Only for a moment out of respect for his protégé, but a moment only. He liked his house, the privacy. No neighbors for miles. Lost in the trees with only a well-concealed dirt track for access, his property had been removed from ordinance maps.

No one knew he was there. No one would.

"Leave her. I'll take her when the time is right. Let her get comfortable with this doctor. Rebuild her life, enjoy it. Remember her past, if she can." His chuckle was dark. "So much sweeter it will be when I whisk her away from it all and drag her back into the dark."

When the brunette sobbed, Sire sighed and rose, and snapped her neck.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Daddy was still sleeping.
Jenna narrowed her eyes at him and wondered how long he'd sleep. It was early, the light was dim and she was an expert on gauging time by light—in Sire's regime, she'd have already been up and hauled to the house to clean and light the fire, fix Sire his breakfast, and be ready to rush upstairs and make his bed as soon as he was in the bathroom.

Now, she was ready to go find her present from Cain.

Adult Jenna stirred and admonished the child. Connor had not given her permission to be nosy, had he? Well, no, but he hadn't said she *couldn't*, either. As long as she was quiet, didn't wake him, he wouldn't be mad.

He did look tired, she admitted. Dark circles under his eyes, the thin covering of stubble over his lean face. She'd liked the thicker stubble he'd come back with from his trip with Cain. Soft but prickly.

No, she would be extra quiet. So quiet even the mice wouldn't hear her. Super-duper quiet, like a ninja mouse. She clapped her hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle, then froze when Connor groaned and rolled onto his side, facing away from her.

The woman eased the reins away from the wired child and ushered her back into seclusion with a sigh. It was easier to let the little run free and cause havoc, but the mature side of her realized Connor was in fact exhausted.

Jenna managed to get out of bed slowly enough she didn't disturb Connor, then stared down at the sheer pinkness of the pajamas. She wasn't keen on the feel of them after so many months living naked—she preferred the light, cool weight of her stolen shirt.

She left Moose on her pillow and tottered into the bathroom to take care of her full bladder. Stupid bladder, she thought sourly, recalling the

accidents from the week before. Always primed and ready to embarrass her.

She stripped out of the PJs, folded them neatly and set them on the towel rack. Her shirt was much better, she just needed to find it. Naked, she tiptoed back into the room to hunt for her prize but couldn't see it anywhere. Biting her bottom lip, she appropriated another from the drawer.

Dressed, she made her way downstairs into the cool quiet. A quick stop for juice, and she walked into the living room, prepared to watch something on Netflix for a few hours until Connor woke of his own volition.

The man sleeping on the couch caught her attention first. Broad, muscled, Cain resembled a starfish, limbs stretched out from a golden body similar to the one she'd left in bed. Broad shoulders tapering down to narrow hips and long legs encased in jeans open at the button and fly.

She frowned disapprovingly at the beer bottles scattered over the carpet, wrinkled her nose at the stale smell. This wouldn't do, this wouldn't do at all.

She bent to set her juice on the table and pick up the spent bottles when movement caught her eye. Straightening, she dropped the bottle in her hand with a gentle thud and stared at the TV screen.

Heat struck her between the thighs, blossomed warm in her center. Dumbfounded, she simply stood with shaking knees, unable to tear her gaze away from the performance playing out between a man and a woman.

Thank God she'd taken over from the child, she thought numbly. She dreaded to think what sort of questions the little girl would've come up with—Jenna could think of several herself.

Like what the *fluff* was that man doing with his head between the woman's—oh. Oh. Her knees gave out and she sat on the floor, mouth open, eyes transfixed on the TV.

She watched and she learned, and she waited for the moment the naked man with his fierce erection throttled the woman beneath him.

Everything she thought she knew was wrong. The couple on the bed were laughing, smiling, even when the woman moaned as though she was in pain. If the man struck her, his hand connected with her buttocks, never her face, and she reacted positively, arching her back and begging for more.

"Shit, is that still on?" Cain muttered sleepily.

Jenna blinked, ignored him. Her thoughts were too complex to involve him right now, and questions pelted her from all directions the longer she watched.

Why was the woman not afraid? Did she not grasp how easily the man with her could snap her neck, choke the life from her if he chose to? He could become a monster within seconds, his powerful body turning into a weapon, and *end* her before she realized the threat.

The man said something Jenna couldn't hear over the harsh buzzing in her ears and the woman grinned, spread her legs seductively so all her feminine parts were on full display for the camera. Jenna gasped softly, one hand slapping over her mouth while the other slipped protectively over her own mound when the guy thrust his fingers into the woman.

"Fuck, no."

The screen went blank and Jenna's head turned so quickly toward Cain, her neck cracked. "Cain! You have to warn her!"

Pale and still half-asleep, Cain stared at her, horrified. "How long have you been watching that, sunshine?"

What did that matter? She pointed at the screen, jabbed her finger at the darkness. "Cain, please, you need to warn her. She doesn't know what's going to happen when he's done with her!" Breathless, she crawled to him, offering submission and hoping he'd listen to her in exchange. "Please, *please*, you have to help her before it's too late."

"Jenna, I don't have a clue what you're on about." Cain leaned forward, lifted her head from where she pressed it to the floor. "Take a deep breath and explain, sunshine, before you pass the fuck out."

There wasn't *time* to explain. Why couldn't he get his head around that? Every moment he delayed, that poor woman came closer to having her life snuffed out. She'd never grow old, fall in love, have kids...she would cease to exist.

"Christ Jesus, I've never known porn make a woman cry." Big hands scooped her up, settled her onto firm thighs. "If I'm stepping out of bounds, you tell me, sunshine. I don't poach, and I sure as hell don't want my brother kicking the shit outta me for putting hands on his girl."

She sobbed. "You need to save her."

"Okay. Tell me who needs saving and I'll go kick some ass."

"Her!" She gestured wildly to the TV. "She's going to die!"

Puzzlement crept into his voice. "The woman on the TV? Sunshine, that's a porn film. The woman is Tyra Mackay, she's an actress. She gets paid to have sex on camera. People die all the time, but I'd be surprised if she pops it anytime soon."

“Y-You know her?” Tears dripped off her chin onto the front of her borrowed shirt.

Cain chuckled and wiped the tears away with his hand. “No, Jenna, much to my everlasting disappointment, I do not know Ms. Mackay. But I’d know if she were dead. Half the teenage boys in town would be grieving.”

She shook her head. “But...”

“I’m thinking this has something to do with your...circumstances,” he mused, looking down at her with sympathetic eyes. They were so like Connor’s—just as easy to be lulled by. “That’s okay. Do you want to tell me what triggered this, sunshine? Or would you rather I get Connor?”

“He’s sleeping,” she whispered.

“Then I’ll wake him up. I know my brother, Jenna. If you’re in distress, he’ll want to be here for you.”

“No. No, he’s so tired. I think I’m wearing him out,” she said sadly, twisting her hands together. Her breath shuddered out. “I overreacted, I guess. I’m sorry, Cain.”

“Not getting away with it that easily, Jenna. You were frantic just then, absolutely manic with the need to come to the aid of a woman you don’t know. Now I’m not your Daddy, but I figure we’re family. I can also be a fucking vault.” He smiled, and she saw Connor in his face. Younger, a little more wickedness in his eyes, but the same solid core of kindness she’d trusted immediately in his brother. “Sex is a trigger for you, right? You ever had it?”

Jenna frowned. She was still alive, wasn’t she? “I don’t think so?”

“Well, either you’re a virgin, sunshine, or your former beau was a fucking awful lay. Speak with Sarah later,” he advised soberly. “Sarah does all the chick shit when it comes to examinations and doctor stuff; if anyone can tell you, Sarah will. She’s fucking awesome at her job for a reason.”

Did she want to know? With her former life secreted away, she didn’t have to think about who’d been in it, who’d mourned for her when she wasn’t found. If she had anyone. Not everyone was lucky enough to have family, friends, who cared—maybe she’d be one of them.

“But with personal experience aside, why don’t you explain to me what you think sex is, Jenna. No holds barred, no thinking you’ll offend me, just unmuzzle those memories and let them out. No judgement,” he promised solemnly.

She swallowed hard, bit her lip until Cain gently pulled it free. “Sex is pain. Sex is having something taken from you, being held down and...and rutted like a bitch,” she mumbled, recalling one of Sire’s favorite sayings. “Sex is dying, clawing for one last breath, feet kicking in the dirt, blood running down your legs while a monster feeds on you.”

Gray eyes darkened, blinked slowly. “Wasn’t expecting that, but okay. Firstly, I’m gonna say I’m sorry, sunshine. No one should have to see that in their head when they think of sex. That’s just abominable from every fucking angle. Secondly,” he continued smoothly before she could babble a reply, “what you described? That’s *not* sex, Jenna. I swear it’s not. It’s rape, it’s abuse, and it’s abhorrent to any man with a sense of morality.”

“Sire doesn’t have morals.”

“Doesn’t sound like he does, no. In my opinion, any man who thinks and acts like Sire should be castrated and hung, drawn and quartered.” Cain rubbed a hand over his face, and she heard his palm scrape over the soft bristle. “Can I tell you what sex is like through my eyes, sunshine?”

She peered up at him from under her lashes. “If it hurts, I don’t want to know.”

He let out a heavy breath, inclined his head. “Sunshine, my brother would make himself a eunuch before he hurt you. Being as we’re born of the same blood, I can say that as honestly as I’d say it about myself. Sex is emotion. No matter which way you look at it, that’s all it is. Two people joining together. Sex can be fun, happy, exciting—hell, I’ve had sex that’s made me and my woman laugh from start to finish.

“There’s sad sex,” he said with a crease in his brow. “For me, that pulls you deep into the connection. Maybe there’s tears or just a sense of forlornness that sinks inside you, but sad sex is poignant. And now so are you,” he commented when her eyes filled again. “Sex can be kinky, but I’ll let Connor give you those details.” He tapped her under the chin with a fingertip. “Angry sex—that’s fun in itself, all fiery passion and dominant emotion released in a fast, hard fuck. Quite cathartic.”

Data overwhelmed her brain, but still she listened, enthralled by the rhythm of his speech, the rise and fall of his words. He spoke without regret, with no apologies for who he was or what he’d experienced.

“You, little one, should be made love to for your first time. Slow hands and careful fingers stroking, teasing this warrior’s body. So many scars and

old hurts that need to be kissed, worshipped, because each one made you into the woman you are now.”

Jenna ducked her head so he wouldn't see the heat in her cheeks. The concept of what he described was foreign to her—in her world, women were not worshipped by the hand that kept them, they were ruled. And under Sire's rule, they bled, they wept, and they died.

“He tied us to trees,” she whispered, stopping Cain in his tracks. “He dragged us to his favorite place with collars around our necks. The one who'd served him and the one who would. Pulled us along on chains until we tripped and fell, kept going even when we couldn't stand.

“There's a tree with a chain eating into the trunk, a few rusty links dangling. The one he keeps is locked to those links by her collar, left to stand and watch, naked and silent. Left to learn and understand that one day, one day soon, she will be the one he throws into the dirt.”

Cain said nothing, just set his hand on her knee in silent comfort. She didn't know why she was letting the words escape her, why she gave voice to the memories in her head she couldn't forget regardless of what she did.

“He took me there three times. Once as the replacement, chained to the tree while he murdered a woman he'd taken from a good life and sentenced to hell. Twice as the one destined to die.” Her teeth began to chatter, recalling the fear etched into her bones as she waited to be tossed to the ground, only for the girls she'd tried to train to survive to be discarded instead. “Twenty-One was a kind woman. She helped me adjust to Sire's routine as best she could. My voice was already broken the day Sire chose to kill her, so I couldn't even cry out when he backhanded her where she sprawled on the ground.

“He straddled her chest, used his knees to pin her arms. Used his fists to split her lip, her cheek. Blackened her eyes and knocked out her front teeth. That was just the start. The horror of what he did to her...” Jenna choked, latched onto Cain's hand. “There was nothing much left of her by the time he forced her legs apart. Broken and bloody and bruised. Still breathing, barely, and aware. Her eyes were hollow, haunted, when he shoved his pants to his knees and...and...”

“All right, Jenna,” Cain crooned, covering her hand so his sandwiched hers protectively. “That's enough, sunshine, you've had enough.”

She shook her head furiously, trying to breathe around the knot strangling her throat. How could it be enough when she was the last person

to see Twenty-One alive, aside from her killer? Number or woman, Twenty-One didn't deserve to remain the nightmarish secret of a traumatized survivor trapped in the dark.

"When you can't talk, you learn how to read. Faces, body language, the nuances," she said, and wondered where the hell she'd pulled that word from, "of truth and lies. Eyes are the biggest books in the world. They contain *everything* about a person. Read it often enough and the author can't conceal anything, however they might try.

"I didn't see what Sire did to her. I read it in her eyes. Fear, despair, a kind of pain that reached down and touched both our souls, because in that moment I could feel her pain. He rutted her ruthlessly and pain became resignation, surrender. The life was gone from her eyes before Sire tightened his hands around her throat and crushed what was left of her. He growled," she remembered as a whimper built in her chest, "and that sound grew deeper until it was almost a howl. He got up, cleaned himself, and kicked her dead body between the legs before he came for me."

That had been the terrifying part. The monster of a man, elements of the beast still raging in his pale eyes, stalking toward her with blood on his pants, his hands, his face and malicious pleasure in that hooded gaze.

Nowhere to run to, no way of escaping the chain or the collar.

Jenna sensed her bladder initiate its panic response and willed it not to mortify her. "He detached the chain from the tree and yanked me forward. I was given a lecture on what behavior he expected from me as he tugged me back to the house and warned of the consequences disobedience would bring. I didn't doubt him; I didn't dare. After all, I'd just witnessed him rape and strangle a woman for no other reason than she bored him."

Cain's fingers tightened around hers. "And the other two times?"

"I'd done my best to teach the replacements he brought. Both good girls, too young to be in that predicament. There was only ever one new girl at a time, and communication is hard when one can no longer speak and the other is out of her mind with panic. They failed him, faster than anticipated. They were dispatched quickly, with a mute slave as their only witness to their imprisonment and death. He took me there both times, allowing me to believe it was my turn to die. Sometimes I wished it was, so the threat of it couldn't hang over my head, day after day, night after night, while I rotted in my shed."

Cain dropped his forehead against her crown as his arms pulled her tightly against him, a heavy blanket of safety in her broken panic. They weren't Connor's arms, didn't hold her the same way he did, but they were welcome, nonetheless. "The first few weeks after you got here, Connor talked about you like you hung the moon. I didn't come around much—I didn't want to intrude when Connor was working so hard to make his home into a safe place for you—but we talked on the phone a lot. He told me how brave you were, this little slip of a woman, so brave despite everything you must have gone through. He couldn't say often enough how he might not hear your voice, but you spoke to him in other ways, deeper ways. Connor's always known how strong you are, Jenna. I didn't believe him, not at first. But now? Now I understand what he meant in those first few weeks. There is no one else like you in this world, sunshine."

"There are days I wish I'd stayed in that shed and waited for dawn to come," she admitted quietly. More tears came, but there was no shame in them. Instead they washed away some of her pain, some of her misery and guilt. "Sometimes I don't feel as though I deserve to be alive when they're not."

He gave her a little shake. "Survivor's guilt, sunshine. Natural, but dangerous. Misplaced in your case—you survived because you used your head and you took a chance. They didn't die because of you, Jenna. They died because of some jumped-up motherfucker who gets kicks out of destroying precious things."

"Precious things have names," she said dully, falling back into old habits, old thoughts. "Anything that is nothing has no name."

"Bullshit. They're people, Jenna. Women, just like you. They have names and families, and the FBI agent is going to track each one down. He'll give them back their names, their identities, and they won't be nothing ever again, sunshine. We won't let them."

She wanted them to be remembered. Sire had thrown them away, trash into the gutter, and she carried the weight of them all on her shoulders. Not just the ones she had met in person, but the ones whose ghosts haunted her in the shed, in the house. The ones who whispered in the trees surrounding the place where they died.

She bore the weight of them all.

"My advice to you, little one, is live. Give the past to me or Connor or Sarah whenever it drags you back there. We're here, we'll listen. The day

will come, sooner than later, when Connor asks more of you, and you'll have a choice to make." Cain stroked her back when she shuddered. "Trust him, Jenna. Take his hand when it's offered, let him lead you upstairs, and give yourself the gift of a future. He'll worship you, every inch, for the rest of your lives if you trust him enough."

"And when Sire comes for me? What gift am I offering then?"

"Sunshine, you leave that fucker to us. I've got a present of my own for that asshole." Cain's voice turned to silken steel; a sword sheathed in velvet. She wondered how deep it could cut when he revealed the honed blade beneath the soft cover.

"How am I supposed to tell him all this? I don't know if I can go through it again. Not even for him."

Cain cupped her chin, let her eyes meet his before he gently turned her head to the doorway. She sagged when she saw Connor leaning against the jamb, his face carefully controlled. But as she'd told Cain, when one was speechless, reading eyes became second nature, and Connor's were ablaze with fierce and lethal emotions.

Fury. Murder. Pity. Love.

He straightened, easing away from the wall and opening his arms for her. She wriggled off Cain's lap, aided by the man himself, and threw herself at Connor. In an instant, she was lifted, cradled close in arms strong enough to change her world, and he was carrying her into the room.

"How much did you hear?" she asked him anxiously.

Connor sucked in an audible breath. "Enough to know Sire needs to die. Enough to dropkick my Hippocratic oath out of the fucking window and end his worthless existence myself."

Home again, she nuzzled his throat. Some days she didn't feel worthy of being alive, she thought, when so many others had died. Today she wanted to live, would go through it all again just to be right here, with him.

"Also enough to know that my little brother needs his ass kicking for leaving porn running on the TV." Connor growled under his breath. "You better not have jacked off on my couch, Cain."

Curious, Jenna peeked at him. Unperturbed, the youngest O'Malley brother grinned. "That would just be rude, Connor. I was looking for a light bit of entertainment under the influence of several beers and found your—*your*," he reiterated with a sly wink, "porn channel account. Might want to

consider changing your password, what with having a little in the house. A curious little,” he added with a head tilt toward Jenna.

Connor groaned and lifted an eyebrow at her. “Are you sure you’re ready to explore that yet, baby? There’s nothing wrong with curiosity as long as you feel ready to take that step. Don’t let the wise old man over there taint your instincts.”

Cain laughed and stretched. “This wise old man only speaks the truth, bro. He also needs to get his ass up and make sure his deputy manager didn’t trash his bar during his absence.”

He stood, stretched again, showcasing a lean six-pack of abs, and belatedly fastened his jeans under Connor’s narrowed stare. “You need anything, give me a call. The DM’s been bugging me for more hours, got a kid on the way and could use the extra cash, so I have some free time if you need me.”

“Thanks, Cain. Don’t let the door hit you in the ass on the way out.”

Cain just grinned again and gave him a little salute as he snagged his shirt off the back of the couch and yanked it over his head. “Love you, too, big brother. I’ll call my friend, get you hooked up with him today. Probably be this afternoon.”

Connor saluted him back with the bird, sighed when a few minutes after Cain left the room, the front door opened and closed. He pressed his face to Jenna’s hair and breathed deep, and both of them relaxed in the silence.

Wherever they went from here, Jenna thought, she was content to go.

He owed his brother.

Jenna sat quietly on his lap, pensive and relaxed. Her mind busy, her body resting. He stroked her back as they sat in the odd silence left behind by Cain—his brother had a knack of filling a room with his presence.

So much to process, for them both. Connor still couldn’t get the images out of his head—Jenna chained by her neck to a tree, forced to watch brutality play out in front of her. Believing—twice—she would suffer the same fate, experience the same pain and degradation as her predecessor.

Yet it hadn’t broken her. Did she realize how special that made her? Standing in the face of adversity when it slapped her repeatedly, punched her, kicked her, all but cleaved her off at the knees. Her body might be weakened from abuse, her mind a little messed up with a forgotten past and months of mental anguish, but the core of her was pure fucking titanium.

His woman—because, by Christ, it was his woman he held in his arms now—could shame a goddamn marine with her strength.

Connor thought of his apprehension over the dog. Hell, if she wanted a dozen damn dogs, he would go buy her as many as she fell in love with, because he was head over fucking heels in love with her.

“Jenna.” Her name rumbled in his chest, pulling her attention away from her thoughts and onto him. Her green eyes wary, they met his with a touch of uncertainty.

“Are you mad?”

“No, baby. I’m not mad at all. Would you do something for me? Just straddle my legs. I want to look at you properly.” Hands on her hips, he helped her into position. “That’s better. I like looking into your eyes when we talk.”

Automatically, her gaze dropped submissively.

Connor chuckled and cupped her face in both hands. “That means I want to see them, Jenna. All that green virtue showing me your thoughts and feelings. Your eyes make me happy, baby. I love your eyes.”

She squirmed in embarrassment.

“I love you, Jenna.” Connor’s eyebrow flicked up when she gaped at him. “Have you not seen it, all this time, baby? Time’s been skewed for us. We’ve only known each other for a matter of weeks, but the time we’ve spent together...falling in love with you in that time is the easiest thing I’ve ever done.”

Her lower lip trembled; Connor smoothed the quiver with his thumb. “How can you love me when you know what I’ve done?”

He lowered his forehead to hers, needing the connection. “Baby, I love you because of who you are. All you’ve done is do as you’ve been told, under duress. At this point in time, there’s nothing that could stop me loving you.”

Jenna sobbed once, leaned forward to hook her arms around his neck. Her mouth touched his tentatively, asking permission he readily gave. She gasped when his hands slid up into her hair, fisted gently, tipped her head back. “You really mean it?”

Connor nodded slowly, understanding she’d need to hear it often. That was fine by him—he’d tell her every damn day, hourly if needs be. All his life, he’d known he’d been loved. His parents had shown him and his

brothers without fail how much they adored their three sons, and while his father had been more reticent with the words, his mother had not.

Jenna didn't have that memory trail. Until she unlocked the abyss where she'd hidden her past, all she knew was what Sire had given her. So, they would start afresh. Build new memories, set the foundations of a new life together and, he hoped, forge something strong enough to keep her with him when her family came forward.

"I love you, Jenna," he repeated solemnly, enforcing the words with every ounce of what he had inside him for her.

Her eyes glowed with hope and, yes, love. He'd seen both emotions often enough in the mirror when he thought of her to recognize the same in her. It took confidence to say it, so he wasn't too concerned she hadn't said it in return, but it was written all over her face.

The face he wanted to marry, the woman he needed a life with.

"I love you, too." She bit her lip, gave him a watery smile. "Would you kiss me now?"

It had been far too long since he'd been happy in a relationship. Even Louisa hadn't inspired this level of rapture inside him—not the first time in bed, not the first time she submitted to him...not in the entirety of their one-sided commitment.

Jenna encouraged him to be a better man just by existing. His needs came secondary to hers, always. Her happiness, her welfare, could be nothing but his only priority, and he found that sent his dominant side into an almost comatose sense of peace.

"Do you want me to kiss you?" he teased, tracing her now-pouting lips with a fingertip. "Seems like that would make this kind of official."

"I want official. I want you."

Not yet, he reprimanded himself. She didn't mean it that way. Wasn't ready for him *that way*. But if he couldn't claim her physically, he'd damn well make love to her mouth. He'd dreamed of her mouth, hadn't been satisfied with the small samples he'd already stolen.

Gorging himself wasn't wrong, right?

Because as his mouth feasted on hers, it felt really, really right.

Jenna moaned into him, eyes closed, lips moving hesitantly over his as she tried to follow his lead. Connor coaxed her, beckoned her deeper into the kiss with tongue and teasing nips of his teeth.

His cock strained against the zipper, eager to join the union.

Jenna's hips rocked, urging a growling groan from the depths of his chest. He dropped his hands to her waist, kneading carefully, to keep himself from pulling her down harder, grinding her on his erection for relief.

Christ knew he needed some relief from the ache she created.

She whimpered, hardening the ache into pain. The slim form beneath his shirt vibrated with subtle shivers, her breathing coming in fast, shallow pants. She grew braver with her hands, touching him as a man for the first time, her fingers skimming over his shoulders, down his chest as her hips danced.

Desire clouded his judgement, tried damn hard to convince him to just slide his hands under the hem of the shirt, whip it off and away. Let her ride him naked so he could admire her body, slide his hand between those slim thighs and discover heaven.

He'd happily die to achieve satisfaction.

With no small regret, Connor banished visions of hauling her over to the couch, laying her down, and ravishing her. Too soon, too easy to test her trust like that.

Plus, he'd like a bit more control over his base instincts before he had her under him. When she responded so eagerly, so fucking innocently, it was difficult to remember she was untouched. He couldn't promise he wouldn't plunder as well as pleasure.

Arousal did beautiful things to her skin. She glowed like a wildfire, pretty pink with a sweep of darker rose across her cheekbones. Her eyes were huge, dilated and glassy, and blissful.

"More?" She gave him a sweet smile, reinforcing his decision.

"Later, baby. You okay?"

The smile became soft and shy. She licked her lips, rolled them together. A happy little sigh escaped her, a breathy huff of air. "Liked it."

"Me too." Connor kissed her forehead, exhaled deeply. God help them both when sex came into the equation—Jenna would be flying high as a kite, and he'd be right up in the skies with her. "We're not rushing into this, okay, Jenna? We're taking it slow."

She swayed, that wondrous smile in place even as her eyes fluttered closed. The strain of the morning catching up with her, he mused as he pulled her down onto him. She mumbled something, snuffled quietly, and fell asleep.

Connor shook his head and picked her up, carried her over to the couch where he could settle in with her and the TV remote. A lazy hour before Sarah arrived sounded good. An hour with his sleeping woman in his arms, maybe a nap of his own.

He flicked on the TV, cursed a blue streak as a rather energetic orgy burst onto the screen in a flurry of limbs and sound.

“Fucking Cain!”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Seven pairs of eyes watched her.

It was quite disconcerting to be under such intense scrutiny after a nap, especially when four of those pairs weren't human, and another pair belonged to a stranger who scared the crap out of her.

Jenna was sorely tempted to let the child come play so she could sneak back into hiding until the tall, steel-haired man went away. Her little was already enamored with the four big, intimidating dogs sitting to attention.

The man spoke with Connor, not paying his dogs any mind, yet they didn't move. Not one muscle. But they had her in her sights, which freaked her out completely.

"Relax, Jenna," Sarah murmured, moving to stand beside her. She rubbed Jenna's arm briskly. "You'll feel better once you've been introduced properly."

She shook her head. "I don't like them."

"That's okay, sweetheart. If you don't think you'll get on with any of them, that's fine. Just give them a chance?" Sarah pointed subtly at a big black dog with short, cropped ears and muscles like a bull. "That guy might be too much for you. Hell of a dog, though."

Connor nodded as the man said something, then turned and extended his hand to Jenna. "Come on, baby. I'd like you to meet Mackintyre and his crew."

She blanched; her feet rooted to the spot. This was quite close enough, thank you. So far, she'd managed not to pee herself with fear, but between the man and the dogs, her bladder was primed. She didn't really want to be puppy kibble for four large dogs if she moved wrong or did something stupid like trip and fall over her own clumsy feet.

Hard green eyes, several shades lighter than her own, studied her. The stern face of Mackintyre was lined, weathered, and she got the impression he didn't take prisoners in his line of work.

A hand pushed between her shoulder blades. Beside her, Sarah nudged her along with quiet, firm grace.

Dressed in a pair of Connor's sweats, the legs rolled up at the bottom, and the shirt she'd stolen for her own, Jenna resisted. "No."

Immediately, the pressure retreated from her back, became a slow, circular rub over her rigid frame.

"Someone hurt you, girl?" Thunder rumbling down the mountains, that was Mackintyre's voice. Boulders smashing together in an avalanche.

The confidence she'd gained from being around Connor and Sarah and Cain fled. She braced to follow it, wished fervently for Moose. Her knees buckled, but Sarah's arm whipped around her waist and held her up.

Mackintyre grunted thoughtfully. "Brought you the wrong dogs, Doc. Cain said you'd be best with a working guard dog, which is what I've got here." He flicked a finger at the four motionless dogs. "Cane Corso needs a strong handler; so does the Malinois. Got the Doberman, but he's not much for living in the house." He ran his tongue around his teeth and shook his head. "Pit Bull might be your best bet, but Angus came from the pound. Not sure how he'll cope with a...sensitive female as boss."

Connor nodded, held out his hand. "I understand. The situation's more complex than Cain knew, so he wouldn't have the full data to give you. I'm sorry to drag you all the way into town, but I appreciate it."

"Now hold on a minute. Didn't say I couldn't help, did I?" He eyed Jenna—she could feel his eyes raking over her as she kept her gaze submissive, trained on the carpet, when he was looking at her—and grunted again. "You like dogs, girl, or are you scared of them?"

"I-I l-like them, S-Sir." The honorific slipped out automatically.

"Polite, I'll give you that. You anything but scared of these four boys?"

Jenna shook her head fiercely.

"Thought so. I'll be back," he told Connor and, with a snap of his fingers, walked out of the living room with the four massive brutes at his heels. The door didn't slam, but the quiet click finished the job of taking her knees out from under her.

"That is one scary mo-fo," Sarah said with a relieved laugh. "Where the hell does Cain find these people?"

“Benefit of being a bar owner,” Connor replied and helped her lift Jenna back onto her feet. “Sit down, baby. You’ve gone white.” He stroked her nape, smiled at her as they steered her to the couch. “That was a huge improvement. I’m impressed.”

“Can we not just pick a puppy from the pound?” she implored.

“Let’s see what Mackintyre has up his sleeve first. We need something with training, Jenna. The kind of training we don’t know how to do.” He tapped the end of her nose. “It’ll be a pet, baby, but it’ll earn its keep. Cain highly recommends Mackintyre; he’s not involved with the police, but all his dogs meet their grade system.”

The door opened again, snicked shut, and heavy footsteps clomped down the hallway. Mackintyre’s shadow filled the doorway before his physical form reached the room.

Jenna squeezed her eyes tight against whatever demon dog he’d brought to show them now.

Fingers snapped.

“This one’s younger,” Mackintyre said without preamble. “She’s not met her full potential yet, but she likes her work. Very intelligent little bitch. She tolerates me, is willing to learn from me, but there’s no bond between us. She’ll make a fine guard dog when she clicks with her person.”

“Who’s a pretty girl?” Sarah cooed.

Curiosity got the best of Jenna. Opening her eyes, she fell into a pair of jade green eyes, gentle as a doe’s. Her heart stumbled in her chest, and she looked at Connor with astonishment.

Sarah had asked the right question.

“You’re not going to get the full range of training with her as you would the others,” Mackintyre continued. “Everything you need her to know, she has in her.”

“She’s blue,” Jenna blurted.

Something twinkled in the man’s eyes. “Sure she is. Blue German Shepherd, one of the rarest colors for the breed. That adds some to the price,” he told Connor, “but the bitch is worth it. I was lucky enough to get hold of her and her brother. The dog went to a friend of mine, and I kept her.”

It annoyed Jenna that he didn’t call the beautiful animal by name. It was too reminiscent of her own captivity. She cleared her throat. “Does she have a name?”

Both Connor and Sarah turned sharp eyes on her, but she ignored them. Mackintyre lifted his eyebrow. "I don't tend to call them by name, aside from Angus. She's got some fancy name on her pedigree papers. You like this one, girl?"

Jenna's teeth ground together at being called *girl*. She nodded, not trusting her tongue to say something that would have the hide whipped off her bones.

"Hold out your hand, let her sniff you. She'll make her own mind up about you."

He snapped his fingers as Jenna reached out with a shaking hand. She didn't dare touch the silky-looking fur or the damp black nose; instead she held her fingers a few inches away from the dog's muzzle, jerking when the bitch leaned forward to sniff.

Those liquid eyes seemed to drill into Jenna's soul, assessing and considering. Free of Mackintyre's control, the dog rose slowly, sniffed again, nudging trembling fingers firmly before a long, pink tongue lashed out and began to wash Jenna's hand.

"Looks like you've got yourself a dog. Had her eighteen months and not once has she done that with me." Mackintyre stepped away in his heavy combat boots, shoving his hands in his pockets. "You know any commands, girl?"

"S-Sit?"

The dog cocked its head but didn't obey.

"Again. Stronger voice, firm command. No question."

She tried again. "S-Sit."

The dog sat; attention riveted.

"D-Down."

Ears pricked, the bitch dropped onto the carpet and waited.

Nerves calming as she tried different orders, Jenna relaxed and felt a smile breaking through. She slipped off the couch, inched her hand toward the dog's head, gently fondled the velvety ears.

"She'll learn what you teach her. There's two words you need to know; use one, and she'll take the other into her own hands if she thinks you're in danger. Tell her *guard*."

One ear flicked toward her former master, but her eyes remained on Jenna. The intelligence in her gaze astounded Jenna; she had no idea a dog could possess such astuteness.

“Guard,” Jenna repeated, uneasy when the bitch immediately moved to sit by her side instead of in front of her. She looked at Mackintyre.

“Now, *halt* will stop any prior order in its tracks. Say that and she’ll return to your side. Doc, if you’d step forward in a threatening manner, arm raised, fist clenched.”

Connor blinked. “What?”

“Just as I’ve said. Become a threat.”

Frowning, obviously unsure, Connor took a hesitant step forward. His next step was heavier, the next became menacing as he stomped toward Jenna, arm above his head, big hand clenched into a fist.

Jenna cowered immediately, whimpering and throwing her arms over her head to block the blow. It didn’t matter that her head recognized Connor or that she knew he wouldn’t hurt her; mind and body acted on instinct, on years of ingrained violence.

A low, vicious snarl echoed in the room.

Jenna felt warm fur brush over her skin, strong legs landing either side of her head. The snarls became continuous, shuddering down into her body as she curled beneath the dog.

“Perfect match,” Mackintyre said with satisfaction. “Now, if the girl doesn’t say the word, or the good doctor comes any closer, she will attack. The command word is *kill*, but if she thinks her mistress is in danger, she’ll act of her own volition. Take a step back slowly, Doc.”

Jenna groaned as the dog laid on top of her, those savage snarls still rumbling through the heavy body. But the aggression she’d sensed from her ebbed the more Connor backed away.

“H-Halt.”

Doggy kisses rained over her face, making Jenna squeal with delight and disgust. After a thorough bathing, the bitch leaped up and sat, tail wagging energetically.

No, not *the bitch*.

Luna.

“Cain said he was covering the purchase cost.” Evidently happy with the outcome of the test, Mackintyre jumped straight into business. “Given your circumstances, I’ll give you two weeks with her. Any problems, you send her back. No questions asked. Two weeks is up, she’s paid for in full.”

“No,” Connor responded, and Jenna’s head shot up as he crushed her heart in his hand. He looked down at her, then at the dog, and something

flashed in his eyes. “Cain won’t be paying for her. Thank you for the offer, but we don’t need two weeks. Jenna’s smitten with her already, and any dog that defends her that way after ten minutes isn’t going anywhere.”

“Can’t argue with a man who knows what he wants. I’ll go get some stuff from the truck. Nothing much, just a few days’ worth of food until you get your own, a leash. Any problems,” he repeated, “you call me or you send her back.”

“Do you foresee problems?”

“Not with one of my dogs.”

“Excellent. Then let’s get you paid. Appreciate it.” Connor walked out with Mackintyre, leaving Sarah perched on the edge of the couch and Jenna curled on the floor, catching her breath. “Baby, you take deep breaths. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Quiet fell over the room for a few moments. Calmer, Jenna pushed herself up to sitting, rested her back against the couch and her forehead on her knees. Luna sidled closer, licked her arm.

“That is one hell of a fucking dog,” Sarah murmured, sounding shocked. “For God’s sake, let me make friends with her before she eats me.”

Jenna chuckled weakly. “Is she that frightening?”

“Sweetheart, I think I counted pretty much every tooth in that pretty head. She’s gorgeous, absolutely stunning, but I don’t want to be on the wrong side of her.”

“I’m in love,” Jenna admitted.

“With her? Yeah, completely not taken by surprise.”

“With her. With Connor.” It felt wonderful to admit it to someone other than the man himself. To share the joy of belonging with a...with a friend. “We...we kissed.”

Sarah’s grin curved her mouth. “About damn time, the stubborn bastard!”

Jenna stroked the comforting fur under her hand. He’d given her so much—a home, her health, his heart, a dog. Whatever she required, whatever she dreamed of, he strived to get. “How do I ask him for more?”

“Wow. Just wow, Jenna. What *more* are you asking for?”

She shrugged uncomfortably. The snapshot from the porn film etched in her mind, the man’s hand pushing between the woman’s legs. “Maybe... maybe touching?”

“Like heavy petting?” Sarah frowned.

“I-I guess? Cain told me...he suggested I ask you if I...because you’d know if I...” Jenna dropped her head back onto her knees.

“Cain’s a smart man. You want to know if you had sex before you were taken?”

Suddenly afraid of the answer, Jenna swallowed hard. It didn’t make a difference, did it, if she had or hadn’t. She nodded quickly before she backed out of the conversation.

Sarah eased onto the floor beside her, side by side. She took Jenna’s hand, linked fingers with her, squeezed gently. “The night Connor brought you home, you were in a bad state. We sedated you so we could perform an examination without stressing you further. While you were under, I checked for signs of sexual assault, rape, sodomy. There were none. There were indications, however, that there’d never been any sexual contact, ever. In my experienced opinion, sweetheart, you’re a virgin.”

Jenna’s breath shuddered free. “So Connor will be...”

“He’ll be your first lover,” Sarah told her gently. “If you want that.”

Yes, she wanted that. She exhaled slowly. “Is it stupid to be scared?”

“Absolutely not. We all feel differently about our first sexual encounters, Jenna. There’s no trend as to how you should feel. Connor won’t push you into anything. He’ll slam the brakes on if he thinks you’re not ready. If you want to try something, talk it through with him. Ten minutes conversation and he’ll put your mind at rest or keep talking until you’re not scared anymore.”

The front door banged open, something heavy dropped in the hallway, causing both women to jump. Luna shot to her feet, hackles rising, and darted to the doorway, growling in warning.

“Shut up, mutt,” Mackintyre called out easily.

Luna didn’t back down.

“Luna, here. Come here, pretty girl.”

“You named her already?”

“Blue moon. She’s a once in a blue moon dog,” Jenna told Sarah as the dog in question slunk back to her, warily watching the doorway. She plunked down beside Jenna, sitting stiff and straight, ears pricked. “So she’s Luna.”

“You’re learning quickly.” Pride radiated in Sarah’s tone. “Everything deserves a name, sweetheart. She’s a very lucky dog.”

They sat together in relative quiet, three females thrown into one unit through fate and circumstance. Linked by touch, woman to woman to bitch, there was a solidarity Jenna had never realized before. In that moment, it was blindingly clear she was no longer alone.

She had Connor, the best thing in her life, past or present. She couldn't believe there was anything from her past before Sire capable of topping the privilege of having Connor in love with her and being able to love him back.

She had friends in Sarah and Cain. A safety net of friendship and fondness she was happy to reciprocate. Maybe she didn't know how to do a lot of things, and it felt as though she leaned on them both too much, but Jenna wouldn't deny them anything they needed if she could give it.

Now there was Luna. Already she loved the young dog, trusted her to keep her safe. The animal had come to her defense without hesitation, used her own body to protect Jenna against the threat—okay, faux threat—but she'd done it willingly.

Jenna turned her head and looked at Sarah. Her friend was a pretty woman, in nature as well as looks. Jenna knew she didn't look the same; their appearances were completely different, but she'd seen herself in the mirror, lamented over the frail, hollow-eyed ghost reflected back at her.

"Would you help me?" she asked meekly.

Dark eyes roamed over her face, narrowed slightly. "If I can."

"I want to look pretty for Connor. Like you."

Sympathy, then indignation, flashed over Sarah's face. Followed swiftly by anger bright enough to shake the foundation of Jenna's courage. "I'm aware that's a compliment, Jenna, but don't ever imply you're not attractive. I don't like it, and Connor sure as hell won't."

"I-I didn't mean..."

"I get it. I do. It's been a rough recovery, still ongoing. Makes a woman feel less than pleasing to the eye. Doesn't help when your self-confidence and self-worth has fallen through the floor." Sarah squeezed her hand tight enough to make Jenna wince. "But you are fucking beautiful, Jenna. The physical aspects will come—your hair will grow, you'll add a few more pounds, the spark will come back into your eyes. You've already lost that sickly pallor, most of the time. Connor loves what he sees," she added, inadvertently hitting the nail square on the head. "And what he sees is who

you are. Who you *are*, Jenna. I saw him when he brought you in here that night, and he saw through the grime and the fear, and he saw *you*.”

Jenna’s free hand moved to her mouth, her thumb aiming for her mouth as the child pushed to take over. Sarah’s other hand gripped it, tugged it away.

“No, sweetheart. That isn’t how you deal with this. Little Jenna is adorable, she really is, but she can’t deal with this. If you believe you’re ready to go further with Connor, if you’re ready for him to touch you, she can’t be part of that right now. I’ll help you as best I can, but you have to tap into that insane wealth of strength that’s kept you alive for months and handle Connor like a woman, not a child.”

Little Jenna stomped her foot and pouted, sulking like the child she was. If she’d had her plushie in hand, it would’ve been thrown on the floor as her temper tantrum erupted.

“He said we could kiss more later.” Jenna slapped the child down as she tried her hardest to distract Jenna from the conversation.

“Ah. Now we’re hitting a touchy spot. Did you think he was rejecting you?” Stern Sarah lost her strict edge, faded enough for maternal Sarah to make an appearance.

Jenna’s shoulders sagged.

“That makes more sense. Did he explain why he wouldn’t kiss you again?”

“He said we weren’t going to rush things. He wasn’t going to push.”

Sarah’s smile was slow and warm. “Yeah, that’s definitely a Connor thing. Okay, so we’ll break things down. Rampant sexual frustration aside, do you think he was wrong in slowing things down?”

Jenna went back to those moments in the recliner. Relived the stretch of her thigh muscles as her knees hugged Connor’s hips, how the thick ridge between them both unnerved her and fueled the painful emptiness throbbing inside her.

God, she’d wanted him to do the things from the film. Even as his mouth devoured hers, she’d wished for his mouth to go lower, for his head to be between her thighs. Anything, *anything*, to quell the insistent ache.

She’d have done anything, and Connor had known it.

“No. No, he wasn’t.”

“Connor’s not an idiot, sweetheart. Trust me, if it wasn’t going to be your first time, I doubt you’d have made it off that recliner without a good,

hard..." Sarah trailed off, eyes twinkling with mischief. "We won't go there. Let's just say he wouldn't have hesitated. He wasn't rejecting you, sweetheart; he was protecting you, from him."

Jenna frowned. "Connor wouldn't hurt me."

"Connor is a big man with big hands and a big...personality. By personality," Sarah continued wickedly, "I mean cock. The O'Malley brothers are famed for their bedroom skills. Cain especially, since he's rarely in the same bed twice." She laughed delightedly when Jenna's eyes rounded into saucers. "Connor is fully aware he could hurt you if he lost control. Sex can bring an excitement, an urgency, not easily controlled. That's not a bad thing," she reassured her quickly. "Not at all."

Not a bad thing? Jenna shook her head frantically. She'd seen sex at its worst, when control snapped and humanity ceased to exist. She tugged at her hands until Sarah released them, then scrambled to her feet.

Pain and sex were intertwined, she'd *seen* that. How could she be so naïve to think it wouldn't be the same with Connor? He loved her, she believed that, but she wouldn't survive him if he lost control. She imagined his big hands clasped around her throat, powerful fingers strangling the life from her. His body thrusting into hers, unstoppable, as her own writhed in death throes, heels drumming uselessly on the floor.

Imagined still loving him as the man she adored killed her.

"Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. No, Jenna. Listen to me. Let me finish." Sarah was on her feet too, her hands on Jenna's shoulders. "Listen to me, sweetheart."

Anxiety gripped her lungs, slowly choking her. Heart battering against her ribs, jackhammering in her ears, Jenna shoved past Sarah, stumbled out of the room with the dog on her heels. She barely made it around the newel post at the bottom of the stairs.

Panic made her clumsy. Her legs from the knees down were numb, tripping over each step. Carpet burns scorched her palms. Bile and lack of oxygen ripped at her throat.

"Jenna. Jenna."

She crawled the last few steps, collapsed on the landing. Everything shattered around her—hopes, dreams, reality. The future she yearned for slipped from her fingers, toppled into the abyss to join her past.

Past, present and future, all gone.

Eyes open but unseeing, she barely heard Connor's voice calling her name. Heat fell over her, a living blanket, and Luna's savage growls drowned out everything else.

Poised on the steps below Jenna's prone form, Connor wondered whose bright idea it had been to get a personal attack dog. It was a relief to know the several thousand dollars he'd just shelled out for the damn thing were worth it, but it—she, he corrected—wasn't supposed to be guarding Jenna from *him*.

The bitch definitely took her job seriously. She stood over Jenna like a lioness guarding her cubs, hackles raised, head lowered, and incredibly white teeth on full display. She wasn't playing around.

Then again, neither was he.

Connor didn't know what the fuck had happened while he finished the transaction with Mackintyre, but his nurse looked devastated. He'd left her downstairs, white as snow and trembling.

Jenna had shot past him just as he closed the door behind Mackintyre. She hadn't stopped when he called her name, had almost fallen back down the stairs in her haste to get up them.

Something had pulled her trigger.

"All right, dog. This is not getting you and me off to a good start. Halt."

Canine lips peeled back further.

Patience thinning, Connor levelled her with a stare any submissive would submit to. "I'm her protector as much as you are, and she's been mine a lot longer. Back the fuck down." He dropped his voice to a snarl matching the dog's. "Halt."

The bitch's snarls lowered to disgruntled grumbles, but she acknowledged his dominance. Licking her lips, she backed away, sat by Jenna's head with a quiet whine.

"Good girl. Good dog." Moving carefully, Connor approached Jenna while holding out his hand to the dog. He waited for several long seconds before the bitch sniffed and licked his hand, then laid down with a sigh. "Yeah, you're a good girl. I need to take care of my other good girl now, okay?"

He rolled Jenna tentatively, supporting her head. Her eyes were wide open, pupils surrounded by the thinnest sliver of green. "I thought we were past this, baby. This was supposed to be behind us."

Connor lifted her, cradled her, carried her. The winded feeling in his gut wasn't from his mad dash up the stairs to reach her—it came from the helpless sensation of watching her take a massive tumble away from where they'd been heading.

He laid her on his side of the bed, hoping she'd be comforted by his scent on the pillows when she broke from the shock. Murmuring to her, he stripped her down to bare skin, then found her favorite T-shirt—the original one with the bull on the front—and bundled her into it.

The dog leaped up beside him, sniffing curiously over the covers before settling down next to Jenna, her head resting on his woman's shoulder. Those insanely intelligent eyes watched every move he made.

"Making yourself at home pretty quick," he commented dryly. "Just note, when I'm in the bed, you go on the floor. No negotiations on that, dog."

"Jenna named her Luna."

Connor's head whipped up to the doorway. Sarah stood there, half the woman she usually was, with her hands wringing together nervously. "Come on in, Sarah. No need to look so worried. She'll be fine."

"I don't know if she will. I don't know if you guys will."

Alarm bells clanged as a tear slipped down her cheek. Connor patted the bed next to him. He wasn't going to like what she had to say, he decided, but ripping her head off when she was visibly distressed wouldn't solve anything. "Sit down, Sarah. Tell me."

"Connor, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking, and I said the wrong fucking thing. I'm so sorry."

"Sarah. Come. Sit."

Head hanging, she shuffled into the bedroom and sat gingerly beside him. She trembled, and he had to question if she was afraid of him. His answer was a head shake.

Sarah told him her conversation with Jenna from start to horrible finish. Her remorse, clearly evident, negated any anger he might have allowed himself to feel. His friend was already smacking herself around without him adding his two cents.

Years of friendship left him with no doubt she accepted the full blame for the incident, but the truth was, she couldn't. He'd been so busy trying to protect Jenna from sex for a little while longer, he'd pushed her into a

conversation she wasn't quite ready for—he'd recognized her curiosity and blown it off.

Apparently, this was the price he paid.

"I overstepped my bounds, Connor."

He grabbed her hand, forging a link between them. He hated seeing her this way almost as much as he loathed the idea of Jenna having a panic attack thinking he would hurt her. "Sarah, how long have we been friends? Me and you, we have no bounds. You speak your mind, always have, and God willing, always will. Being friends with Jenna makes her happy, and you only did what friends do—you told her the truth."

"She wasn't ready—"

"She has triggers, Sarah. We'd reached a point where she needed to take the next step and instead of nurturing her curiosity, I restricted it. This is a result of my actions, not yours. The consequences are mine to fix, and believe me, I will fix them." He leaned over and kissed her temple. "My best friend wouldn't do anything to sabotage me or the woman I love—not when you love her just as much. Go home to Zeke, Sarah. Have a good cry on his shoulder, fuck his brains out, and have a quiet evening with the family when the boys get home from school. Tomorrow's a new day."

"I do love her, Con. She's like my baby sister."

"I know." He patted their joined hands on her knee. "So does she."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Fortune favors the wicked. Sire lifted his glass to the sentiment, tapped it against his protégé's with a satisfying clink of quality crystal. He'd broken out one of his most prized bottles of whisky for the occasion—it was rare for his protégé to visit, and this was a visit worth celebrating with his Glenfarclas 1955.

Not the most expensive in his collection at eleven-thousand dollars, but one of his favorites.

Seated in deep leather chairs in front of a roaring wood fire on a bitterly cold winter's eve, anyone would think they were simply two gentlemen settled in for the evening, discussing business and politics.

No one would guess the reality.

Two predatory monsters secluded in their lair, plotting the demise of the only one who ever got away.

Two months without Twenty-Two was long enough.

"Does this mean I've got the go-ahead to pick the whiny little bitch up now?" The man across from Sire drank deep of the rich whisky like a peasant, gulping it rather than savoring the fine flavor. If he hadn't been so useful over the years, and Sire's fondness had waned instead of grown, he would have been terminated a decade ago. "The situation is making me edgy."

Sire sipped from his own glass, let the whisky sit on his tongue for a moment. "You refer to the situation regarding FBI presence within that sleepy shithole she's hiding in."

Stormy eyes rolled. "Yes, that one."

"You need to fuck your whore more, boy. That temper of yours is slipping." It was a warning, subtle but effective. "I appreciate your concern,

but Agent Hadley doesn't worry me. Our songbird will have taken wing before he knows she's flown the nest."

"Can't fuck the whore. I took care of that earlier."

"Are you telling me you ended Twelve's contract?" Sire referred to his protégé's latest acquisition. The master had trained the student well, in all walks of life, but the student could still be headstrong and impulsive, even after eighteen years of guidance. "For what reason?"

The sulky shrug and stare annoyed him. "The feds are crawling all over the town. They have no reason to suspect me, but if they do, I don't want any trace of her in my place. I dropped her over the state line this morning."

Sire closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose. Why was he always surrounded by such cowardice? "Decisions made in haste lead to mistakes. How often have I told you that? The FBI have been trying to find me for nearly two decades, boy, and have never come close. They won't now."

"Times have changed, Sire. Technology has changed, improved."

"Have you changed your mind about partaking in the lifestyle?"

"What? No. You changed my life back then. Opened my eyes to what I'm supposed to be. I'd just rather cover my ass—and yours—before they strap me down in the electric chair."

"No faith, boy—that will be your downfall. We are above the law. Above morality and the common man. Women serve their true purpose under our hands and we balance life and death in our palms. We do not fear death," Sire said solemnly.

"Death fears us," the man finished with a nod. "I remember. It was the first lesson you taught me outside the classroom. After our first joint kill."

Ah, a pleasant memory. Although setting the scene for the police had been more satisfying than the kill itself. Tampering with a coroner's report had proved most thrilling. "I'm pleased you recall the basics. Well, Twelve was yours to do with as you wished. May Thirteen give you as much enjoyment."

They lifted glasses again.

"Now, back to our errant songbird. I trust you made the necessary adjustments to her cage while I was working this morning?"

A wicked grin spread over a handsome face, morphing charming into cruel. "Everything is in place. I've shored up the weak points and repaired the door, added several new locks. The screen is as you ordered and hooked

up to the electric. Security cameras are checked, working. I added a set of manacles—hands and throat—to reinforced beams. Just in case.”

“An excellent idea.”

“Thank you. I wouldn’t mind a few hours with her in there. If Connor hasn’t popped her cherry yet, I’ll make sure it goes with a bang.”

Sire scowled. “That privilege is mine. Whether I decide to share her with you is still under consideration. I’ll re-evaluate the idea when she’s safely back in her shed.”

“This one is as much mine as yours, Sire. I’m risking everything to reacquire her.”

At least he argued with respect, Sire mused. He wouldn’t tolerate disrespect from anyone, not even someone who was working his way towards being an equal in the field of manipulation and murder.

“Very well. We’ll take her together as a final farewell. Let the songbird sing her last note with our hands around her throat.” Sire smiled over the rim of his glass before he sipped. “Take her when you’re ready, boy. I’m excited to welcome her home.”

Jenna stared at the ceiling.

She’d been awake for hours, long before the dawn came, and dawn had passed a long time ago. She didn’t have the energy—physically or emotionally—to so much as roll onto her side. Drained of the will to live, she felt as though she’d been transported back to the beginning of this misadventure.

Luna sprawled beside her, feet twitching and kicking as she dreamed. Jenna’s hand lay motionless on the dog’s side, a simple comfort she couldn’t enjoy.

Aside from the sleeping canine, the bed was empty.

Connor wasn’t there, and she was miserable.

“You and I need to finish the conversation you had with Sarah yesterday. The longer it’s left as it stands, the more you’re going to fear me and what you believe sex entails.”

Startled, Jenna squeaked, sitting upright and blinking at the figure in the doorway. Connor filled it, blocking her escape route, and she edged back on the bed as he approached.

Luna lifted her head, started to growl, then went back to sleep when Connor pointed his finger at her.

Dressed only in black boxers, Connor stood beside the bed. Muscle rippled down his arms and chest as he crossed his arms and scowled. “Don’t ever cower from me, baby. Angry or not, I’ll never lift a hand to you in anger.”

Her thumb ascended to her mouth.

“No.” The command reverberated deep enough that Luna slunk off the bed and curled up on the floor. “This is between me and you, Jenna. My little girl has nothing to do with it, and it’s gonna stay that way. Move over.”

Dropping her hand into her lap, Jenna blinked at him. “I panicked.”

“You did. You reverted back to the poor, beaten girl cringing on a barroom floor. We lost trust last night, you and I. This morning, we’re getting it back.” Connor shoved his thumbs in the waistband of his boxers and pushed them down, kicked them off.

Jenna’s breath snagged. Her eyes veered up and over his shoulder as she instinctively slickened for the dominant male her body desired. “I changed my mind. I’m not ready, for any of it.”

“That’s your prerogative, baby. I’m not going to force you into anything you don’t want. I never will.” He tossed the covers back and effortlessly pushed her across the mattress until he could slide into the warmth. “Sarah said some things yesterday that can’t be taken back. They can be amended, as you didn’t let her finish what she had to say.”

Jenna bit her lip. “She said you might lose control. That you might hurt me if you lost control.”

“*Might*. Not *will*. Did she say anything else?” He reached down and drew the covers over them both, covering up the *big personality* Sarah had mentioned.

Larger than life personality, Jenna corrected silently.

He wasn’t more than a handspan away. His heat and scent were already whispering around her, soothing the rigid tension she’d carried since she woke. There was a sternness to his tone, but he wasn’t furious.

“She said it wasn’t a bad thing.”

Connor nodded and hooked his hands beneath his head. “Do you think Sarah would lie to you, baby? After all this time, would she lie to you to make me happy? She loves you, Jenna. She wants to see you happy, just like I do, and I managed to fuck it up royally.”

“I ran away.”

“You went to hide away, there’s a difference. We came close to having sex yesterday, Jenna. A few more minutes of kissing you, and I’d’ve been lost in you. Making the choice to back away hurt you, and I’m sorry. You expressed curiosity, and I shot you down because yes, if I lose control with you, I will fuck you. Hard, fast, rough. You’d come more times than you could count, and maybe it would hurt a little. But not in the way you think, Jenna.”

Her thumb plugged her mouth regardless of his previous order. This was not the Connor she was used to. No, Sir. This Connor was to the point, pulling no punches, and he radiated prime male vibes that set her belly fluttering.

“I’m looking forward to it. Curious little kittens should have the opportunity to experience everything they dream of, Jenna. Every wish, fantasy, fleeting thought. I’ll give you all of it. Show you every nuance of sex from black to white. But before I do that, I want to make love to you.”

Her throat clicked on a swallow.

“Have we lost all the trust between us, baby?”

Jenna shook her head. Sarah had inadvertently hit a sore spot in Jenna’s defenses, shaken them down to the soul, but the trust was still standing strong. “No, Daddy.”

His eyes darkened. “Then why are you so far away?”

“I-I’m right here...”

“That’s too far, baby.”

Forgiveness. He’d forgiven her for freaking out, for running away in blind terror when she should have run to him. She’d lost her faith in him, in them, but Connor was willing to set it aside and work on rebuilding what her distrust had damaged.

She didn’t deserve a Daddy like him.

Jenna inched over the mattress toward him, closing the small gap in increments as she gauged his reaction. Her gasp echoed in the room when his arm slid under her, curled around and pulled her flush against his body.

“There, that’s how I like my girl,” he crooned. “You’re not in trouble, Jenna. You’re not in danger. Make yourself comfortable.” He grabbed the TV remote from the bedside table, switched it on. Channels flipped past until he found a popular zombie show, then he set the remote aside and rested back on the pillows.

Flush against his hard frame, Jenna took a slow breath. Tentatively, her arm draped over his bare stomach. Muscles twitched at the contact. She tucked her head into his shoulder and waited.

Fingers trailed up her spine over the T-shirt, back down to the crease of her butt. Up and down, one slow motion of sensation. Tension seeped from her limbs, gave her enough room to sigh and snuggle into his warmth.

She listened to the voices from the TV, jolted at the screams that occasionally disturbed her peace, and surrendered to Connor's touch.

Up and down. Up and down.

For a while, she dozed. Lulled by his hand, comforted by his scent. This was how she wanted to be with him. This is what she found in him. Solace.

Her fingers kneaded his skin, traced his ribs. Absently, thoughtlessly. Eyes half-closed, mind blissfully clear, she explored his torso with light fingers. He had smooth skin, not marred like hers.

There were hairs on his chest, downy beneath her fingertips. His breath caught when she brushed over his nipple, toyed with the raised nub idly. Her hand drifted down, palm skimming over the firm ridges of his belly, fingers circling his navel.

Connor's guttural groan jolted her from her mindless journey. His hand grasped hers before she could snatch it away. "Nothing you've done is wrong, baby. It feels really nice."

Pride spread through her. She'd made him happy. She turned her face into his shoulder and smiled shyly, not quite sure what to do with the sliver of praise. "I-I...I don't know what to do now."

"Whatever you want, baby. No pressure."

Take the gift, Cain had told her. Trust the man she loved. She was his woman, and he was her warrior. There was nothing to worry about. He wouldn't squander his hold on control, not when he knew how much she worried.

Jenna pushed herself up, made herself meet Connor's eyes. They were the darkest she'd seen them, lust and love warring for prime position. Her hands reached down, fingers curling around the hem of her T-shirt. She saw lust win an instant before she pulled her last defense over her head and tossed it aside.

"Brave girl," he murmured. "Brave, beautiful girl."

Her nipples peaked as her barely existent breasts tightened. A new and strange sensation that shot wet heat between her legs. She squirmed in

place, hoping to ease the annoying ache building inside her yet again.

“Want me to make it go away?” Connor grinned at her, obviously amused by her frustrated wiggles.

She glanced at his body beneath the covers, gaze dropping to the small mountain at his crotch. Connor appeared unperturbed by the phenomenon, but Jenna...that damn curiosity kept raising its head, urging her to get into bother.

“Ah,” he mused, eyebrow cocking with surprise. Without flare, he drew the covers down low enough to expose the hard length of his erection. It sprang upwards, released from its confines, bobbing under its own weight.

Huh.

Jenna bit her lip, gulped. She’d seen glimpses of him before, but the full effect hadn’t really hit her. Not like this. “Um...”

“It’s above average,” Connor informed her with a placating undertone. “It’s not a weapon.”

Sure looked like one. Jenna looked down at her hand, doubted she’d be able to enclose it in her fingers. More worryingly, she guessed both her hands combined wouldn’t compete with the length. “Sarah wasn’t kidding about your personality,” she said, suddenly dry-mouthed.

Connor winked. “The O’Malley brothers’ legacy.”

“If you lose control with that...” she murmured nervously.

His eyes lost their manic, lustful edge and became utterly sympathetic. “Baby, you can’t think like that. When you’re ready for me, you won’t know anything but pleasure after the first few seconds. After that, you won’t have to worry about it again.” His hand slipped to her nape, rubbed. “Give me your hand.”

“First few seconds?”

“Thought you’d cotton on to that. I know what I’m doing, baby. Trust me, all this worry will seem like a dim memory afterwards. We’re not there yet, anyway.” The hand on her nape tugged her down for a kiss. “Taking care of you from start to finish is the only thing on my mind.”

Kissing she liked—Connor’s lips on hers sent her head into a spin. Gave her a sensation not unlike bubbles in her blood, building heat and arousal into a wicked high. She laid down again, twisting so she curled into him for easier access to his mouth, but he had other ideas.

He shoved himself up against the headboard, adjusting pillows behind his back as she slipped and squeaked. He chuckled, his hands supporting

her as he made himself comfortable. “Okay, baby, climb on.”

“I...what?”

He patted his strong thighs. “Swing your leg over and sit. Right here.”

Right here put her in incredibly close proximity to the erection that made her nervous. That seemed hasty, didn’t it? Wasn’t she supposed to make its acquaintance before sitting so close? Her little side poked her head up; adult Jenna knocked her back down.

This wasn’t a situation for a little.

Connor waited patiently, storm cloud eyes gleaming, face passive. He wasn’t rushing her, which helped solidify her decision to scoot nearer and clumsily lift her leg over his—with aid from big, strong hands.

Jenna blushed fiercely, realizing too late just how exposed her position made her. Where dampness gathered, she felt open and vulnerable. Her hand whipped down to shield herself.

“That’s a shame. I was enjoying looking at that sweet pussy.” A hum of pleasure accompanied his words. “Such a pretty pussy, Jenna. All pink and wet for me. Will you let me see?”

So persuasive, she thought. Only the devil should be allowed such persuasive power over a woman. Maybe he *was* the devil, sent to tempt her and lead her into sin. But oh, what a way to fall.

Eyes averted, she moved her hand and received the best reward—a long stroke of his fingers down her thigh and a gratified purr reverberating through his chest. “Clever girl. Will you give me your hand now, baby?”

Will you? A question, a request, not a demand.

Jenna submitted, choosing to walk the easy road with him instead of fighting him every step of the way. Struggling with doubt and fear couldn’t be more exhausting, and she was sick of being unsure of his actions. He shouldn’t have to prove himself any more than he already had.

Ready to prove herself worthy of his love, she held out her hand.

“If you get uncomfortable or scared, you tell me. Immediately.” The edge of his tone boded no argument. “Okay, baby?”

His fingers linked through hers, his palm to the back of her hand, and he guided her to his erection confidently. She might have trembled, but Connor simply ran his free hand up and down the side of her thigh, inciting a riot of tingles racing madly to her sex.

Smooth, hot flesh met her palm. Her fingers twitched, then she relaxed and lost herself in the fascination of exploring him. She discovered her

estimation of his girth was indeed correct, as was her guess at the length. Being a virgin didn't mean she wasn't appreciative of what he possessed.

Connor grunted, hips flexing as she stroked him with their joined hands. Nerves faded into wonder when she understood her touch affected him in so many ways. When she stroked, he arched. Running her thumb over the rounded head, through the slick drop in the eye, made him groan so low in his throat she thought she caused pain.

Jenna noted the fine sheen of sweat glistening over muscles slowly hardening into a sculpture of rigid beauty. One formed by *her* inquisitiveness, her skin on his.

Wasn't that just wonderful?

His shaft throbbed and she could feel his heart pulse along beneath the skin. Blood pumped harder beneath her fingers when she squeezed.

Connor's hand left hers, gripped the sheets. Cords rose in his neck, his head falling back to thunk against the headboard. "Baby, not to alarm you, but you keep that up and I'm going to come."

"Do you...should I stop?"

"God, no. This is...you're amazing, Jenna. Just like that."

Could that be a touch of desperation eking into his voice? Her little's mischievous side wanted to play, had a naughty urge to see if Daddy would beg. She didn't know where he was going to 'come', but she'd like to come with him.

Stroking a little harder, a bit faster, she was shocked when he cursed, the sheets almost ripping in his fists, and creamy fluid spurted almost violently from the dark red head of his erection.

Oh God, oh God, she'd broken him.

More relaxed than any handjob in his history had ever achieved, Connor sagged onto the mattress as his straining muscles went blessedly limp. Two months of stress simply seeped away, leaving him panting and feeling so fucking good.

Jenna, however, looked horrified.

"I broke you," she whispered, staring at her hands as though they were lethal weapons she'd never seen before. Maybe they were because, goddamn it, he'd been close enough to heaven to touch the pearly freaking gates.

“Baby, look at me. At me,” he coaxed when she began to shake. He half-turned, delved into the bedside drawers for a handful of tissues to clean up with, and quickly dealt with his mess. Then he gathered her into him, shifted her *very* carefully on his lap, and rocked her. “I came, Jenna, that’s all. You made me feel really, really good. You should be so proud, baby.”

“Proud I broke you?” She sounded so indignant, he had to angle his face into her hair to hide his smile.

He’d give anything to let her keep her innocence. She was so refreshing, and just a little naïve. There was a lot to teach her, especially now the expanse of her sexual knowledge became clear. “Not broken. All fixed.” He kissed her temple, her cheek.

She tilted her back, watching him with concern. “Really?”

“Absolutely.” In fact, he thought it was time she learned just how *fixed* an orgasm could make a person. Particularly a person keyed toward stress and anxiety. “Will you trust me to show you?”

Wide-eyed but willing, Jenna nodded. He heard her breath shudder out, followed by a sharp inhale as he rolled her onto her back beside him. She blinked up at him in shock, her arm creeping toward her breasts.

“I’m going to need access to those,” he admonished lightly, smiling as she dropped said arm back to the bed. “Good girl. Now, where should I start with this beautiful body? Here?” His fingertips caressed the long line of her throat. “Or here?” Across her collarbone, her sternum. Down between her breasts. “Maybe I’ll save these for later.”

Connor mimicked the stance she’d taken with him, straddling her tiny frame between his longer legs. Leaning forward slowly, unwilling to spook her when huge green eyes focused on him like a hawk, he kissed her sweetly.

He kept his weight off her for now. A big man, he outweighed her, and he hated the thought of making her feel claustrophobic, trapped beneath him. His lips cruised over her jaw, down her throat on the same path his fingers had traced.

Her pulse rabbited under his mouth.

He nipped at her collarbone, licked away the slight sting he knew his teeth would leave behind. The tang of sweat and her own unique taste filled his mouth; he went on a mission to sample every inch of her.

By the time he reached her breasts, Jenna whined with frustration. His girl was getting antsy, a rosy flush warming her skin. She froze as his lips

kissed each and every letter of the offensive brand in her flesh.

Lies, the biggest one of all, but the damned thing was part of her for now, and he'd promised to worship every inch of her. An idea popped into his head as he ran his nose around her nipple, causing the already tight bud to pucker further, just right for his mouth to claim.

Lips, teeth and tongue paid special attention to both needy nubs, and his cock stirred to life once again when Jenna's whines upgraded to needy whimpers.

He moved down, leaving her wanting for a few seconds as he repositioned himself between her legs. Hands and mouth worked together now, fingers teasing her nipples, his mouth pressing soft kisses to her mound.

"Pl-Please," she whispered, hips lifting off the bed.

Her pussy, just inches away, smelled divine. The sweetest scent of arousal, the highest of powerful aphrodisiacs. Plump labia, erotically pink where they parted. Liquid desire seeping from the most perfect, untouched pussy he'd ever seen.

Fuck, he was a lucky man.

Lucky men didn't fuck up, he reminded himself. No matter how strong his urges, Jenna remained his priority. As a man, a doctor, a Dominant and a Daddy, his promise to her held strong between the tether of those four individual elements merged into one.

"Tell me."

Long, lean thighs quivered as he hooked his arms beneath them, his hands curving around the slim tops. Restless hips tilted back, he waited for her answer.

"Please. Please touch me."

He studied her eyes, so dilated with desire only a minute green ring remained. She pleased him beyond the knowing of it—her trust was irreplaceable, her faith in his promise uncompromised despite everything.

Connor swore his eyes rolled back in his head at the first languid lick. Her shocked cry registered, more stunned pleasure than discomfort, so he moved his hands, used his fingers to part her pussy for his tongue, and delved into heaven.

His orgasm had brought him close, but sweet Jesus, this was incomparable. His body felt as though he'd been shoved face first into those pearly gates and ungodly energy careened into his blood. Of course, it was

quite possible he was being struck down for tainting an angel's virtue, but the trip to hell was so fucking worth it.

A starving man with a feast for the taking, Connor devoured her. Her cries came quickly, the sharp noises growing in volume and pitch as his tongue dipped inside her, lapped. His nose brushed her clit, the shy bundle of nerves still hiding away, and Jenna nearly bolted off the bed.

"Relax, baby, I've got you."

Small fingers shot into his hair, grabbed handfuls. Fisted and pulled when he closed his mouth over her bashful clit and sucked gently. He held on as her hips bucked, scraped his teeth lightly over the insanely sensitive bud, and listened to her wail.

Moments before she came, he shifted position, holding onto one thigh and bringing a hand to aid his pursuit. Circling the entrance to her entrance, he soothed her, reassured her as she asked him what was happening, why she felt this way. Asked him if she was going to die.

That last question held a serious note he couldn't ignore. "Relax and breathe, Jenna. This is all normal, I promise. Just relax and breathe," he repeated. "Trust me."

Teasing her to the pinnacle again took only a minute. Fires anxiety had almost extinguished roared back to life with careful manipulation of his tongue. As the first spasm wracked her, arching her body like a bridge over forgotten waters, he probed her gently, pushed deep with a single finger as she clenched and released with—mother of all things fucking holy—the tightest pussy in existence.

Jenna screamed, muscles seized as the force of her orgasm paralyzed her nervous system. He thrust in slow, measured time, giving her internal muscles something to clamp down on, nurturing the climax for another twenty seconds before her muscles unlocked and she collapsed bonelessly onto the mattress.

She was almost sobbing, her legs jerking and twitching. Sweat drenched her. Her eyes, unfocused and glassy, sought his. Her hand lifted an inch off the bed toward him, flopped limply down again.

Connor didn't hesitate, moving straight into aftercare without a thought for his now painfully throbbing cock. He withdrew his finger slowly, wanting her to remember a killer orgasm, not discomfort from a hasty retreat.

Off the bed and across the room in a heartbeat, he snagged a blanket from a pile he'd accumulated just for this purpose. The royal blue fleece was soft, warm, and could have been crafted from a cloud. He climbed back onto the bed, covering his lap and shoulder with half the blanket, then lifted Jenna onto his lap and swiftly wrapped her up.

This was where caring for her really mattered. She hadn't hit subspace, not by a long shot, but he'd given enough women orgasms to recognize a shattering release. The kind that loosened locks on repressed emotions and sent the woman into a tailspin.

Chemicals and hormones spinning through the system could create one hell of a breakdown, and Jenna wasn't the type of woman to ride the wave, acknowledge it, and carry on as though it was an everyday occurrence.

"Who's my good girl? Who's my best girl, baby?" Connor rocked her, hands petting and stroking before the emotional drop took a deep hold. She was trembling so viciously, the aftermath sank into his bones. "You are. You did so well, Jenna. Such a clever, responsive girl."

A sob hiccupped from within the fleece, and Connor braced for the next. It came a few seconds later, followed by another. He rocked and crooned, hummed and stroked, until the storm passed.

For another twenty minutes after the waters cleared.

The trembling finally stopped. Jenna went limp, but when he peeked at her, tears glistened on open lashes like raindrops on a sunny morning. Her pupils were almost back to normal, her breathing calm and easy. She regarded him with something akin to awe.

"Thank you, Daddy," she murmured before her thumb disappeared into her mouth. Her go-to self-comfort method.

Adult Jenna had snuck away in the chaos to recover, he mused. Quite frankly, he wasn't surprised. She'd had her eyes opened and her curiosity satisfied—maybe not to the full extent, but certainly beyond heavy petting—and that was something she'd need to process.

"Are you okay, Jenna?"

She nodded sleepily, her lips curving adorably.

"Do you want me to get you anything?"

The thumb popped out. "Moose. Luna."

Shit. He'd forgotten the damn dog. Connor cast an eye over the edge of the bed, saw eyes gleaming at him. Yeah, Luna the guard mutt didn't look impressed at bearing witness to Jenna's sexual awakening.

Connor found Moose stuffed under Jenna's pillow and tucked it into the blanket where limp arms cuddled him tight. They were comfortable, cozy, with Jenna's head resting beneath his chin, her body settled into his body perfectly. He didn't want to move ever again.

"I'll make you a deal," he said quietly to the baleful dog. "You can get on the bed if you lie down and let me hold her for a while. After, I'll let you out and feed you. Agreed?"

Intelligent eyes blinked, then Luna sat up, tail wagging. When he patted the mattress, she hesitated until he patted again. Agile as a goat, she leaped and padded around the bed until she flopped beside him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ten days after their first foray into intimacy, Connor's life reverted back to a semblance of normality. It gave him a glimpse into what life with Jenna would be like when this shit with Sire was finally over.

They went to bed together on a night after dinner and watched TV in bed while hands roamed, and mouths teased. They woke together, sometimes with Jenna tucked into him, other times with just skin touching skin in the form of fingers or feet.

Jenna had gravitated more toward adult Jenna a lot, employing little Jenna only when she was troubled or upset. She seemed settled, falling into their daily routine with ease, although he still couldn't get her out of the house—not even into the backyard with Luna.

His clinic hours altered slightly, finishing earlier in an afternoon unless it was an emergency, and he liked spending the time with Jenna. Sarah sure as hell appreciated the extra time with her twins and husband.

His friend had returned to the house contrite, although somewhat less broken, and groveled profusely to Jenna with fervor. There'd been tears on both sides, and Connor grimaced, remembering the strange babble of crying females. How the hell they'd understood what the other was saying, he didn't know, because he hadn't. Not a freaking word of it.

While he worked in the clinic with Sarah, Jenna spent her time with Luna, and the pair were inseparable. The only time Luna could be found away from Jenna's side was when she was in the yard doing her doggy business. Jenna was also putting a lot of time and effort into improving her reading and writing skills.

He loved his life, what it had become, since Jenna fell into it. He had purpose now that he hadn't had before. Helping people was in his nature, it

was why he'd become a doctor, but with Jenna in his life, there was a satisfaction to his work. She'd changed *everything*.

Coffee cup in hand, bread in the toaster for their breakfast, and Jenna happily tucking into her candy-topped cereal, Connor answered the knock at the door with a grin as his girl chattered away to the dog.

His world collapsed with one look at Special Agent Hadley's face.

"Morning, Connor. May I come in?"

Connor closed his eyes briefly, pushed away the hopeless feeling that he'd lost Jenna. He heard her giggle, call his name, and he opened his eyes again, meeting the sharp blue gaze of the agent who was slowly becoming a friend. "I'll be there in a minute, baby."

"Might as well let me in, Connor. I can stand here all day if I have to, but I'd prefer to get this over with." Hadley shifted a stack of files under his arm, tucking them in close to his side. "Not to mention it's fucking freezing out here."

"Gonna snow," Connor murmured, wondering how badly Hadley's news would hit Jenna. He'd known this was coming all along, but somehow, he'd convinced himself it wouldn't. How foolish of him. "Come in."

Hadley stepped inside, shrugged off his jacket, swapping the files from hand to hand. He'd been in the house often enough now he simply hung his jacket on the peg beside the door. But instead of wandering into the kitchen to see Jenna, he proved he was really on duty. "Is there somewhere we can talk? Jenna included."

Sickness curled in his gut. "Living room. You want anything?"

Hadley set his free hand on Connor's shoulder. "This is a good thing, buddy. It's going to be hard, but it's necessary." Stepping toward the living room, he called back, "That coffee smells good, if you wouldn't mind."

Dazed, Connor walked into the kitchen. Jenna looked up with a guilty expression, quickly whipping her spoon out of Luna's mouth, then beamed at him. The picture of innocence, while Luna wore a smug expression and licked her lips free of milk.

"Did I hear Hadley's voice?" Jenna asked quietly, evidently picking up on his somber mood—something he hadn't left the kitchen with moments before.

He topped off his coffee, poured a second cup for the agent. "Yeah, baby. Hadley's here." Understanding she still wasn't entirely comfortable

with the agent, he glanced at her over his shoulder, noted the way she now stared at the empty cereal bowl. It didn't escape him how she gripped the table with one hand, the spoon with the other, as though grounding herself. "Unexpected visitors are part of a normal social life, Jenna. Folks drop in on a whim, come for a cup of coffee," he demonstrated by lifting a mug, "and hang around for a chat."

"He's not here for a chat."

Oh, she knew, he thought. She knew exactly why Hadley was here, and she was as scared as Connor about what the outcome might be. They hadn't really talked of what would happen when this day came, and Connor kicked himself for putting it off. They both floundered now, and he wasn't sure he could keep them both afloat. "No, he's not. But he's in charge of the investigation, Jenna. He's only trying to help, doing his job. Least we can do is listen."

"No."

"Jenna, baby, he's not taking you away from me."

"I said no!" She shouted it, shoving away from the table with a screech of chair legs on tile. The noise shot Luna to her feet, hackles up and guard mode on high. "No!"

Connor abandoned the mugs and whirled as she made a dash for the door. His arm looped around her waist, held her fast, but he wasn't prepared for his girl to turn feral in his arms.

Jenna kicked and scratched, teeth snapping as effectively as Luna's. He snapped out an order for the dog to sit, another one for Jenna, but she was riding high on panic and stubbornness. Her heels battered his shins, her nails raked his forearms.

Connor managed to spin her, press her face to his chest. Her tiny fists hammered his torso as muffled *no*'s turned into a sobbing chant. "Stop it, Jenna. Stop it *right now*."

She howled, breaking his heart.

Her weight went dead in his arms and he scrambled to keep her upright, adjusting her body so she didn't just slide to the floor. "This won't change anything, baby. Fighting me won't change the future."

"I don't want to know. That's not who I am anymore."

"Maybe not, but she's who you used to be, Jenna. She's still part of you, even if you don't remember her." Connor hitched her up so she could lay her head on his shoulder like a child, certain little Jenna would be making

an appearance anytime soon. "It might be you have people who miss you. Parents, family, friends. People who've grieved for you for years without knowing what happened to you. They had no body for closure, baby. They've been as lost as you have."

"I forgot them," she said miserably. "I forgot them to protect myself."

"No," he responded firmly, adding a dominant edge to his tone. "No, you didn't. You protected them by locking them away, Jenna. Kept them safe. They'll come back to you. Maybe this is the start to finding them again."

"Maybe they won't like who I am now."

He grunted. "If they don't, they're idiots. Do you want to know what I think, baby?"

She pushed back enough to see his eyes, and he tightened his arms to keep her secure. Misery dulled the green of hers, and he saw the child pushing at the boundary line. Holding on by a thread. "I guess."

"I think it'll hurt, you and them, to acknowledge who you were and why she's gone. It'll be hard for them to come to terms with what's been done to you. But they're going to look into your eyes, baby, these goddamn eyes I adore, and they're going to see some part of her in you and know you're one and the same. Because they're not idiots, they're still going to love you."

"I only want to love you."

Connor's heart swelled. He wouldn't mind being the only one she loved, but denying her heritage, the people who'd loved her long before he'd laid eyes on her, was a disservice to everyone involved in this fiasco. Sire had torn apart families, taken mothers from husbands and sons, daughters from parents and siblings. Mothers, daughters, wives, sisters... none of them had been safe from his reach, Jenna included.

But of all the ones taken, all the lives thoughtlessly ended, Jenna had survived him. They owed it to the fallen women and their families to at least give Jenna the opportunity to be reunited with her own.

"Trouble is, baby, your heart's just too damn big to love just me." He kissed her gently, coaxing her sorry mood into something a fraction lighter. "Now me? My heart's so small, there's only room for you."

"I love you, Connor."

"I love you too, Jenna." Another kiss, hotter and sweeter, before he let her slide down his body. They both shivered at the contact. "Let's go bite

the bullet, baby. It's been coming long enough."

Luna whined and padded over, nudging her nose into Jenna's hand. Connor turned to gather both mugs in one hand, then linked his fingers through hers, leading her into the living room.

She stopped him before they reached the threshold. "Tonight, Connor."

"What's tonight?"

She rubbed her toes along the carpet, flushing with color that no longer looked out of place on her face. "I'd like to be with you tonight. Properly. All the way with you."

Well shit, now his cock was awake, primed for action. He decided it would be insulting to question her, and he sure as fuck wasn't about to reject her. It was her choice, a more well-informed one than before, and he wouldn't argue it. "Okay. If that's what you want, tonight's the night."

She nodded once, bit her lip, and tightened her fingers through his.

Assuming they were ready, Connor walked into the room, Jenna beside him and the dog at their heels. He caught Hadley's look of delight as he saw Luna and offered the mug of black coffee before taking Jenna to the recliner. With her snugly curled on his lap, he focused his attention on the agent.

"I love that fucking dog," Hadley murmured, staring at her with envy.

Luna dropped into her position beside the recliner, rolling onto her side. As long as she was near Jenna, she was happy.

"Okay, so I'm guessing you both know why I'm here. I'm sorry it's taken so long—there was a mix-up with samples in the lab, and some went missing. We've had evidence tampered with, case files walk, and photographic evidence destroyed." A dark expression crossed over Hadley's face. "Since news of Jenna hit the bureau, things have been going wrong left, right and center. Two lab techs were arrested and interrogated on suspicion of several crimes relating to these obstructions, and it's likely both will be charged with aiding and abetting Sire."

Connor's mouth dropped open. "The fucker got to people in the FBI?"

"We're beginning to believe he can get to whoever he needs to in order to keep up his...lifestyle. The two individuals lawyered up quickly, and shut their mouths like clams, so there's no positive confirmation Sire is behind the damage, but it's my gut instinct he's involved."

His first thought was security. "You've got men in town. Who's to say they aren't on his goddamn payroll, keeping tabs on Jenna?"

Hadley nodded. "My team went through strict screening before being assigned to this case. I personally read each file and selected the team *before* the screening. I trust them implicitly." He inclined his head. "But for the sake of safety, the screens are being run again, deeper than before. I'm positive they'll come back clean."

Connor ran his fingers through Jenna's hair and waited.

"My team narrowed the search down to three missing females matching Jenna's description. One from New York, one from Texas, and the last one from Colorado. DNA testing eliminated the Texan and the New York female. It also confirmed Jenna as the missing woman from Colorado."

Silence fell over the room. Hadley let it ride for a few moments as though prepared to field a barrage of questions, then continued. "Penelope Violet Abernathy, of Denver, Colorado, disappeared from a mall three years ago this coming March."

Penelope. Connor rubbed his neck. Penny? Somehow the name just didn't sit right, didn't suit her. Probably because she was and would always be Jenna to him.

"You'll be twenty-seven on April fifteenth," he continued gently. He leaned forward and slid a folder off the pile he'd stacked neatly on the coffee table, opening it up to take a photo from inside. He passed it to Connor. "You were a solid student in high school and college. Apparently, you love books, have an apartment full of them. You worked in a library in downtown Denver."

Connor studied the photograph, couldn't deny the woman looking at him with radiant green eyes was Jenna. Penelope. She was vibrant, glowing with that happiness some people possessed naturally, and the smile beaming at him was wide and genuine. Her hair was a riot of blonde waves curling down her back, and her face was full, just a touch of the teenager she'd been still remaining around the eyes.

Young and carefree, smiling earnestly at whoever was behind the camera.

Hadley handed over another photo, and this one took Connor's breath away. He heard Jenna's breath hitch, soothed her as he took in the family portrait. God, what a portrait.

A tall, silver-haired guy stood in the middle of the group with his arm slung around the shoulders of Jenna's spitting image. Three small children

no older than two years were sat on a lawn, surrounded by six older kids. Around the middle-aged couple, four couples were posed.

Connor spotted Jenna arm-in-arm with another blonde woman, too similar for her to be anything other than her sister. In fact, they were a very easy family to recognize.

“Your parents are still alive, Jenna, and anxious to see you. You have two brothers and two sisters, of which you are the youngest. Between your siblings, you have several nieces and nephews.”

Jenna tucked her head down, digging her nails into Connor’s chest through his shirt.

“They’ve been notified of your reappearance and are eager to come to the Creek. I haven’t given them many details,” Hadley assured her. “They’re flying out this morning. They should be here sometime this afternoon or late evening. You’re under no pressure to meet with them, Jenna, but I think they feel better doing something proactive, being near you in case you need them.”

She shook her head. “Connor’s the only one I need.”

“Baby, you can’t think that way.” Connor held the photo where she could see it. “Do you recognize anyone?”

Jenna glanced at it, panic flashing in her eyes before she slapped it away. “No.”

Little liar, he thought, and showed it to her again. “Who are they, baby?”

“I can’t. I’m sorry, I can’t do this.”

“You can. You know these people, Jenna. They raised you. They loved you. Who are they?” he repeated, hating himself when she began to cry thick, fast tears.

“Mamma,” she wailed and touched her fingers to her lookalike. “Papa. Jacob, Isaac. Isabella. Rosemary.” She skimmed her fingertips over each face on the photo as she spoke their names. “Me. Oh God, that’s me.”

Connor looked to Hadley for confirmation, and the agent nodded silently. Her memories were on their way back, and it was time to ride the onslaught of emotion coming with them like a tsunami. “Good girl. That’s your family, baby. That’s who you’ve been protecting for so long.”

“I loved them. I missed them.”

“Jenna,” Hadley leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and spoke softly. “I can arrange for your family to meet you whenever you feel

ready. Like I said, they'll be in town as of this afternoon. If you're only up to seeing your parents, I can see to that. Just say the word."

Jenna stared at the photo, her hands shaking as she stroked the moment captured in time. When she met Connor's eyes, hers were bleaker than the winter settling into town. "No. I'm Jenna, not...not Penelope. I can't ever be Penelope again, and that's who'll they expect me to be. I know you said they wouldn't," she told Connor wearily, "but I can't ask them to accept me as I am now. This girl here," she pointed to herself in the picture. "She's happy, and pretty. She wasn't kidnapped and tortured, branded a whore. There's no shadows under her eyes or scars on her body. This girl died a long time ago."

"Jenna," Connor murmured.

"Yes, *Jenna*. Not Penelope. These people I loved need to move on. They should remember Penelope as who she was, grieve for her, and move on with their lives." Her voice ebbed and flowed with emotion. "I'm Jenna. I'm broken, I'm damaged in ways I don't even understand, but I'm loved by a man who accepts me for who *I* am and doesn't compare me to who I used to be and find me lacking."

"Nobody wants to do that, baby."

"Maybe, but they will." Jenna wriggled off his lap, dropping the photo in her place. "Would you mind excusing me? I...I need..."

Connor let her go, a concerned frown creasing his brow. "Go on, baby. I'll come find you in a bit."

Jenna hurried out, Luna grumbling as she rolled to her feet and trotted after her mistress. He could hear Jenna sniffing, dreaded going upstairs to find her when Hadley was gone. Her tears were like glass shards in his chest and those sad little noises she made were akin to a kick in the balls.

All he could do was rock and soothe, comfort and just be there for her.

"Will she be okay?" Hadley asked.

Scrubbing his hands over his face, Connor lifted his shoulders helplessly. Predicting the news would devastate her proved completely different to the reality. "All she knows is her time here, and the shitty existence she lived with Sire. Anything before Sire, she forced herself to forget. Knowing they still care, still love her...it's unnerved her. Everything she said, she believes to be true."

Hadley nodded. "Understandable. Look, her parents don't have your name or address, but no doubt people in town will be their usual friendly

selves. I'll advise—strongly advise—they don't approach the house uninvited, but these are exceptional circumstances, Connor. They're going to push the boundaries to see their daughter."

"Well unless you *advise* me that they can barge in here against Jenna's wishes, they will be firmly, politely declined. This is Jenna's home. Family or not, nobody gets to push in and upset her." Connor dropped his head in his hands. "I think if they called her Penelope, she would revert back to little mode permanently. We've made some damn good progress and now... fuck."

Hadley gathered his files together. "I'll leave you alone. I think you need to be with her more than you need to sit here talking with me. I'll keep you updated. Get in contact straight away if the family gives you any trouble—you have my number, use it. And if Jenna changes her mind about meeting them..."

"I'll work on it," he told the agent wearily, already sick of the damn day. "Not today, she needs time, but I'll talk to her. I'll be in touch if she decides it's what she wants."

"Thanks. Even a brief communication would set their minds at ease."

Brief communication. Connor snorted at the idea. After this, he'd be lucky if she communicated with him. Her world was spinning wildly on its axis with no way to stop it. "Would you mind seeing yourself out, Hadley?"

"Sure thing. Things will be okay, Connor." Files in hand, the agent left Connor alone in the room. A few moments later, the door shut quietly, and he heard the locks engage. He closed his eyes and rested his head back.

Normally, he'd rush upstairs after her, prepared to do his soothe and protect routine, but today...she hadn't clung to him, looking for comfort. She'd walked away, regained a touch of her independence, and he was thankful for it. Relieved she was able to tackle her emotions alone.

On the other hand, he felt fucking useless.

Alone, he dissected his thoughts. All three hundred of them. Part of him wished Jenna would see her family—the poor bastards deserved to have their lost daughter and sister returned to them. He couldn't imagine the horror of one of his brothers disappearing without a trace, not knowing for nearly three years whether or not he was dead.

He might not think kindly of Caleb at the moment, but the asshole was still his brother. The same blood ran through their veins, their lives meshed at nearly every turn until Caleb went to college, then the police academy.

They'd drifted apart, sure, but Connor didn't doubt for a second he'd move heaven and earth to find his eldest brother in that situation.

How much worse was it for a daughter to go missing? The odds were higher a woman would be mistreated—just as Jenna had been—and weight stacked the scales on the side of rape and murder.

He was surprised it hadn't driven her parents insane with worry.

He struggled with hope and guilt. The pair created a messy conundrum within him—Jenna's adamant refusal to be reunited with her family meant the chances were high she'd stay with him. Deriving hope from that sent guilt ricocheting through his brain like a manic ping pong ball on turbo power.

He couldn't, wouldn't deny it. Jenna was his, and he would do anything to keep her beside him—as long as it remained what *she* wanted. If she changed her mind, made the decision to return to Colorado with her folks... he wouldn't stop her. She'd leave him with a gaping, bloody chest wound where his heart once beat, but he wouldn't stop her from making that choice.

How could he, when all her choices over the last two and a bit years had been stripped from her? At the heart of things, although he made mistakes just as well as any other man, he was a moral creature. Right was right, wrong was wrong. Sure, there were gray areas, there always were, but not here. Not with this.

Discovering his mental process was making him depressed, Connor slapped himself out of it and slipped on his Daddy face as he pushed to his feet and made his way upstairs, leaving the family picture on the chair. He expected to find her curled under the covers, thumb in comfort position, Moose under her arms, and Luna on guard.

Surprised to find her sitting in the middle of the bed, knees drawn up to her chin, he stepped into the bedroom without saying a word. Her eyes lifted to his, swollen and red, and she offered him a sigh heavy enough to give him a glimpse into the weight on her shoulders.

"I was rude."

Luna grumbled again, obviously disgruntled as she slipped off the big bed and into her own on Jenna's side. She thumped down, propped her head on the plush edge, and huffed in disapproval.

"No, baby." Connor slipped onto the mattress beside Jenna. "Being rude and being overwhelmed are two different things. This is a lot for you to

think about.”

“I don’t want to think.”

Her face turned up to his, eyes pleading. He couldn’t stop himself from skimming his fingertips over the shell of her ear, wiping away the tear tracks. Kissing that sweet, lush mouth until a moan mingled between them both.

As he did every time they were in bed together, Connor asked, “You’re sure this is what you want?” And as always, her consent gave him a thrill in the blood even drugs couldn’t mimic.

Her clothes were gone in seconds, thrown across the room and followed swiftly by his own. Her mouth beckoned to him again and he plundered, drawing her down the bed as his lips slanted over hers, his body angled over her.

That tiny, talented hand grasped his shaft at the root, tightening with just the right amount of pressure to take him from hard to insanely primed.

Connor moved over her, nuzzling her neck and shoulders, lips teasing a heated trail over her skin. She shuddered, eyes a little wild now, and mewled as he swiped his tongue over her brand. He made a point now to lavish attention on the ugly scar, rather than show revulsion. Not that it repulsed him—nothing about Jenna could alter his perception of a strong, brave, sexy woman.

His strong, brave and ridiculously fucking sexy woman.

“I love you, Jenna. Don’t ever forget that.”

Her heart was a crazy thing in her chest, beating beneath his lips where he whispered words he’d never truly comprehend how much they meant to her.

Lost in the frenzy of love and desire, she clutched his shoulders, nails—healthy and smooth now—biting into the thick muscles as his mouth shifted from brand to nipple. Her breath exploded out on a cry as teeth nipped one sensitive bud and fingers pinched the other.

Two lines of fire ripped into her belly, joining together to hit her clit like lightning. Her hips jerked, arched to press her wet center against the steel of his cock, slicking the heavy shaft with wetness.

Connor’s face dropped between her breasts as his pelvis thrust in response, his erection sliding along her sex, teasing her wickedly. “Not yet, Jenna. We need to slow down.”

“No.” Her hands ran up his neck, over the cords already standing out, to cup his face and lift it. Clean-shaven today, smooth and soft. “No more slow, Connor.”

His lips quirked. “Bossy little madam.”

“I don’t want to wait anymore. I want to be yours.”

“You are mine,” he said with fierce possession. It radiated in his tone, brought her warrior to life. “Only mine.”

Jenna grunted, legs kicking restlessly as two strong fingers found her sex, circled, pushed deep. She exhaled sharply, breathing through the sting of muscles parting, then moaned when he hooked them up, massaging her gently until he found the spot that sent her skyward.

Her pussy clenched hard, sucking his fingers deeper, trapping them as an orgasm ripped through her. Her body went rigid, her mind swirled away, and she lost track of everything but Connor.

His weight left her, leaving her chilled and uneasy when her senses returned. A drawer snapped shut, a wrapper crinkled, and she watched through dazed eyes as her lover rolled a rubber sheath over his erection with dexterous skill.

“No kids,” he murmured, eyes raking over her body with admiration. “Not yet. As much as this slim tummy would look amazing with our baby growing in there, we’ve got too much to explore before adding a new member to the team.”

A baby, she thought blurrily. He wanted a baby with her? The idea wasn’t abhorrent, but there were more important things to think about right now. Like the big personality waiting to make a more personal acquaintance.

Jenna wet her lips nervously as Connor eased back over her, his mouth aiming straight for hers. She kissed him back as passionately as he kissed her, raising her knees instinctively as his weight found its rightful place atop her.

Trembling, she closed her eyes.

His arms slid beneath her, one easing under her neck and supporting her head while the other moved to her lower back, raising her hips a fraction. Hot breath caressed her ear. “Thirty seconds, remember? Just relax, breathe, and trust me, baby.”

The heavy crown of his cock nudged between her labia, notching into her entrance. She stiffened, suddenly unsure he would fit. He wasn’t even

inside her and she could feel the pressure threatening to tear her open.

"Open your eyes, baby. Don't lock yourself away."

She obeyed and fell headlong into the near-black of his eyes as they bore into hers. The moment they connected, Connor's hips pushed forward, easing the prominent head of his erection inside her.

She arched against the pop of penetration, whimpered as the sting began to burn. Her fingers stabbed into his hips, held on for dear life as he flexed again slowly, claiming another inch.

Again and again, stretching her inexorably, filling her past reason.

"Okay, baby?" Dark eyes filled with concern, he paused. "Jenna?"

Nerves flickered back to life, pleasure receptors standing to attention. He was deep, testing muscles she'd never used before. They *ached*. "Nobody warned me about big personalities."

A grin curved his mouth as he chuckled. "I adore you, baby. I really do. Now answer the question." His head ducked to her neck, mouth sucking on the pulse in her throat.

"I'm okay. I'm okay." She cried out as he sank deeper, his pelvis firmly pressed against hers. Pain peaked, ebbed, died. She blew out a long, relieved breath.

"God, you're so tight. I can feel you rippling around me, squeezing..." Connor nipped at her throat, her collarbone. His voice was lower, so deep and aroused. "I imagined being inside you, baby, but this...this goes beyond anything I dreamed of."

Jenna made a soft sound in her throat as he pulled back, thrust forward gently. Fire spread around where they joined, filled her belly as another orgasm sparked to life and began to grow. She tried to move with him, hips lifting as he thrust, falling away as he withdrew.

"Good girl," he growled, attacking her mouth in a kiss that stole what little breath she had left. "Relax and let me take care of you."

They danced together, the rhythm smoothing out into a quick beat. Sweat sheened both of them, skin sliding over skin, hands beginning to wander and tease.

Her breath caught sharply as the climax rushed up, swept through her, carried her away. She thought she heard a delighted laugh as pleasure whipped her into a frenzy, spinning her round and round.

Connor thrust harder, faster, those wonderful eyes back on hers with intensity. "This time, baby. Come with me this time."

Feeling his body tense, the tempo quick and hard now, she locked herself around him and let him guide her up again. She choked on a scream as he plunged deep, holding himself flush against her as her muscles gripped and released, gripped and released.

His own shout of orgasm sounded triumphant, his cock jerking inside her in time with the squeeze of her pussy. He dropped his head against her shoulder, breathing hard, twitching as squeezes calmed to flutters.

Limp, shocked, Jenna's arms fell away. She felt weightless, a leaf on the wind. She barely registered the heaviness of his sated body holding her down, could only focus on the way their breathing matched, the hard pumping of their hearts. Before they'd slowed, she was asleep.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Never in his thirty-eight years had sex destroyed him so completely. As in, razed his soul to the ground kind of destruction. His orgasm had ripped heart, mind, and soul out of his body and left him shattered.

Ten minutes after their mutual climax, he managed to pry his body off Jenna's with care. His erection had subsided, for the moment, but he'd be damned if he'd hurt her now.

Jenna slept, her face utterly slack without a hint of nightmares. She'd need time to recover—he hadn't been quite as gentle as he would've liked toward the end—and sleep was the best solution. When she woke, she'd be sore, her body either resistant to physical exertion of this magnitude or accepting of it. He hoped for the latter.

It made convincing her to do this all over again a lot easier and taking her again was high on his to-do list. Like, top spot. He'd spend the rest of his life inside her if it was physically possible.

Discarding the used condom in the trash, Connor brushed several wayward wisps of hair away from Jenna's face, bent to kiss her swollen lips. Just a whisper, not enough to disturb her. He left her, padded into the bathroom for a quick shower. He'd rather enjoy the hot spray with his woman, but he had other plans for her.

As Cain had once predicted, Connor's Daddy instincts were firmly in place. All the pieces joined loosely together, forming their relationship, were now cemented into one unit. As far as Connor was concerned, they may as well be married with rings on their fingers.

He flicked the water on, stepped beneath the water. Closed his eyes as it sluiced over his head, down his back. Cold at first, heating quickly until it

warmed loose muscles. Sex with Jenna, after so long tending himself with his hand, could only be compared to a two-hour massage.

He felt phenomenal.

Showering quickly in case she woke, Connor lathered and rinsed, and was drying himself off within minutes. The last thing he wanted was for her to rise from sleep and find herself alone—he wasn't sure how she'd feel, and he sure as hell didn't want her to think he'd fucked her and left.

Refreshed, naked, he walked back into the bedroom and found sleepy eyes peeking at him over the covers. Not quite awake, but not lost in dreams. Just lucid enough to recognize him, he thought, when her eyes lit up with love.

"Hello, beautiful. Have I told you how amazing you are?"

Jenna shook her head shyly. He couldn't find a trace of regret on her face, not even a flicker. Grateful for it, Connor perched beside her on the bed and tugged the covers away from her mouth. Her smile was wondrous.

"An oversight on my part," he told her, stealing her hand and kissing her fingers in a simple gesture of affection. "Baby, you are astounding. So responsive, and I just love kissing this pretty mouth." He traced his fingers over her lips. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Tired and happy." Her words slurred a little. "Was it okay?"

Connor frowned. "What do you think?"

Wondrous dimmed to sad. "I think you love me, so you'd tell me it was good even if it wasn't."

"So cynical, baby." He flicked the tip of her nose, annoyed she would think along those lines. "If it had been bad—which it *wasn't*," he emphasized firmly, "I wouldn't care, Jenna. You've given me something exceptional. Irreplaceable. We can practice having sex—in fact, I'd *really* like to keep practicing—but what we did here? That can't be rehearsed."

Her smile brightened adorably. "We can do it again?"

"Hell yes. Many, many times." He read the interested gleam in her eyes and shook his head, grinning at her apparent appetite. "Not right now, baby."

That hungry gaze dropped to his lap. "I think your big personality disagrees."

Yes, it had some complaints to make about Connor's choice. "He doesn't get a say. You might agree with me when we get you on your feet."

"Am I going somewhere?" Her brow wrinkled.

He flipped the covers away, assessing her with professional intensity. Disguising the wince when he saw the blood on the inside of her slim thighs, he kept his voice perfectly calm. "I think a nice warm bath followed by food is in order. I fancy pampering my girl for a while, if that's okay with you?"

The child flashed into her eyes. "Bubbles?"

"I think that could be arranged." He held his hand out, lips curving with pleasure when her small one slipped immediately into it. "Move slowly, Jenna. Your body took a battering it's not used to."

And then some, he thought. He needed to remember she was half his size—squashing her unintentionally was a possibility in the throes. Her discomfort smacked him in the gut when she let him guide her off the bed.

The little whimper was pained, confused. "I feel sticky. Am I supposed to be sticky?" Her hand moved between her legs, came away with small streaks of red on her fingertips. "Connor, I'm bleeding."

Connor debated letting her totter to the bath under her own steam or carrying her. Taking into consideration he was on a pampering mission, he swept her up and into the bathroom before she saw the sheets where the last trace of her virginity stained the cotton. "Not anymore, baby. It's perfectly normal for the first time."

"It is?"

"Mmm-hmmm." He set her next to the toilet seat. "It shouldn't happen again. I'll set the water running then give you some privacy, baby. I have a quick errand to see to, I'll be two minutes." He ran his hands up and down her upper arms. "Trust me, Jenna. It's nothing to worry about."

He flicked the taps on, poured her desired bubble bath under the stream of water just beginning to steam, then paused to kiss her as he passed her. He wanted to change those damn sheets before she saw them. "If you feel weak, sit down. I won't be long, Jenna. I'm just in the bedroom."

He damn near tripped over Luna as he dashed out, swore the dog shot him an amused look as he stumbled, righted himself. Within a minute, he had the sheets whipped off and tossed toward the laundry basket, one ear cocked toward the bathroom. Getting a fresh set back on took a little longer, but he spared a second to admire his handiwork when the bed was made to his satisfaction.

When he walked back to the bathroom, sidestepping Luna laid in the doorway, he cleared his throat meaningfully as he caught Jenna sat on the

toilet, peering between her spread thighs. “What on earth are you doing, baby?”

Her head jerked up guilty, eyes wide. “Nothing?”

His eyebrow quirked. Something worried her, he could tell by the set of her shoulders and the quick flashes of the child he saw in her eyes. That transition fascinated him, how she allowed one persona to simply slide over the other on a whim. He couldn’t stem the pride of knowing she was learning how to control that shift of nature.

“Want me to take a look?” he asked gently. “In a professional capacity?”

Jenna turned beet red and shook her head. “I’m just sore.”

Connor slipped into the bathroom, tested the water and found it just about perfect beneath the clouds of bubbles. “Once you’ve had something to eat, I’ll get you some mild pain relief to take the edge off. We’ll soak some of that discomfort away first, see if you’ll relax a bit.”

“I’m relaxed,” she protested.

Deciding it didn’t matter he’d already had a shower, Connor stepped into the bath and beckoned her over, guiding her in with him before he sank into the mass of bubbles. Hands on her hips, he helped her sit between his spread legs, settling her back against his front.

She yelped as heated water touched tender flesh, then let out a moan as the heat sank deep. The stiffness in her posture melted away, leaving her limp against him as she sighed in relief.

“Now you’re relaxing,” he corrected, grasping her arm by the elbow. Inch by inch, he massaged her forearm with strong fingers, elbow to fingers. He nuzzled her nape as he worked on eradicating every ounce of tension in her body. Pain could seize a person from top to toe if it hit strong enough.

By the time he got around to washing her, Jenna was a boneless noodle dozing lightly in a sea of deflating bubbles. Painstakingly, he sponged her everywhere, taking great care between her thighs. This was the kind of aftercare he loved. The connection linking them thrummed contentedly—or maybe that was just Jenna.

Connor breathed in the scent of her hair, decided to leave it for now. She was quiet and happy; disturbing her seemed counter-productive to his goal.

“Sure we can’t do it again?” she murmured sleepily.

“Positive, Jenna. Just rest for a while.”

“Okay.”

They stayed there for an hour, with Connor using his toes to flick the hot water on and off when needed. The most relaxing hour he’d spent, idly stroking her flesh with trailing fingertips, thinking easy thoughts and glowing with accomplishment at how far she’d come in such a short time.

That bitter night just two months ago seemed like it was years ago. They’d spent so much time together, constantly, that eight weeks felt more like a year. But she’d needed it, that one-on-one bond she trusted, yearned for. Two months or twenty years, it didn’t matter.

They were fated, regardless of time sailing down the stream.

Water splashed as her leg jerked. The easy mood dissipated in a second, roiling into vicious tension that struck Jenna’s body like a spear. Her arms thrashed, hitting water, smacking hard against the sides of the tub before Connor braceleted them both in one hand. Her lean body arched, her feet kicking. Water exploded from the bath in waves and droplets alike.

Connor held onto her tight, hooking his legs over hers until he pinned her on top of his body. His free arm curved over her flat belly as it heaved. “Jenna. Jenna, baby, it’s a nightmare.”

The sounds coming from her were brutal, clawing at his composure. They were all too reminiscent of someone being strangled.

Choked, breathless sobs squeaked free as her face turned red. Purple as the noises cut off. Blue when her body went lifeless in his hold and he couldn’t feel her chest rising and falling beneath his arm.

Fuck.

The pools of water on the floor turned into a flood as Connor surged up, both arms wrapped around Jenna’s torso. Moving quickly, carefully, he stepped from the tub and laid her on the floor, getting his first look at her face.

He’d seen fresh death before. Been part of it, held hands and administered pain relief to those suffering on their journey to the end.

“Not this fucking time,” he muttered, covering her mouth and pinching her nose shut, forcing as much air into her lungs as he could summon. He began chest compressions, almost bouncing off her ribs with the effort to kickstart her heart again.

Over and over, he breathed and bounced.

Whining, Luna huddled in the doorway. Why couldn’t the fucking dog play Lassie and go fetch him some help?

“Connor?” Sarah’s voice drifted up the stairs. “Connor, are you here?”

Oh, thank fuck. He closed his eyes as he started chest compressions again, sending his gratitude upstairs to the big guy that he’d been given the foresight to offer Sarah a key to the house. “Upstairs! Bring oxygen!”

“What?”

“Oxygen!” he almost screamed it. “Adrenaline!”

Two repetitions later, he heard footsteps pounding up the stairs, through the bedroom. Sarah appeared like an angel in the doorway, all dressed up in her smart-casual wear she reserved for days with her beau and boys, a small oxygen canister and a syringe in her hands.

“Jesus, Connor, what the actual fuck?”

“It’s been too long. Get the adrenaline in, the mask on.” He breathed deep and blew hard as Sarah poised the needle over Jenna’s heart. “Sarah!”

“I-I’m not qualified, Connor. I could do more damage...”

More damage? His girl was pretty much on the cusp of being irretrievably dead, what other damage could there be? He snatched the syringe from his friend’s hand, gauged his mark, and stabbed the needle through Jenna’s chest into her heart.

His fingers trembled as he depressed the plunger and removed the syringe. Seconds ticked away slower than hours as he waited for an answer to his prayers. Prayers running in his mind like a mantra. Not giving a shit he was naked, or that water was spreading quickly over the tiles, his attention focused solely on Jenna.

She sat bolt upright with a wheezing scream, her hands grasping for something to hold onto. They latched onto Connor’s arm in a death grip, nails drawing blood in her panic. Green eyes darker than jungle moss darted manically around the bathroom.

Sarah scrambled away, sneakers slipping on the wet tiles. She came back a moment later with an armful of towels, tossing one at Connor. “Take her out, Connor. I’ll clear up in here.” With a quick glance at his nakedness, she kindly threw another towel at him.

“Jenna, you’re okay, baby. I’ve got you right here.” Connor swirled the towel around her shoulders as she doubled over, rubbing the cotton briskly over flesh pebbled with the chill off the floor. “Stay with me, Jenna.”

Shaking, she didn’t seem to be listening. Her teeth clacked together. “He’s...he’s coming for me. He’s so angry.” Her hand twitched as she

reached for her throat. “He’s going to make me pay for being a bad girl. Bad Twenty-Two. Bad girls don’t see the light of day. Bad girls *die*.”

So did good girls, he thought darkly. Good girls came damn close to losing their lives through no fault of their own. It infuriated him she referred to herself as that fucking number, relegating herself back under Sire’s control after so long. So much work fading away under the bastard’s rigorously taught lessons.

“Good girls live, and you are *my* good girl,” Connor told her emphatically. “Jenna is *my* good girl. Twenty-Two doesn’t exist anymore, baby. She’s gone, never to be controlled by Sire again. Jenna is here, with me, and she’s my good girl. Only mine.”

Maybe if he reiterated it over and over, it would sink in.

He got to his feet, pulled Jenna up with him. Picking her up felt right, just as pressing his face to her hair and breathing deep felt right. The warmth of her skin returned, banishing the corpse-gray cast under her mottled flesh.

He couldn’t banish the image of her laid dead on his bathroom floor.

“Connor.” Sarah stood with her hands on her hips as he continued to stand naked, just swaying with Jenna held tight. “Take her to bed, climb in with her, and cuddle her. You both need it. This was...” she looked at the waterlogged floor. “Traumatic. Process it before it knocks your feet from underneath you.”

“She *died*, Sarah.”

“She gave it a fucking good try. Now she needs you to step up to the plate and smack aftercare out of the park. Seeing as you’re the only man for the job—the only Daddy, for that matter—you should get your head pulled out of what could’ve been into what is. She’s alive, Connor. That’s a miracle.”

Jenna was his miracle. Sarah was right; he’d made Jenna promises he wouldn’t break, and they started from the beginning of the freaking saga.

“Yeah. Yeah, she is.” He moved toward the bedroom and the visibly upset German Shepherd watching him with worried jade-toned eyes, then paused. “Sarah, thank you. I don’t know how much longer I could have gone on with the CPR before...thank you.”

“As long as you’d needed to,” Sarah said firmly. “I have no doubts.”

Connor did. His lungs still burned from the effort and his palms felt hot and swollen from his frantic compressions. Eventually, he would have tired.

He would gotten slower, less effective, and she would've slipped away forever.

Because of a goddamn nightmare.

He'd heard of people, patients, reacting to stimulation in their dreams as they would in real life. Dreams became so realistic, they couldn't differentiate between subconscious suggestions and reality. But he'd never come across an example of subconscious suggestion being responsible for cardiac arrest.

Jenna remained silent, almost catatonic, as he settled her into bed. How the fuck was he supposed to let her fall asleep after this? He wasn't sure he'd be able to sleep beside her for fear it would happen again and he wouldn't hear her. That her heart would stop and he'd wake to find her cold and gray beside him.

He checked the puncture wound in her chest, marked by a single drop of blood on her pale skin.

He slipped under the covers onto the fresh sheets, gave Luna a mock glare as the dog jumped up and laid against Jenna's legs. Her head propped on one foot, she huffed and watched Sarah through the doorway.

Connor pulled his girl closer, more for himself than Jenna. She might not even know he was there, but he needed to feel her against him. Wanted to feel the warmth of her skin, the lift of her chest, hear the soft rasp of her breathing. The little things that assured him she was still alive.

Sire had a lot to fucking answer for. Connor's insecurities escalated into fury. That bastard was responsible for this, should be held accountable for every moment of suffering Jenna experienced. Connor was willing to sacrifice his own freedom to ensure the fucker paid *dearly* for his cruelty.

"Go to sleep, Con." With a bundle of dripping towels in her arms, Sarah paused at the foot of the bed.

"I can't. What if..."

"You can. I'm going to put this lot in the washing machine, then I'm going to sit in the chair in the corner and keep an eye on both of you."

"I can't ask you to do that, Sarah."

"You don't have a choice, lucky you. So shut up and get some rest." His friend turned on her heel and disappeared, her soggy burden leaving a trail of wet droplets.

God, luck didn't come into the equation. Having a strong and dependable family at his back, at Jenna's back, meant more to him than any

four leaf clover or rabbit's foot. Luck was fickle; what he had was the absolute opposite.

For that, for having Jenna in his life, he couldn't thank God enough.

He knew it wasn't the smartest idea to be watching the doctor's house, especially with the FBI in residence in Howler's Creek, but he couldn't resist the temptation. An intelligent man—particularly one with his extracurricular activities—performed better with maximum data.

For almost a week now, he'd had his eye on the doctor's cushy digs, keeping track of who came and went. He had yet to catch a glimpse of the elusive Twenty-Two.

Dressed for the downright freezing conditions in thick padded ski trousers and a red plaid lumberjack jacket, he was warmer than if he'd been stood beside a fire. The thermals beneath his outer gear helped.

Lurking between the two houses opposite O'Malley's happy home, his gaze flicked from window to window. It was only late afternoon, but he'd seen the FBI agent, Hadley, arrive and leave earlier in the day, and then nothing between then and now, when the nurse came hurrying to work.

His main obstacles to snatching the girl were the doctor and his sidekick. One or both were in close vicinity at all times, and that made reacquiring her tricky. It made him think they were aware Sire wanted her back in his possession, but that wouldn't deter him from the plan.

Glancing up at the sky, he smiled darkly. By nightfall, the first snow of winter should be on the ground. The forecast was dire—ten days of heavy fall, with an estimated thirty-six inches due to land—giving him a beautiful window of time in which to bring Twenty-Two back to her master.

Ten days to finish the last touches on his plan, execute it, and disappear with a certain blonde cunt into the wilderness, where not even Doctor Do-Good or his merry team of agents from the Federal Bureau of Inadequacy could find them.

Melting back into the shadows, he gave the house a cocky salute.

When he made his move, the sleepy town of Howler's Creek would be in an uproar. It seemed a shame to miss the fireworks, but he had much bigger, much bloodier displays to take part in.

Twelve's demise was foreplay compared to what he had in mind for Twenty-Two's last hours, and Twelve hadn't been an insubordinate, traitorous rat.

As his breath curled from his nostrils like twin streams of smoke, he walked away from his future mission, and decided it might be good to pass some time catching up with friends in the bar for an hour before heading home. Might be he'd come across a snippet or two of gossip he could use to his advantage.

He used *everything* to his advantage.

Jenna still felt Sire's hands around her throat.

Beside her, around her, Connor slept uneasily as though plagued by bad dreams of his own, but she couldn't sleep. Wouldn't ever sleep again after the nightmare showed her in its full glory just what she could expect from Sire's lack of mercy.

The nightmare played over and over in her head, on fast-forward, in slow motion. Black and white, and full color. Surround sound and silence.

Making love with Connor. The sweetness of it, the humming sighs and murmured words, slick skin and motion of bodies joining together in gentle appreciation of the act and everything it stood for.

Entwined with each other on a bed of lush grass beneath a canopy of summer foliage, the sun beaming warm through the leaves. Until the sky turned black and a wicked wind stirred the trees into a frenzy of whipping branches and bent boughs.

Until Sire came, dragging another Jenna along the path to his killing hole. He stood in all his monstrous glory, studying the woman whose throat was collared to the chain in his hand, then her as she arched beneath Connor with a stunned cry.

Picking his replacement, sentencing one to die.

Hooking the chain to the tree and making his choice.

He turned then, cold blue eyes blazing with icy fire as he contemplated the scene before him, and the world shifted. No longer was Connor her lover, his body the instrument of pleasure. It morphed, became heavier, more restraining as a wide pelvis forced her open, hammered a thick erection inside her painfully, quickly.

Bad girl, Twenty-Two. Hands around her throat, the full force of his weight bearing down his arms as he continued to fuck her with hard, rapid strokes. *Broke all the rules, now I have to break you.*

No air to suck in, breathe out. Nothing to scream with, beg with, pray with. Just black and red circles gathering behind her eyes, her frantic

heartbeat drowning out everything but its own failure to survive, until darkness stole her vision.

Short, sharp pain in her chest...and nothing.

Jenna tried to crawl onto Connor, but he was asleep on his side. Teeth chattering, panic attack brewing, she shivered violently as she rolled off the edge of the mattress, landed heavily on her knees. She retched, but nothing came up.

Gentle hands touched her shoulders, almost sent her up like a rocket, but Sarah crouched in front of her, touching her finger to her lips in a quiet gesture. "It's okay, sweetheart. Tell me what you need."

"I don't know."

A cool hand pressed against her clammy forehead, and Sarah frowned. Her fingers trailed over Jenna's temple, along her jaw, and slipped under to find her pulse. "The adrenaline shot should wear off soon," she whispered. "I don't want to give you anything too soon after that. Do you want me to wake Connor?"

Daddy. The word strained in her mind, the child reaching for him with both hands. But she shook her head. "He should sleep."

"So should you. Come on, back into bed." Sarah helped her, all but lifting her back beside Connor and tucking her in. She sat next to her, stroking her face calmly. "Connor and I are right here, Jenna. So's Luna. Whatever the dream was, it's not true. You're safe. You're home."

"My name isn't Jenna," she said mournfully, spilling part of what weighed her down. "It's...it's Penelope."

"Says who?" Sarah demanded.

"The people Hadley found. My family. My name is supposed to be Penelope."

Sarah nodded thoughtfully. "I see. Do you *want* that name, sweetheart?"

The conversation was more hushed than a confessional, their voices little more than murmurs, but Connor still stirred. He muttered something in his sleep, flipped onto his back, grunted.

Jenna shook her head. "I don't know how to be her anymore."

"Do you remember who she is?"

She remembered more than she had a week ago, more than she cared to. Fragments of family and childhood were creeping back in, scaling the walls Connor had worked so hard to bring down. Recognizing her family had shocked her, their names coming to mind the moment she saw the photo

and their faces. Blips of time, soundbites of their voices. It wasn't enough, yet it was far too much. "Some of her."

"You don't have to be afraid of her, Jenna. She's a part of you, a big part. Whether you live life as Jenna or Penelope, you have two people inside you living as one. Use them both. Nobody's going to make you choose between one or the other."

They couldn't, she vowed. For all her faults, she would choose Jenna without hesitation. Penelope was the past; Jenna wanted a future, *the* future, with Connor.

She glanced at him. "We had sex."

Seemingly unsurprised by the change in topic, Sarah grinned. "About damn time! I thought I'd fucked things up royally for Connor when I sent you into that panic attack. I couldn't believe I was so stupid. I didn't mean to scare you, Jenna."

"You didn't. Not really. I forgot to trust you, and Connor. I went a little crazy," she admitted. "But you were right about the big personality."

"Oh really?" A wicked glint sparked in her dark eyes. "I think you should give me all the juicy details, sweetheart. No holding back."

Just like that, she settled. Nerves and fear whispered away into a shy giggle as she said, "Oh, I couldn't do that. That wouldn't be fair to Connor."

"Bullshit. It's the woman's code, sweetheart. Spill everything." Those eyes narrowed suspiciously. "He *did* make it good for you, right? Because if he didn't, I'll take his ass to town and hand him over to Zeke for an ass-kicking."

"I liked it. Connor says he wants to practice a lot."

"I bet he does, dirty dog. Did he at least make you come?"

Jenna flushed and nodded hesitantly.

"Once?" Sarah's eyebrows nearly met her hairline at Jenna's headshake. "Twice?" Her mouth dropped open with shock at the second declination. She held three fingers up in question, then fanned herself with her hand when she got the affirmative. "Sweetheart, you surely landed yourself the trifecta there—some ladies can't achieve one, let alone three on their first time with a guy. Kudos!"

Jenna let the smile loose, bit her lip. Her friend never seemed to be prudish about sex—talking about it was one of her specialties, and if the way her eyes lit up were any indication, Sarah got a kick from listening to

other women's experiences...something Jenna thought she might get used to. Listening was learning, was it not?

"Do you...with Zeke?"

"Orgasm? Yeah, it's a pretty regular occurrence in our bedroom." A salacious laugh bubbled free before Sarah sealed it off with her fingers over her lips. "And the bathroom, kitchen, over the couch, against the wall... having the boys makes things tricky, but once they're in bed, if both Zeke and I aren't too tired, it's wonderful to reconnect."

"Against the wall?" Jenna whispered dubiously as Connor grunted again. Her worries were nudged into the background, out of her direct line of thought, and she could finally breathe.

"Mmmm-hmmmm." Sarah's gaze flicked over to Connor. "Connor won't be taking any chances with you after today's excitement, so don't get your hopes up about trying anything just yet. Wall sex is kinda awesome. There's an urgency to it, when you're kissing like crazy and there's hands everywhere. Everywhere," she repeated dreamily, her eyes blurring with memory. Then she shook herself. "Sorry, the last time Zeke took me against the wall, he did this thing with his fingers...yeah, better save that for another time," she decided. "Um, anyway. Yeah, the moment comes when you just have to bounce and lock your whole body around him. Your back braced against the wall, his body keeping you safe, and all the feels in between. When he's inside you, it's—"

"Sarah."

She jolted, eyes widening slightly as both women turned their head to give Connor their best innocent faces. Feeling a little high on arousal from the imagery Sarah's words brought, Jenna tried to stifle a nervous giggle and failed.

Her lover's stern face softened imperceptibly, his gray eyes heavy. He scrubbed the heels of his palms into the sockets as he yawned widely. "Are you influencing my girl again, Sarah? Encouraging bad behavior?"

"Me? No! Simply imparting some wise advice stemming from personal experience," she replied soberly, without so much as a lip twitch. "Missionary is all well and good, boss, but a woman needs more variety than just being humped into the mattress."

Jenna's mouth dropped open.

"You're such a brat, Sarah; I don't know how Zeke doesn't end up spanking you a dozen times a day." Connor threw his arm over his eyes, all

the muscles in his chest stretching with the movement.

“Who says he doesn’t?” she retorted smoothly. “Anyway, maybe you better finish explaining about wall sex, Connor. You’ll be able to give her more thrilling details.”

He peered from under his arm. “When it comes to sex positions, I’m a show-not-tell kind of lover. That’s all the details you need, baby.”

Well, she thought. Didn’t that give her something to look forward to!

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Hadley called Connor later that night to inform him Jenna's—Penelope's—parents had arrived safely in town and were staying at a local if somewhat disused B&B property across the Creek. They were settling in for the long haul and had expressed their intention of remaining in the Creek until they'd seen Jenna. Hadley also warned Connor they were determined to take their long-lost daughter home with them.

Connor barely resisted the urge to hurl the phone across the room into the wall. The satisfaction of it smashing into many plastic pieces of shrapnel would have been worth it, but waking Jenna was not.

It had taken him too long to settle her down after Sarah went home to her family. The interlude with his friend and his girl had lightened him, stripped a fraction of the burden off his shoulders—especially with the humorous element of conversation—but knowing Jenna's family could whisk her away at any time had his nerves on fire.

He'd made Jenna soup, given her strict instructions to not move while he fed Luna and taken her into the yard to do her business. Jenna had followed said instruction, to his pleasure and relief, and he'd found her in a mountain of pillows and covers, watching movies with Moose locked under her arm.

Not quite full-blown little mode, but only a small push away.

Now he stretched out beside her, a documentary on Russian warfare casting gloomy shadows on the walls, listening to Hadley's warning. He would pay mind to it, of course. The agent didn't have to keep him as informed as he was doing, which was certainly appreciated, but Hadley wasn't really letting Connor know where he stood either.

So, Connor decided to lay down a few rules of his own.

“This is Jenna’s home,” he murmured with one eye on his lover. She was fast asleep, her face glowing with a healthy flush and fully relaxed. He knew how to read her face now, asleep or awake. “They don’t come barging in here, Hadley, and they don’t stalk her. She’s resistant to them for her own reasons, and she needs to resolve the issues herself without pressure from them making her edgy. They need to wait for Jenna’s invite.”

“I’m not disagreeing, Connor. But it’s been nearly three years. They’re insistent.”

“I’m well aware of what time has passed,” Connor said coldly. His fist clenched on his thigh. “I’m reliving every fucking minute of those years through Jenna’s nightmares. They need to understand the way she thinks now—she doesn’t have the same thought processes as Penelope did. She had her choices, the smallest fucking decisions, taken out of her grasp. That changes a person, Hadley. You know that.”

“I do. I think they do, to some degree. I, ah...fuck, Connor, I don’t know how to say this.”

Dread filled his veins like the bitter wind blowing a gale around the house. The snow had started an hour ago and was already settling thick and fast. “What the fuck have they done, Hadley?”

The agent cleared his throat. “Before they left Colorado, they petitioned the court for custody of their daughter’s rights. It was denied, due to Jenna currently residing in Montana, but they were advised to try again once they got here.”

Connor’s jaw tightened so hard his teeth almost snapped. “On what grounds? On what fucking grounds are they trying to take her rights away, Hadley? Has she not had enough taken from her already, for fuck’s sake?”

There was a brief pause. “The petition in Denver stated they wanted custody of her rights due to the circumstances surrounding Jenna’s disappearance, her incarceration, and her current behavioral issues.”

“Mentally-ill,” Connor hissed. “They want to have her locked up as mentally-ill so they can just up and take her away? Do they have any idea what happens to people like Jenna in that section of the health system?”

“I’m sure they don’t. I’ve managed to persuade them to delay applying for another petition with the county court for a couple days. A health check would be required by a county medical official before a petition would be granted anyway, but it would be best if Jenna decided to meet her parents before this goes too far, Connor.”

He was seething. Livid. To his mind, it had already gone *too fucking far*. “Can I oppose it? Is there any way for me to stand up in court and knock the fucking petition out of the equation? They’ll kill her with this, Hadley. This will break her.”

“You’re so sure Jenna will refuse to see her family? That would be the easiest way to resolve it.”

How many times did he need to repeat himself before someone actually opened their fucking ears and *listened* to him? He might not be a goddamn shrink, but he knew enough about thought processes to understand Jenna’s reactions to things, and he certainly knew her better than anyone from her past life did at the moment.

He gave serious thought to packing a bag for them both and disappearing into the frozen night, losing them in the snowstorm until somewhere better than this hellhole of idiots came into view.

Hadley would just love slapping kidnapping charges and handcuffs on Connor in spring, he was sure. “She’ll agree to see them when she’s ready, without any input from me. It’s her decision, Hadley, and I will back whatever she chooses. She’s an adult, she’s not mentally incapacitated in any respect that demands hospital interference. She just needs time.”

“Okay, okay,” Hadley soothed. “If it comes to the worst and the petition is filed, I’ll let you know. A professional statement from you would probably go a long way, so be prepared to get one written quickly. I doubt a judge will hang around debating the case for long.”

“Pick it up in the morning,” Connor answered tersely. “I’ll get it written and in your hands, Hadley. Whatever a court needs to reach a decision that falls on Jenna’s side of the scales, I’ll get it.”

“That’s good. That’ll help. Look, I’ve got to go. I’m working on a lead possibly related to all this, but I wanted you to have a heads-up in case things went south. I’ll swing by before lunch to pick up your statement and update you again if I can.”

“I appreciate it,” Connor murmured as his blood simmered in his veins. He wasn’t lying—he really did appreciate Hadley’s never-ending help, but his temper was fueled and ready to rampage.

“Don’t worry too much,” Hadley added smoothly. “The family is worried, and they believe they’re acting in their daughter’s best interests. I don’t think this is malicious in intent, Connor.”

“Yeah, well, Jenna might not see it that way. But,” he continued, trying to tamp his anger down, “that’s a conversation for tomorrow. I guess we’ll see you then, Hadley.”

“Connor...yeah, I’ll see you guys tomorrow.” The line went dead.

Motherfucking asshole bastard *wankers*. The litany of curses rolled in his head like a thunderstorm as Connor calmly, quietly set the phone down.

How fucking *dare* they? These people he didn’t know, who didn’t know him. People who were so focused on getting their daughter back, they couldn’t see how lost she was. They obviously weren’t listening to anything either he or the FBI said to them, and they were setting themselves up for huge disappointment.

He couldn’t begin to imagine the meltdown Jenna would have if hospital staff turned up on the doorstep with a court order in hand. She’d be bound and sedated before she could defend herself if she made the slightest move to run or fight.

Jenna wasn’t capable of doing anything but one of those.

Connor angled the covers over her face like a hood, shielding her from the worst of the lamp’s glare when he flicked it on. He rummaged through his bedside drawer for a writing pad and pen, something he kept in there in case he had a medical epiphany about a patient or was trying to work out a complex condition and needed to make notes.

He’d write the statement by hand, then type it up and print it onto paper with his official header. He would sign his name to it, was willing to sign his goddamn life away on it, to spare her from being yanked away from everything familiar and vital to her recovery.

On a whim, he grabbed the phone again and zipped off a quick text to Sarah. It wasn’t so late she’d be sleeping, but after the afternoon’s line of discussion, he wouldn’t put it past her and Zeke to be christening another freaking wall.

The phone chirruped in his hand a second later, signaling an incoming call. Well, well. Either the wall had been sufficiently baptized, or Sarah hadn’t yet jumped her husband. Connor grimaced and squeezed the bridge of his nose—this was why he avoided partaking in any conversations revolving around sex. He ended up thinking things he *really* had no urge to see in his mind’s eye. “Sarah.”

“What the fuck is the shit you just sent me, boss?” She arrowed into the topic without a greeting, his fury’s twin eating through her words. “Are they

on the same planet as the rest of us, these people?”

This was what he'd needed. Someone else to share in his outrage. Sarah was as invested with Jenna's wellbeing as he was, and having her fire added to his own actually brought his temper down a notch. The pen stopped shaking in his hand as his blood cooled. “Judging by tonight's revelations, no. I'm astounded, I really am.” Yet didn't some part of him sympathize with Jenna's family?

No. No, he did not. This wasn't a teenaged girl head over heels in love with an older man, refusing to go home or being talked into staying. Jenna had physical and emotional trauma to recover from, and this was her choice—an *adult* making her own choices about *her* life.

To slap a label on her, especially one like mental illness, was callous and cruel. Those bastard labels didn't come off easily—they stuck to a person like superglue, tagging along with them wherever they went, whatever they did. An unfair and unmovable gremlin perched on slim shoulders.

“Okay, so first thing tomorrow, you get in touch with a lawyer on Jenna's behalf. A good one, Connor. One who knows his shit and knows mental health laws inside fucking out. They want to play hardball, we'll give them hardball.” Voice like steel, Sarah sounded as though she snarled beneath her breath. “I'll have my written statement done by morning, and Zeke can do one too—he's had up close experience with Jenna. Zeke? Zeke!”

Connor winced and held the phone away from his ear as his nurse bellowed her poor husband's name. He hoped the twins were sound sleepers, otherwise there would be war in the house. Waiting patiently, almost amused by the situation now, he eavesdropped as Sarah ordered her spouse to document the one time he'd met Jenna in fine detail, down to the last second.

She was taking no prisoners on this mission.

“There,” she said smugly, coming back to Connor. “You'll have both by morning. Make copies of *everything* before you hand it over to the FBI or anyone else, Connor. Evidence is going missing, according to Hadley, right? No reason these won't go poof if they stand in someone's way. Zeke's father knows some people in the justice system—I've asked my beloved husband to pull strings. Are you going to tell Jenna?”

“Yes. No.”

“Maybe?”

“How can I tell her when it’s going to sway her opinion firmly onto the side of *they’re the enemy*?” It was the crux of his problem. Anything he said could be construed as leading Jenna, brainwashing her to his own end, in the wrong light. “There’s more than enough for her to worry about without adding this to the party. But if her parents go this route and win...what the fuck do I do, Sarah?”

She sighed, and some of the anger dissipated from her tone. “Write what you need to say, Connor. The whole stinking mess from start to finish and every last gory detail. If a judge is going to make a verdict, he might as well do it with *all* the facts, not just those her family think will be sufficient to win a petition. Slap it in their faces, show them what you’ve gone through with Jenna while she’s been recovering, and make damn sure they know how she has been and is suffering.”

“But...Jenna can’t deal with that kind of scrutiny.”

“Unfortunately, Jenna will end up dealing with more than scrutiny if the psych ward gets hold of her. There won’t be any more bedtime cuddles or hands wiping her sweaty brow when she comes out of a nightmare, Connor. This shit is fucking serious. It’s a lifetime schedule of mind-altering psychotic drugs, padded restraints, and therapy through the roof. I hate the idea of breaching her privacy, just as much as you, but honestly, how do you see this turning out without using what you’ve got?”

“Badly,” he muttered. He looked at Jenna, nudging the covers away so he could see her face. Still at ease, the faintest sheen of drool over her lower lip, she made a pretty picture.

Luna peered at him.

“Go back to sleep, dog,” he ordered, then returned to his conversation with Sarah. “What if I ask one of her family to come over? Just one. Her mother maybe? Introduce them gradually, one at a time rather than en masse.”

“She might agree to that. I think that is something you need to run by her,” Sarah advised. “Your house is her territory, Connor. Her safe place, her home. Visitors need to respect that—and her—when they walk through the door.”

“You don’t think they will.” It wasn’t a question.

“I’ve never lost a child, Con. The twins are the primary pains in my ass, which is why they’re on the kiddie leashes wherever we go. Always trying

to run off in the mall or play hide-and-seek in the grocery store. They're never out of my sight. But I know the time is coming when I have to release them on unsuspecting shoppers and the general public—God bless their souls—and there'll be moments of panic when they're not in view. When I can't find them for ten, fifteen, twenty minutes. I can imagine the panic, almost taste it, but I've not lived it yet.

"If one of them vanished into thin air for three years? If he was found hurt but alive, I'd break the goddamn speed record to get to him. There wouldn't be a wall or a door or a dog big enough to keep me from seeing him, making sure he was really all right."

"Well hell, that's not making me feel any better, Sarah. Thanks."

"Not done. I hope someone like you would have his back. Would stand up in front of me—and God help you, in front of Zeke—and make fucking sure we listened to what you had to say. I'd hate you for it, for keeping me from seeing my son, but I hope I'd realize in the near future that what you did was done for a reason. A legitimate reason."

The pressure inside him eased, and he relaxed back into the pillows. Running into this mess blind wasn't his goal, but he couldn't help but feel as though every step he took in whatever direction he thought best was screwing up Jenna's future relationship with her family. "Okay. Okay, that brightens things up a bit."

"Still not done," she told him in a sing-song voice carrying an edge of laughter. "As long as you work in Jenna's favor, pushing toward Jenna's recovery and rehabilitation, her family have nothing to hate you for. That's my opinion. From day one, you've done nothing but fight for her, every single treacherous step over rocky and hostile ground. More than that, more even than saving her life, you gave Jenna someone to love, and loved her in return. Any parent who thinks anything of their child would kiss your feet for that alone."

Connor scowled at his bare feet, wiggled his toes. Ugh, no, thank you. He hadn't taken Jenna in for the accolades; he'd been doing his damn job, and he hadn't been able to resist the lure of those haunted green eyes, the way she'd clung to his jeans amid the storm of shit falling down around her. Loving her was the most natural phenomenon he'd ever experienced; one he could never regret or turn away from.

Only a fool would need praise for being the man a woman like Jenna loved.

“You still there, boss?”

“Are you done this time?” he asked with a wicked smile.

“Smart ass.” Her laugh rang down the line. “You wanted my advice, that’s it. Write your statement, set it aside until morning and catch some z’s with Jenna. Read what you’ve written again tomorrow, with fresh eyes and a clear head. And Connor?”

“Yes, oh wise one?”

“Trust yourself. Trust *her*. You’ve done a damn good job so far.”

She ended the call without another word, that single line of praise echoing in his head, no doubt just as she’d intended. Sarah was a clever woman, and she was adept at hitting the right spots at the right time.

Dropping the phone to the mattress beside his hip, Connor lifted the writing pad and stared at the blank sheet, blowing out a long breath. There was evidence in both video and photo form of Jenna’s initial condition. Her weight records spoke for themselves. Documenting the whole saga from the start was intrusive, he couldn’t get around that.

He reached out and dug under the covers until he found her hand. Small, warm, he smiled when her fingers curled around his in her sleep. Wouldn’t he do anything to keep this, to save her from being strapped to a bed in a room overlooking one of the big cities? Staring out day after day, blissed out on drugs until she didn’t know her own name, watching people in the buildings around her.

Being handfed, given bed baths, the option of either a catheter or bedpan. Left alone for long chunks of time, her main visitors the nurses who served the psych floor, the treating physician, the shrink.

Connor didn’t need to ask Jenna what she would do.

She’d choose a life, whether with him or without, but she would choose to live life as she wanted. Being locked up, tied up, controlled, would never again be a voluntary option for her.

Setting pen to paper, her hand still in his free one, Connor set aside emotion for now and began to write Jenna’s life since she came to him in black ink. Later, when the professional report was complete, he would get his personal feelings down on paper as the man who loved her.

Giggling as a wet nose and slurpy tongue bathed her face, Jenna gently pushed the sleek muzzle away from her as she tried to wake fully. The beautiful dog—*her* beautiful dog—balanced on her hind legs beside the

bed, her front paws scraping lightly at Jenna, with little whines rising in her throat.

“Uh-oh, somebody needs to pee.” Jenna glanced at Connor, fast asleep on his back with a pad upside down on his bare chest and her hand fast in his. She frowned, noting the wadded up balls of paper scattered over the bed like discarded snowballs. What had he been doing all night?

Luna whined again, leaving the bed to pad over to the door.

“I think Connor should take you,” Jenna whispered. “The yard...it’s too big, Luna. There’s trees and bushes and...” And there could be someone waiting for her out there, ready to snatch her up and steal her away again.

With a look of distress, Luna’s back legs trembled, lowering into a crouch that suggested one thing only.

“No!” Jenna’s soft shout accompanied her quick wrestling match with the covers. She stumbled out of bed, grabbing Connor’s robe from the footboard and fighting her way into it as she clumsily hurried across the room.

Connor had left the heating on low all night, so her feet were warm on the carpet as she followed Luna downstairs in the dim light of dawn to the wide doors in the dining room. She stopped, transfixed by the sight of a couple feet of snow obliterating the once-familiar view of her lover’s yard.

It was so white. Pristine. Nothing stirred beyond the doors, and Jenna wasn’t surprised. Thick, fat flakes of white floated down from a leaden sky to add another layer of precipitation to what was already fallen.

Luna yowled.

“Okay, okay.” Jenna jumped forward, fumbling with the keys to open the sliding door. Already she felt eyes on her from all directions, studying her, assessing her weaknesses. She managed to turn the key and pull the door open enough to let the bouncing Shepherd squeeze out into the yard, then slammed the door shut again, taking several steps away from the glass.

Part of her didn’t want to let Luna go out. The scared, outdoors-fearing part of her was aware she wouldn’t be allowed to step over the threshold and rescue her dog if her life depended on it. Her brain had rewired itself to despise anything outside the confines of her sanctuary.

With her back against the wall, Jenna watched her guard dog see to her business, then have a mad ten minutes of what videos on Connor’s laptop called *zoomies*. Legs seemed to fly in all directions, disturbing the peace of the snow as it flew everywhere. Luna’s tail was tucked between her hind

legs as she spun and whirled, happy and carefree, then attempted to catch the snowflakes as they tumbled to earth.

Memories—the ones she had access to now—proved Jenna was capable of such frolics. Playing with her siblings in the snow at their home in Colorado as small children, teenagers. Snowball fights and snowmen contests. Knocking snow off the house roof, the garage roof, to see who could bring the most down on all their heads while their mother kept the log fire roaring and milk warming on the stove.

Laughter, so much laughter. Bright and cheerful, punctuated by happy screams and jeered taunts designed to egg the others on in their pursuits.

All six of them, parents and brothers and sisters, seated around a huge dinner table with food heaped on plates and heads bowed in joint prayer to thank God before they ate His bounty. To offer their gratitude for all He'd given to them, for the strength to see them through the tests and trials of life.

Jenna bent over double from the swift surge of nausea. She'd prayed for a long time. Months and months, with every shattered breath she took as pain exploded in her lungs. Day after day, when her stomach shrank from malnutrition and the flesh eked off her bones. She had prayed and she had been abandoned.

She lifted her head as Luna barked at the door. The daft dog was covered from head to tail in snow, little clumps of it clinging to her fur. Jenna pushed away from the wall, gritting her teeth as bile rose swiftly up her throat, and hauled the door open to let the dog—and fresh air—come streaming inside.

Unfortunately, so did a significant portion of the outside weather.

Luna shook, sending snow flying in every direction before a wicked glint appeared in her eyes. When Jenna locked the door again and turned to survey the mess, the dog dropped so her butt was in the air, her front end pressed to the ground, and her trigger switch for more *zoomies* was clearly primed.

"No. Luna, no." Jenna held her hands up and tried to be stern. "Stay, Luna. There's enough chaos in here without you spreading it around Connor's house."

Her voice flipped the *zoomies* switch in a split second. With a crazy howl of delight, Luna took off like a rocket down the hallway, skidding into the kitchen, executing what sounded like more chaos in there, then tanking

out and into the living room. The couch seemed to make a noise like it had imploded under the weight of the sodden dog as Jenna rushed to the doorway.

No, not the couch.

Jenna hung her head, near tears as feathers rained down on top of a spinning Shepherd. The implosion sound had apparently been one of the nice, fancy cushions Jenna liked to nest with exploding under the force of Missile Dog.

Luna yelped and bolted for the door as Jenna tried to block her, tongue hanging out the side of her mouth as she—oh no, oh no, oh no—took the stairs three at a time. Her strides thudded down the landing above Jenna's head, and she ducked her shoulders for the brief two seconds of silence it took before—

"LUNA!"

Connor's roar was shocked and furious. Within seconds, the culprit had bounced her way back downstairs and promptly seated herself to heel by Jenna's legs. Aside from the lolling tongue, heavy breathing, and snowballs still clinging to her fur, Luna gave a good impression of being a guiltless animal, ruthlessly framed for crimes she didn't commit.

Closing her eyes in resignation, Jenna patted the loyal mutt's head and shuffled to the hallway closet for the vacuum cleaner. Maybe she could get at least the feathers cleaned up before Connor made it downstairs and saw the carnage.

She hadn't even plugged it in when he loomed in the doorway.

Her knees buckled as they were trained to do, pitching her onto the floor. She slid her chest along the feathered carpet until her body assumed the most familiar position from her years of servitude and linked her hands over the back of her head. She'd learned it was the best way to protect her skull from a blow—intentional or otherwise.

All the while she hated herself for surrendering to habit.

Hands were under her arms almost immediately, dragging her to her feet and spinning her around. Her face mashed against a hot chest and she sighed.

"We agreed this wasn't going to continue," Connor murmured against her hair. "It fucking slays me when you prostrate yourself like that."

"I know, I'm sorry."

“We also said no more apologizing for things you couldn’t control,” he reminded her, lifting her chin with a fingertip so he could brush his lips over hers. “Like that goddamn dog, for example. Did the cushion really require assassinating this morning?”

They both looked down at Luna. Jade eyes couldn’t quite make full contact in return.

“The snow made her a little crazy.”

“Snow makes everyone crazy by the end of winter.” Connor pushed her away to arm’s length, parted the robe. With gentle probing, he pressed over her chest until the briefest pinch of pain made itself aware. “Is that sore?”

“No. I don’t really feel it.”

“How about elsewhere?”

“Elsewhere?” Jenna frowned, then flushed. Oh, *elsewhere*. “No, I think it’s okay. Just achy more than anything.”

Relief flashed over his face. “Good. Good, I’m glad. Well, I suppose breakfast is in order before we tackle Luna’s morning surprise. Did she do her jobs outside?”

Jenna nodded, slightly disappointed he wasn’t checking *elsewhere* as she would have liked. But, she reminded herself, Sarah had warned her he wouldn’t try anything for a few days. Apparently, a needle in the heart was enough to bring out his ultra-protective side. “Before the *zoomies*.”

The dark cloud of thunder his expression had suggested drifted away as he grinned. “I’ll give the damn dog *zoomies* if she murders any more cushions. Feathers are a bitch to clean up and I don’t see her wielding the vacuum.”

With a vision of Luna standing on her hindlegs, steering the vacuum over the floor while wearing an old-fashioned housekeeper’s apron, Jenna giggled and shook her head. “She lacks opposable thumbs. I can vacuum while you make breakfast. We might not choke on feathers with our pancakes...” she said, planting the suggestion.

“Oh, we’re having pancakes now, are we?”

Connor didn’t give her time to answer. He must have seen something on her face, in her eyes, that resonated within him because he moved faster than she thought possible. His mouth covered hers, and she opened instantly. Tongues dueled fiercely; Jenna’s brains leaked out of her head and down her thighs.

His hands clamped down on her butt, stroking the slight curves before his fingers dug into the flesh and lifted her. Her legs hooked around his waist as his hand delved between them, spreading the robe wide. “You’re supposed to be resting.”

“I am. You’re doing all the work.” Her head fell back on a moan as teeth and lips attacked her throat, nibbling and sucking until her pussy clenched and moisture dripped. “We only live once, Connor.”

“Fuck it,” he snarled. He took three long strides until her back hit the wall—the wall—and his hands shoved his boxers down his thighs. With only the wall and the grip of her thighs keeping her in place, Jenna felt weightless. “Tell me if there’s any pain, baby. This will feel different.”

Different ho—Oooh. In what seemed like the blink of an eye, Connor’s cock pressed against her, nudged into her, at the same time his hands captured her hips and pulled her down his shaft as his pelvis rutted up.

She was full, stretched, and floating into oblivion within a second. Muscles complained briefly before they gripped his cock like crazy Amazon women trying to keep him hostage inside her. She garbled out a keening cry of pleasure with the first handful of thrusts, then screamed when—after she offered no objection—his pace and the power of his thrusts became more...substantial.

Nerves shimmied to life, dancing under her skin like fireflies. They spread, a wildfire of sensation from pussy to tummy, ziplining up her spine to some hallowed place at the base of her skull. From there, everything turned into light and sound.

Their breath mingled, Connor’s mouth taking hers as precisely as his cock claimed her *elsewhere*. Hands skipped and skimmed, fanning the flames, urging the heat to consume her.

Jenna choked on a cry, bowing back as the pulse in her brain detonated, blowing the orgasm far and wide, decimating her system into glitter-sized shards. Limp, she fell forward to pant on Connor’s shoulder, feeling his body still pistoning in and out inside of her, while hers moaned pitifully at the fresh stimulation to already aroused flesh.

“You okay, Jenna?” he asked gruffly, nuzzling her ear.

“Just...resting.” She grunted in an unladylike fashion as his drives became harder, deeper, spearing to the very core of her in smooth, fast rhythm. “You keep...working hard, okay?”

He laughed, and as the rumble of his humor resonated inside her, she mewled at his final thrust, the primal growl he released as heat seemed to fill the very heart of her. His teeth bit lightly into her throat and she purred like a kitten.

It wasn't until Connor disengaged that they realized there was a problem.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

His quest for title of supreme idiot wasn't over, Connor thought as he braced his elbows on his knees and resisted banging his head into the wall. The fucking wall. Wall sex apparently possessed powers of moronic proportions, wiping a man's mind of the essentials—for starters, a motherfucking condom.

They didn't need this complication on top of everything else happening around them, and the infuriating thing about it was, it was all his fault. More than that, it was a mistake he didn't know if he should rectify.

Under different circumstances, it would have been a clear and definite *no*. But Jenna's life and his own were close to spinning out of control, specifically now when the petition hung over their heads like a boulder balanced on a pinhead atop a cliff.

He stared at the glass of juice on the coffee table, watched cool tears slide down the side to pool on the coaster. The little white tablet beside it mocked him, serenading him with promises of what could be if he just popped it back in the bottle and forgot all about it.

Pregnancy. A baby. A child. A family.

Everything he wanted with Jenna.

Across from him, sitting on the floor, Jenna said not a word. Her calmness surprised him—after all, he might just have fucked up the life she'd only gotten back a couple months ago—and she showed no signs of reverting back to her little mode.

“Am I taking the pill, Connor?” she asked, finally breaking the silence.

“That's not my decision, baby.”

She hummed thoughtfully. “Part of it is. Half of it. I'd like...I'd like to know what you think.”

His shoulders slumped. He was proud of her for asking, for considering his opinion, and took it as a solid step toward becoming a functioning adult again. Instead of panicking, she was *thinking*. “A year from now, two, I wouldn’t be worried. You’d be healthy, your body recovered enough to take the strain of carrying a baby to term and delivering.”

Her brow wrinkled. “You don’t think I would now?”

“I think you’ve been through too much to pile on more stress. It’s not impossible you could carry to term, but I think you’d struggle.” His heart broke, but Jenna’s face remained almost serene. “That’s without the addition of your family, the investigation, the goddamn court case that’s going to follow an arrest if—when—they catch the fucker. It’s a lot to ask of you, Jenna, and I’m not comfortable putting you in that position.”

“That position was quite good,” she muttered.

Jesus, she made him want to laugh at the most inopportune times. “Focus, Jenna, you know that’s not what I meant.”

“It’s what I meant. It was an honest mistake, Connor.” Serious green eyes roamed over his face, studied his body language.

Knowing her ability to essentially read his freaking mind through his body alone, Connor attempted to adopt a relaxed pose to throw her off her game.

“This hurts you,” she murmured, her lips turning down. She fell quiet again, the silence heavy and thoughtful. While his mind whirled a thousand times a minute, bouncing between potentially being a father and how badly he could mess her life up in a second of passion-fueled lust, Jenna’s mind wandered away to her special place.

Her eyes cleared and, bright as glass, they were peaceful with the choice she’d made. Her hand shot out, faster than he anticipated, and she snatched the pill, tossed it back, then grabbed the juice and gulped. Her little juice moustache was adorable, but Connor could only think, *What the fuck just happened?*

“Jenna, I...”

“It’s done.” It was a simple statement of fact. “You made valid points I agree with. I just found you, Connor. When this is over, I...I want time to be normal again. Human again. I want to spend time with you, build a life and a home with you, before we think about bringing another being into existence, and I’m not...I’m not functioning normally yet, am I?”

It struck too close to the accusations of her parents for Connor to keep his temper fully under control. “Don’t ever say that, Jenna. There is no *normal* about any of this. You’re recovering better than I could’ve hoped. That’s all that matters.”

“You’d still love me even if I don’t...”

Connor reeled his emotions back in. His snappish reply had knocked her confidence, and that was just unacceptable. “Baby, I’ll love you no matter what.” He reached over to take her hand. “Don’t ever underestimate what you’ve achieved, Jenna. You’ve amazed me from that first night and haven’t stopped showing me what you’re capable of. Stop worrying about being normal and be who you want to be.”

She squeezed his hand. “One day, we’ll have another moment like this, Connor. You won’t be so sad and I...I’ll be who I want to be,” she said carefully. “We’ll have another moment like this, and we’ll be happy about having a baby instead of grieving a possibility.”

He blinked. *Grieving a possibility*. Possibly the most mature thing he’d heard her say to date, but scarily accurate. His heart ached because she’d hit the source of his sadness on the damn head.

She offered him a sweet smile. “Don’t grieve for what you don’t know for sure existed, Connor. I learned a long time ago there’s enough to mourn without finding more.” Giving his hand a little squeeze, she got to her feet. Immediately, Luna—silent watchdog at the end of the coffee table—was by her side. “Would you like some juice?”

“No. No, thanks, baby. You help yourself.”

Jenna walked off, his robe draped on her like some ridiculously sexy shapeless ballgown, with her faithful hound on her heels. Subtle changes had taken place recently—good ones, he hoped. A touch of confidence in her walk, the strength of her speech and length of her sentences. Inch by painful inch, Jenna was crawling her way back to humanity.

Her ordeal had made her wise beyond her years.

She was right—he grieved for something he couldn’t say for certain had even been conceived. Just because sperm swam in the right direction didn’t mean it found the treasure marked at X. Better to view the eventful morning as a lesson in how not to ravage your lover without a condom, than to dwell on what could have been.

The kicker, of course, was that his morning from hell had only just begun. No doubt Sarah would arrive soon, shimmering with vibrant

outrage, and then they had Hadley's arrival to look forward to. Joy of joys.

Connor foresaw his day going to the devil in a handbasket, decorated with pretty flowers and a massive box of *fuck you* with a ribbon tied around it on top. Things felt...off this morning. Not between him and Jenna, not even after the last thirty minutes, but something dark and oppressive seemed to sit on his shoulders like a mountain.

He gazed out the window to the snowy yard. The damn stuff kept coming without reprieve, growing layer by layer, faster and thicker. He hoped Sarah had the sense to get Zeke to drive her—her husband owned the Creek's biggest, throatiest sonofabitch truck in the county. It would have to snow for a week straight before the beautiful silver monster even struggled to get anywhere.

If you needed a tow in bad weather, Zeke was your guy.

Hadley might find his way more difficult. His SUV could make it through if the Special Agent was any kind of driver. But then, Montana snowstorms weren't like anything found elsewhere in the country.

Jenna came back, holding her glass carefully in two hands like a child. There was no hesitation after she set her drink down—she sat on his lap and offered him comfort he hadn't known he'd needed. Simple physical contact in the form of a hug, and his world righted back onto an even keel.

She curled into him, snuggling hard, and his arms came around her instinctively. He couldn't envision a time, ever, when he wouldn't hold her just like this. He propped his chin gently on her head and sighed.

They stayed there, watching the flurries dance in the sky outside the frosty windows while they were warm inside, with the carnage-committing Luna at their feet.

Connor couldn't give a fuck about the damp patches where snow had melted into the carpet and couch. The feathers were mostly cleaned up, although he suspected a few stragglers would make their appearance over the next few weeks.

All he cared about was what he felt when Jenna was like this in his arms. She calmed his storm when he lost his cool, lifted his spirits when he sank under the pressure. She did it all without realizing how much she levelled him back out into a functioning adult.

That was her gift.

Luna rose to her feet slowly, hackles raised and the beginning of a snarl in her throat. Ears pricked, she trotted out of the room toward the front door,

then let loose with a maelstrom of vicious barks.

Someone knocked.

Hadley, Connor guessed and cursed under his breath. The next adventure of this shitty day had come faster than anticipated. He kissed Jenna's hair, then her mouth when she turned her head with questions in her eyes. He picked her up and dropped her on the seat beside him. "Get your blankie and pillows if you need them," he told her quietly. "Do you need Moose?"

She went dead white, her eyes shadowed with understanding. "Hadley?"

"Yeah, baby. There's some important stuff he needs to talk to us about. Luna, quiet!" he shouted when the dog wouldn't shut up. "He shouldn't be here long."

"Okay." She folded her hands on her lap, blew out a long breath. "I'll be okay. We trust him, right?"

Connor nodded, giving her the verification she wanted even though she didn't need it. Trusting Hadley came as easy to her now as trusting Connor. "Call your dog, Jenna. Keep her under control."

The dog would not stop barking as Connor went to answer the door. She whined when Jenna shouted for her, torn between her duty to see off intruders and protecting her mistress, but she chose Jenna after a few extended seconds of fierce barking.

Connor checked his watch as he opened the door, and the ominous feeling in his belly morphed into warning bells. He glanced over his shoulder and stepped onto his porch in his socked feet. "What the hell is this, Hadley?"

The agent looked highly apologetic as he stood stiff and unyielding with snow dusted over his broad shoulders and hair. Flanking him, two middle-aged guys wearing winter gear stood silently. They nodded at Connor as he eyed them, noting their outerwear resembled uniforms. "Things went up shit creek this morning, Connor."

"How?"

"I...look, it's freezing out here. Why don't we step inside and talk so we don't start losing our extremities? I'm sure you need your toes and I'd like to hang on to my ears if possible."

Connor shook his head slowly. "I'd rather lose my toes."

Hadley winced. "I'll say what I have to say then and get this over with quickly. Ilene and Aaron Abernathy filed a mental-health petition this

morning at seven a.m. for custody of Jen—Penelope’s rights as a mentally-ill individual. It was pushed through as a priority due to the ongoing investigation and FBI involvement. I’m sorry, Connor. Judge Swinton signed the petition within thirty minutes, before I even knew it had gone before him.”

Connor’s world shattered into little pieces, leaving him standing on the welcome mat in his socks while the earth crumbled away around his feet. “No. Jenna should be defended, there are people willing to stand up in court—in person or by letter—in support of her staying right where she is. Not to mention there should have been an evaluation.”

“Swinton waived it. Took one look at the casefile on his desk and ordered Jenna to be remanded into psychiatric care under parental guidance. I’m sorry, Connor, but it’s with immediate effect.”

His fists clenched. “You’re not taking her.”

Hadley’s face turned stony, and his hand slipped down to his waist and the bulge of his weapon. “We have a good friendship, Doc. Let’s not ruin it by doing something stupid. I know what you’re feeling, and I’d be distraught if it was my girl in this position, but you can’t help her if I have to lock you up for obstructing a court order.”

Obstructing a court order? Fuck that, they’d have a warrant on his head for triple homicide. Connor stood his ground. “She’s borderline agoraphobic. Even with me with her, she’ll panic.”

One of the goons cleared his throat. “No civilians.”

“The fuck did you say?” Connor snapped. “Civilian, my ass.”

“Just doing our job, Sir.” Goon Two spoke up. “We are aware this is a delicate situation, and we don’t want to cause undue stress to the patient, but we have our orders and a court-issued warrant for Penelope Abernathy.”

“Fuck your orders, fuck the warrant, and fuck you.”

“Connor,” Hadley warned.

He heard the vibrating purr of Zeke’s truck cruising steadily down the street and almost cheered. The silver beast pulled up behind Hadley’s SUV, damn near rapping bumpers together, and Sarah streaked from the vehicle like a dark-haired bullet. “Connor?”

“I’m afraid you need to step back, Sarah. This doesn’t involve you.” Hadley offered her a sad smile which wasn’t returned. “Don’t get involved with this.”

She snorted, cheeks pink with the cold despite her purple wool hat and matching scarf. Her hair caught the breeze, lashed around her face. “Too late for that, asshat. What the fuck is going on?”

“We’re going to need those strings pulled,” Connor said numbly. He started to shiver as the cold ate into his bones. “They granted the petition.”

Her eyes flashed to black fire. “Motherfucker!”

“Language, Sarah.” Zeke lumbered up behind them, appearing bigger than usual in his winter gear. “Is there an issue here, gentlemen? As far as I’m aware, we had some time before a petition was requested. Written statements were requested only last night if I recall correctly?”

“The petition was put forward and granted early this morning.” Goon One told him, eyeing the giant cautiously.

“Really? Well, that’s going to pose a problem, isn’t it? My father will be displeased it went ahead so quickly without being given a chance to review the case in its entirety.” Zeke rubbed one massive hand over his sturdy jaw. “Incredibly displeased, considering he cancelled several vital meetings last night so he could study the matter today.”

Goon One scoffed, his smile holding a sneer. “I’m pretty damn sure your father won’t have any say in the matter.”

Interestingly, Hadley’s face had turned a sickly shade of green and was slowly fading to white. “Mark, shut up.”

“My father has a say in a great deal of matters, *Mark*.”

Obviously inclined to butting heads with other men, Mark stepped forward. “Maybe so, but unless he’s on the Supreme Court and can overturn Judge Swinton’s order, we have a patient to collect and deliver to her new residence.”

“Judge Swinton, huh?” Zeke whistled as though impressed. “Christ, I haven’t seen Uncle Bobby in, hell now, must be a year or more. Christmas, year before last, wasn’t it, honey?” he asked Sarah, sliding his arm over her shoulders as she grinned.

“I believe so. Long past due for another family visit.”

Mark turned beet red.

“See, my father and Uncle Bobby have been best friends for the better part of fifty years. Poker buddies, golf buddies. You name it, they’ve done it. Now if you’re wondering, and you gotta be by now, my father is John William Fairfax, Senior. That’s *Senator* John William Fairfax, Senior. Just in case you were curious. I’m lucky I didn’t get stuck with John William

Junior, but that fell to my brother, thank God.” Zeke held his hand out with a shit-eating grin. “Zeke Fairfax.”

“Fuck.” Hadley breathed.

“Yeah, that’s my thought on the situation. If you’ll excuse me, I have a couple phone calls to make. Connor, if you’d take Sarah inside, I’d appreciate it. Too fucking cold to stand around out here.” Hard eyes pinned the agent and the goons. “Up to you whether you let these assholes in.”

Grateful for the excuse to get back inside, Connor ushered Sarah through the front door and barely had time to snag Luna by the collar before she leaped through to get to the strangers causing a ruckus outside her door. He looked over his shoulder, jerked his head at Hadley. “Inside. Your *friends* can find alternative shelter. They’re not welcome in my house.”

Goon Two closed his eyes and looked disappointed he wouldn’t take advantage of the warmth, but Mark’s anger bubbled under his skin like a contorting mask. Not one to easily control his emotions when he was riled up, Connor decided, and not a man he wanted near his Jenna.

He shut the door in their faces after Hadley stepped inside. This time, there was no friendly welcome from the dog. In the intuitive way of animals, she singled Hadley out as the cause of the upset and showed her displeasure. Displeasure in the form of lots of pearly white teeth.

Hadley remained still, not moving an inch as she strained against Connor’s hold on her collar. “Is she liable to rip my throat out if I move?”

Connor shrugged. “Probably.”

“You gonna let her?”

Another shrug. “Maybe.”

“I didn’t know, Connor. They promised me they’d give you time to convince Jenna. It wasn’t until I got a phone call from the judge telling me to pick her up that I realized they’d done an end run. I swear to you, if I’d known this was going to happen, I’d have warned you sooner.”

Luna’s growls vibrated up Connor’s arm. Almost choking herself, she snapped and snarled at Hadley like a crazed wolf.

Connor studied the agent’s face. There was regret lining Hadley’s eyes, a sorrow in them Connor understood far too well—he felt it burrowing inside him like a sickness. The sick sense of loss. He couldn’t catch even a hint of a lie from the man. With a growl of his own, Connor gave Luna the command to cease.

“How do I tell her?”

Sarah rubbed his arm as Luna settled, pried his fingers off the collar. “Why don’t you and Hadley go sit down?” she suggested. “You’re frozen, and your teeth are about to chatter. Jenna must be wondering where you are, Con. Reassure her.”

Reassure her? He couldn’t reassure himself he wasn’t about to watch the love of his life being ripped away. “How do you propose I do that?”

“Be the man she’s come to trust,” she said simply. “She relies on you, Connor. This...unforeseen circumstance doesn’t change that. It makes you all the more vital in her life. Are you going to let her down when she needs you most?”

Damn it, his teeth *were* chattering. Warmth flooded his cold muscles, turned to pain in his feet and hands. But he shook his head. “She’s mine.”

“She is. Zeke will do all he can, Connor. If he can stop this, he will. But right now, Jenna’s in there by herself, and she doesn’t have any idea everything could come crashing down on her head.”

Connor ground the heel of his palm into his forehead, gripped his hair in tight fingers. He needed to tell her, he thought with dread curdling his belly. Before Zeke came in and either broke them or worked a miracle, Connor had to man up and explain things. Fuck swaying her opinion toward her parents, fuck their relationship with their lost daughter.

In one foolish move, they’d already ensured Jenna remained lost to them for good.

“Hadley, give Sarah a hand with the drinks, would you?” Connor said absently as he walked away. He looked down at himself, turned around. “I need to get changed.”

“We’re making drinks now?” Hadley muttered as Connor plodded upstairs.

“Shut up, asshat. I haven’t forgiven you for your part in this,” Sarah hissed at him, making Connor’s lips twitch. Her matron tone was fully engaged, which meant she was in a bitchy mood. “The boss wants drinks making, we make goddamn drinks. Get in there and get the mugs out of the cupboard.”

“Is that dog hungry?”

“God help you if she is. She won’t listen to me.”

Connor strode into the bedroom, took in the bed where everything had been so perfect just a day before. Oh, what he’d give to go back twenty-four hours and alter little things to skew the outcome of today. Left arm? He

could live without that. His house, his job? Take them. Without Jenna, the house would be an empty shell, and his job would hold no meaning anyway.

Wanting to get warm, he stripped down to the skin and went on the hunt for his thermal underwear and socks. With those in place, he chose the thickest pair of padded pants he owned, a thermal undershirt, thick woolen sweater, and found his goose down jacket stashed at the back of the closet. He dressed in everything but the jacket, carrying it back downstairs with him and hanging it on the newel post.

If shit kicked off, he wanted his boots and jacket to hand.

Sarah and Hadley bickered in the kitchen when he snuck past. Sarah's snark wafted from the room like a rich, underappreciated perfume—sweet, potent and deadly. He swore she would make one hell of a Domme if ever she wanted to experiment with the lifestyle. Busting balls was a skill she had honed to perfection.

He found Jenna curled on the couch beneath her ducklings, watching cartoons on TV. Her gaze slid warily to his when she saw how he was dressed. "Are you going somewhere?"

"No, baby." He sucked in a long breath and said the words capable of sending her careening back into hiding behind her little. "We need to talk, Jenna."

She swallowed hard and tugged the covers further up. "Sounds serious." She wet her lips, tried a smile that faltered before it reached her eyes. "Did Hadley have some news?"

Connor closed his eyes. "Yeah."

When he opened them again, she was almost completely hidden from view. Unable to bear not touching her, comforting her if she needed it, he lifted her and sat, letting her curl up with her head in his lap. His fingers moved to her hair, began to stroke her scalp as Luna padded into the room and dropped on the floor with a disgusted grunt.

"Last night while you were asleep, Hadley called. Your family are anxious to see you, Jenna. Before they left Colorado, they petitioned the court for the right to take you back into their guardianship."

Jenna went rigid.

"It was denied, because you currently don't reside in Colorado. They spoke to Hadley and told him they were submitting the petition here in Montana. He managed to get them to agree to delay the submission; in

return, they wanted to see you. They told him they would give him—me—time to persuade you.”

“I don’t like this, Connor.”

He barely stopped himself from fisting her hair. “I know, baby. Me either. Your parents filed the petition this morning, early this morning, before Hadley was aware. They’ve made a claim that you’re...” How the fuck did he put this delicately? “Mentally unstable. Normally, you’d be given a psych exam to establish any mental illness, but the judge decided that due to the circumstances of the case and open investigation, it was in your best interests to be—”

“No.” And here came the little. “Daddy, no.”

“Jenna, baby, you need to listen to me now. Carefully. Do you understand?” His voice cracked in response to the whimper of her own. He cleared it forcefully, tried to soothe the shudders ripping through her. “The judge ordered you be taken into psychiatric care, under the guardianship of your parents. That’s why Hadley’s here, baby.”

“No!”

She wriggled away from him, rolling onto the floor in her haste and crawling across the floor, the duvet dragging behind her. Luna followed in an instant, whining and licking at Jenna’s face.

“Zeke knows some people. He’s trying to overturn the order, Jenna. He’s working hard to stop this.” Fuck, she was crying. Big gulping sobs. He stood and went to her, pausing when Luna whirled on him. “Luna, halt.”

The dog stood her ground as Jenna collapsed in the corner, her back to him. He snapped his fingers and pointed at the dog, exerting his authority. For several long, fraught moments, the dog denied his demand for obedience and did exactly what he’d bought her to do.

She guarded.

“Luna,” he said again, softer this time. “Halt. I won’t hurt her.”

When she laid down, he breathed a sigh of relief. Fighting took too much energy, energy he didn’t have right now, and Jenna’s mournful howls sucked what little he had left. He hated seeing her in distress.

His heart bled when he picked her up, duvet and all, and carried her to the recliner. He found it easier to cuddle her there, keeping her tucked firmly against him as she cried like the damned.

“I will do everything I can to bring you home again if they make me let you go. If I have to fight the courts, your parents, the fucking devil and God

and the goddamn universe, you will come home to me, Jenna. I promise.”

“I’m not crazy.” Hell, that tiny voice stirred his Daddy instincts.

“No, you are not. We know that, Jenna. Anyone who talks to you will know you’re not. This is a ploy, a mean one, to get you where your family wants you. Unfortunately, they’ve taken it down the legal road, so we have to do the same.” He rubbed his cheek over the top of her head. “Believe me, baby, if I could I’d shove you in my truck and drive a thousand miles. But they’d find us eventually, and this would all begin again.”

“Connor.” Sarah whispered his name from the doorway. “Can Zeke come in?”

One look at her stricken face was all the answer he needed. There would be no reprieve, no miracle. This was the end of the line.

His stomach dropped into his feet, and his heart wasn’t far behind. Arms tightening around Jenna, he acknowledged the apology in Sarah’s eyes and nodded. She stepped inside and hurried to the couch, sitting quietly as Zeke ducked his head and entered, instantly shrinking the room’s proportions with his sheer size.

He sat carefully, the couch creaking under his weight as he perched on the edge, his hands dangling between his spread thighs. He twisted the cell phone agitatedly between his fingers. “I’ve spoken with my father, Connor. Not an easy conversation, considering the senator is livid at this turn of events. We added Judge Swinton into a conference call, and we’ve hashed out some points.”

Judge Swinton, Connor noted numbly, not Uncle Bobby. “And?”

“The senator and the judge are meeting this afternoon to go over the case in detail. They’re prepared to take your statement, and ours,” he added with a pat on Sarah’s thigh, “into consideration. My father won’t leave a stone unturned, he’s one of the most methodical men I know. But as a sign of good faith toward her parents, the judge has ordered Jenna to be taken to the psych facility as originally planned. Short-term stay only—a day or two at the most. He’s requested a full psychiatric assessment to add to the data already gathered.”

Jenna started to wiggle again, trying to slide out of Connor’s hold. “I won’t go. I won’t!” She nearly screamed it.

Zeke sighed. “The judge apologized for making a rash decision this morning. Apparently the Abernathy family were quite adamant, and he

honestly felt the judgment he made was the right one. It's not the outcome we wanted, not entirely, but it is a step in the right direction."

Connor gripped Jenna tightly as she thrashed. Panic sweat soaked through his sweater, the padded thighs of his pants. "No, Jenna. Don't fight me. Nobody's going to hurt you."

Her weeping escalated again before he cupped her head against his chest, pressing her ear to his heart. A moment later, her thumb took up residence in her mouth and she sucked around the sobs.

"Her parents asked that Jenna be removed from your care. The judge is standing by that decision. They feel your connection with her is clouding her attitude toward them."

Connor grunted. "Maybe *their* attitude is the root of the problem."

"That's my guess. You and Sarah will not be allowed to travel with or visit Jenna during the duration of her psych exam. Hadley has been assigned to transport her to the hospital and he's assigned men to stand guard. Mark and Andrew will be responsible for her care until she reaches her destination, then she'll be under the supervision of a doctor and a team of specialist nurses."

"Fucking ridiculous. Did you tell them how far something like this will set her back? How much progress she'll lose because of their idiocy?"

"I advised that, yes. While the senator and the judge are sympathetic, they believe the parents may have a valid point. Think of it as a test, Connor. The first of many she has to pass to come home."

"She shouldn't have to pass any fucking test! She's been through enough."

"I agree. But that's how things stand as it is, until the psych exam is complete, and the court re-examines the evidence. Be thankful, Connor. This is a reprieve. Two days and she'll probably be home no worse for wear." Zeke looked miserable. "You know if it was up to me, she wouldn't be going anywhere."

"I know. I know you tried your best for us." Connor ground his teeth together as his throat closed. "When?"

"Say your goodbyes," Zeke advised gently. "They're already behind schedule, and the hospital is strict on times and routines. When you've said what you need to, they'll take her. If she doesn't go quietly, Mark is authorized to sedate her for the journey."

"Like hell he is!"

“It’s his job, no matter how big an asshole he is. We’ll leave you to it for a few minutes. Sarah will pack a bag for Jenna.” Zeke stood, pulled Sarah to her feet. “Connor?”

“Yeah.”

“Remember, if you fight this, she’ll fight harder. Make it easy on her.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Fingers digging into leather, Jenna clung to the recliner like a cat.

She couldn't think, couldn't breathe, as two strangers worked together to trap her. Blind panic pumped through her blood, surged through her body with every frantic beat of her heart. Eyes darting from man to man, she forced herself to assess the situation.

They had her pinned between them, and they knew it. Any direction she moved, one of them would be on her. Right now, they were biding their time, waiting for her to bolt, and one of them had a hunter's gleam in his muddy brown eyes. Predatory focus. He freaked her out and played on the knowledge.

"*Connor!*" she screamed his name, even though she knew he couldn't get to her. Hadley and Zeke had dragged him and Luna away, and she'd heard him shouting, heard the thump and grunt of fists on flesh. "Daddy?"

The one with the nasty look in his eyes sneered. "Fairy-tale time's over, princess. Prince Charming can't save your ass this time."

"Mark, for God's sake, stop being a dick." The other man glared daggers at his colleague. "Just shut up and let me handle this." He lifted a hand, drawing Jenna's attention away from the one he called Mark. "Hey, sweetheart. Why don't you take a seat so I can talk to you without looming over you, huh?"

Jenna edged around the recliner, sensing movement from Mark. "You don't want to talk. You want to take me away. Don't lie."

"Don't want to," he corrected. "I have orders."

Connor was just down the hall. She could make it to Connor if she tried hard enough. She needed him to make this stop, to make the nightmare end.

He could make everything okay because he was her Daddy and he loved her.

Mark lunged for her and she screamed, throwing herself into the chair with a hard thump then scrambling forward as a rough hand grabbed hold of her slim shoulder through Connor's robe with enough force to bruise. She dropped to her knees, breaking his grip, then scuttled away on her hands and knees as the other man came forward.

"Jenna!" Connor's roar answered her scream.

Empowered, she charged forward, dodging Mark's second grab and feeling his fingers graze her scalp. She bolted down the hallway to the kitchen, heard Mark snap at his colleague, "Keep out of my way, Andrew. I won't be made a fool of by some brainwashed little bitch with a daddy fetish."

Jenna hammered on the closed kitchen door, weeping as she tried the handle. It moved, but the door didn't budge. She pushed frantically against the wood, using her hands, her shoulder. "Connor! Connor, please!"

She heard him shouting at Hadley, at Zeke. Harsh, vicious threats. As tears choked her, she realized they wouldn't let him save her. They weren't going to open the door. Dropping her forehead against the door with a thud, she keened wildly before falling to her knees and sobbing.

"Don't touch her, Mark."

Gentle hands touched her back tentatively, rubbed when her body went rigid. She didn't care anymore—the people she'd come to think of as friends, as *hers*, had abandoned her when she needed them most. Her hand touched the bottom of the door, her nails gouging into the wood.

"It's hard," the man called Andrew murmured as his arms slipped around her, lifted her. He held her weight easily as she struggled weakly. "We'll make it easier for you."

Her legs kicked uselessly when Mark parted the robe and slid his hand along her thigh. She didn't like him, didn't like the way he touched her. She yelped, jerked, when he jabbed a needle into her butt harder than necessary.

Something heavy smashed against the kitchen door as her head went light and floaty. More shouting ensued, but she couldn't understand the words. Her limbs went limp, her head dropped forward. Vision dimming, she barely felt herself being flipped around and tossed over a broad shoulder.

"Daddy," she mumbled.

“Shush now. Everything will be okay when you wake up.” The voice came from miles away, from the end of a long, dark tunnel. “You’ll be fine.”

Cold air washed over her, so cold her breath instantly turned to mist. Her last clear recollection before the drugs sucked her into the murk was being laid on the backseat of a car, her head in a stranger’s lap, while doors banged, and an engine started.

“She’s out?” Hadley asked.

“Yeah, she’s good. Should be out for a good few hours—we didn’t skimp on sedative. She’s a flighty little thing.” Andrew’s hand rested on her head. “She was pretty broken up when you wouldn’t let her see the doctor.”

“I heard,” Hadley replied grimly.

Barely awake, thoughts muddled, Jenna had trouble distinguishing voices. Maybe Connor hadn’t told them how quickly her body processed sedatives because they hadn’t given her enough to send her into that dreamy place, not even for a few minutes.

“Dirty bastard doesn’t deserve to say goodbye.” Another voice, disgust tainting the tone, came from the front. “Forcing a woman to call him Daddy. What kind of sick fuck enjoys that shit?”

“Keep your opinions to yourself, Mark. I don’t give a fuck what anyone does with another adult as long as it’s consensual.” Hadley’s voice came across calm, but even doped to the eyeballs, Jenna read the nuances beneath. The agent did not like the man he was working with.

She drifted for a while, losing track of the conversation as the drugs pushed and pulled her along between stupor and consciousness. She didn’t know how long they’d been travelling before her fingers twitched, and she moaned.

“Was that her?”

“She can’t be coming out of it so quickly; she’s hardly been down a half hour!”

“For Christ’s sake, get her back under.”

“I can’t. Not without overdosing her and putting her in a goddamn coma. Ah hell, her fingers are moving. Just shut up and see if she goes back under.”

Silence dropped like a weighted blanket, with only the growl of the engine and the crunch of tires on snow remaining. Peaceful, she thought,

and was tempted to slide away again, but without Connor there as her safety blanket, her mind was already ticking into action.

Her legs moved restlessly, and her hands sought purchase to push against so she could sit up. Her protest was a strained grunt as she was held down.

“Hold still. We’ve a ways to go yet.”

Her hand lashed out limply, smacking the seat in front of her. Her mouth was tacky, her system desperate for a drink. Unease pricked at her when the man holding her wouldn’t let her up. “Lemme go.”

“Just put pressure on the carotid artery,” Mark snapped from the front seat. “Knock the bitch—”

The world imploded.

Jenna heard Hadley swear, saw him wrench the wheel to one side through blurred eyes, then there was just a horrific screech of metal ripping into metal.

She thought she screamed as the SUV skidded sideways, went airborne. Unrestrained, her body lifted off the backseat, twisted and tumbled as the vehicle rolled. When it landed, bounced from roof to wheels to roof, Jenna bounced with it.

The familiar pain of broken bones radiated in her head before it smacked into the passenger seat’s headrest. Blood filled her mouth, her nose, sprayed all over as she coughed to clear her airways. Agony split her ribs, and she knew some were broken.

The SUV stopped on its roof, shuddered with the last of its momentum, and she laid facedown on the ceiling. Blood pooled beneath her head, dripped into her eyes. Pain consumed her down to the soul.

Broken ribs, broken arm. Nasty head wound, and several lacerations to her legs from broken glass. She tried to continue the tally as her vision swam with black.

She heard the crunch of footsteps in the crisp snow, shivered from the cold and chunks of ice inside the wrecked truck. Someone coughed, asked if everyone was okay.

Pop.

Her eyes rolled at the sound. An almost soft exhalation of noise that had dread pooling in her belly as thick as the blood beneath her. A few more footsteps and another *pop*. A short, shocked cry. Silence.

She blinked in confusion as a face peered through the shattered window nearest to her. Distorted, she couldn't see the features not covered by a black ski mask. She blinked again, her heart stopping as a gun poked through, angled upward.

Following the direction it was pointed, she saw the man, Andrew, hanging limp above her. Secured in place by his seatbelt, he looked like a forgotten puppet dangling by his strings.

Pop.

Blood rained down on her, warm and wet. She cringed but couldn't cover herself from a man's life showering over her. Panic and pain twined into one when she saw the hole in his jacket, the blood spurting from the wound in his chest.

"C-Connor," she whispered desperately through numb lips.

If she was going to die, lost in the wilderness somewhere and surrounded by dead men, he would be her last thought. Dying with only her Daddy in mind was the next best thing to having her heart stop while in his arms.

There was no doubt she was going to die today.

A gloved hand knocked away the deadly shards of glass still remaining, using the gun as a hammer to smash them out. Then it reached in and grabbed her wrist, pulling her free of the wreck.

She tried to scream, but her throat clamped down on the sound. Broken bones jarring, her head exploding with every inch of movement, she succumbed to the darkness.

Four hours, and not a word.

Connor paced the hallway, cell phone in hand. The one without swollen knuckles and marks gouged into the flesh from Zeke's teeth. He walked up and down, following the same solitary path he'd made since Hadley and his idiots took Jenna away with a promise to call Connor as soon as they reached the hospital and she was settled.

He'd almost killed the agent when Jenna screamed in terror and Hadley had tried to restrain him. If Zeke hadn't been there, Connor would've succeeded. Instead, the agent ended up with a black eye, broken nose and bruised ribs, while Zeke earned himself a chipped front tooth.

He wasn't ashamed of his actions. Both men would have done the same if it had been their woman trapped with two strange men, alone and

frightened.

When she'd pounded on the kitchen door, tried to open it, he'd nearly managed to break out of Zeke's impressive hold. With Hadley's weight leaning against it, Jenna hadn't stood a chance of opening it, and Connor hadn't been strong enough to break free and save her.

Why the hell wasn't Hadley calling?

Luna stuck to his heels. She'd been glued to his side since Jenna's departure, and she matched his every step. Every so often, she whined as though asking where her mistress was.

"Connor, come sit down before you wear a hole in the carpet."

Sarah leaned against the doorjamb of the living room, her face drawn and tired. She'd kissed her husband goodbye and sent him home to take care of the kids when it became clear Connor wasn't handling Jenna's loss well.

"He hasn't called."

"I know. He will. He promised."

"His promises mean shit." Connor almost let the phone fly before he remembered he needed it. "They took her, Sarah. They fucking took her, and now nobody is telling me anything."

"The weather's bad, Con. Hadley will be driving slower than usual. He knows how important she is to you—he's a Daddy too." She stepped forward and grabbed his arms before he could make the turn back to the front door. "Trust him. We've trusted him this far and he's done nothing but help. Give him the benefit of the doubt."

He snorted. "He kept me from her."

"He was following a court order. Even Zeke said he didn't have a choice in the matter, Con. Maybe it would have been worse for Jenna if she'd been able to say goodbye—letting go of you wouldn't have been pleasant."

Goodbye. The brief goodbye they'd had hadn't been long enough. Jenna wrapped around him, crying her heart into his shoulder. A long, desperate kiss. Whispered words and promises before the psych attendants came in and took control.

Out of patience with the conversation, Connor growled and resumed pacing. If Hadley hadn't warned him to stay away from the hospital on pain of arrest, Connor would have been driving right behind them. But something told him Jenna's parents had connections, if not money, and that locking him up wasn't outside their moral limits.

Apparently, nothing was.

When the phone rang, he fumbled it in his hands, only to discover the screen blank and the fucking thing silent. It dawned on him the ringtone wasn't his—the goddamn ringing phone *wasn't his*.

Sarah wrestled her cell from her pocket with a quick, absent apology. Her brow furrowed as she glanced at the flashing screen, then she answered with a quiet, “Zeke?”

Ignoring her, Connor took three steps away, promising he'd wait ten more minutes for Hadley to call before he didn't give an actual fuck what punishment the law brought down on his head, and went after his girl.

“Connor.”

The edge in Sarah's voice was different to anything he'd heard from her before. When he turned slowly, she was shaking, her skin so white she could have faded into the snow outside and disappeared. She walked to him and took his hand, leading him into the living room without a word of protest from him, and nudging him onto the couch.

Luna settled at his feet; Sarah sat beside him.

He couldn't find his tongue. Whatever had happened, it was bad.

She blew out a shaky breath and pressed a button on her phone. “Zeke?”

Her husband asked immediately, “Are we on speakerphone?”

“Yeah. Connor's right here.”

“Okay. I've had a call from my father, Connor. Hadley and the psych boys didn't arrive at the hospital with Jenna. All contact with them was lost, so Hadley's unit sent a team to track their route.” Zeke fell silent for a moment. “They found the SUV on one of the back roads about an hour away. Looks like an RTA—the vehicle's smashed up good from what I've been told.”

“J-Jenna?”

Sarah stifled a sob.

“It wasn't an RTA, Connor. Or at least, not an accidental one. All three men were shot in their seats—both men from the psych unit are dead. Hadley's not far behind but he's holding on. The medics think the cold saved him from bleeding out completely.”

Dead inside, Connor tried to make sense of what Zeke was saying. Two dead, and a man he considered a friend halfway on the journey to the pearly gates. But it was the one Zeke wasn't mentioning, it was Jenna who filled

Connor's vision as hallucinations of her body jerking under the onslaught of bullets haunted him. "Jenna, Zeke?"

The other man sighed. "They haven't found her, Connor. There's evidence she's badly injured according to the FBI crew currently on scene. A lot of blood they think hasn't come from the shooting victims. The snow's covering too much, but there's...fuck, Con, I'm sorry. There's a bloody trail under the snow where it looks like she's been dragged out of the SUV."

"I..." Dumbfounded, Connor stared at his hands. "I..."

"Breathe, Connor." Sarah scooted closer, rubbed his back in firm circles when his chest grew tight. "They haven't found her, but that means they haven't found a body either. If she was dead, they wouldn't have taken her body."

"Not they. *He*."

"Yes," she amended softly. "He."

"Have...have they got dogs out...looking for her?" Fuck, his throat kept slamming shut at the worst times. Bearing down, digging deep beneath the terror in his gut and the surge of grief, Connor fought for slippery hold on a rational thought. Any thought that didn't scream Jenna's name like a prayer.

"They're bringing in search and rescue teams. They're more accustomed to working in these sorts of weather conditions, but you have to keep in mind..." Zeke hesitated. "The snow's bad, Connor. Tire treads, footprints, blood...it erased all of them before the FBI arrived on scene. That was two hours ago. Any scent markers, any trace of her is going to be fucking hard to find. Whoever did this thought it through."

"No." Connor blinked away the cobwebs of shock. "No, they didn't. If the petition went through so early this morning, how did he know Jenna would be forced to leave the house? Unless he's been hiding close by, watching the house to wait for the opportunity, but that could have taken months. He knew. He fucking knew."

It honestly made him sick to think that motherfucker had been anywhere near Jenna during her recovery. But Connor took that nausea, and the trembling fury he felt at the thought of Sire having his hands on his *fucking Twenty-Two* again and put it into devising his next step.

Because there was a next step.

Until he found Jenna—dead or alive, God help him—there would be no stopping. He'd take step after step, pushing forward no matter what bullshit

got in his way, until he found the woman he loved.

She wouldn't be left to defend her again for three years. Hell, he was damned if any stone remained unturned in the next three days in his hunt.

"Hadley believed there was a mole in the FBI," Sarah whispered, shocked. "All the evidence going missing, getting damaged. If he was right, it's not just a mole. It's a murderer."

"Oh, he's right. Murderer, abductor, fucking traitor." Connor shoved to his feet, unable to contain the sudden flood of nervous energy in his system demanding to be used. His legs felt weak, but he forced himself to walk the room in a slow, methodical circle as his thoughts unwound. "If there's one in the FBI, Sire has them all over. Sheriff departments, morgues, laboratories. Anywhere he needs them, he'll find a way to get them on his roll. Which means..."

"The fucker has money," Zeke finished. "This will cause a ruckus in the main FBI building. Internal Affairs kind of ruckus. I need to update the senator. He'll want to know so he can get the ball rolling. If he can get IA involved immediately, we might be able to start pinning moles before they go deep."

"We?" Connor questioned.

Zeke chuckled, and Connor imagined the big man scrubbing his hand over his chin. "Ploughing snow off the roads is a hobby, Connor. Politics might not be my thing, but justice is my real job. Classified," he added sternly, "so this doesn't go any further."

"My mouth's sealed." Invigorated by the fresh direction, Connor knew what his next move needed to be. "I'm dropping Sarah off outside your door in ten minutes, Zeke. Make sure you're there when I do."

"Why, what are you—"

But Connor tapped his watch and gave Sarah a meaningful look before striding from the room. Finding Jenna was his only priority—leaving Sire and his lackeys to the now-mysterious Zeke seemed the logical thing to do.

Sensing a job to do, Luna sat at attention by the front door as he yanked on his boots, donned another layer of gear. He didn't know how long he'd be wandering in the wilderness, but he didn't plan to freeze to death while doing so.

With several inches of padding on his frame, Connor grabbed his rucksack from the cupboard tucked beneath the stairs and began to pack whatever he imagined he'd need. Hot drinks in two large thermos flasks,

sugary food, extra gloves, a spare hat and scarf. If he thought of it, in it went.

“What are you planning now?” Dressed in the same bulky layers of clothing, Sarah was ready to go. Her eyes were suspicious when he zipped the rucksack closed and grabbed Luna’s leash off the side. “Connor, you can’t go out there by yourself.”

“I’m taking Luna.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“I know, but I have to do something, Sarah. Maybe the trail’s stone-cold by the time I get to the scene. I need to see it.” He swung the rucksack over his shoulder. “My Jenna, Sarah. The motherfucker has my girl, and I’m not leaving her with him any longer than necessary.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“No. You have two little boys who need you. A husband who’d be lost without you. We’re not taking that risk with you.” He remembered his keys as he passed the hook on the wall where they lived. “You’re staying out of the way, safe, where Zeke can run the geek side of things and keep an eye on you.”

Luna stayed perfectly sat when he draped the leash loop over her head. Within a minute, they were standing outside under a heavy sky, and Connor was eager to hunt.

“You might need a spare set of hands.”

“Not this time.” He didn’t want witnesses to the carnage he was going to bring down on top of the prick when Connor got his hands around the sadist’s throat. “I don’t want you in harm’s reach.”

“Connor, I think you’ve lost the plot,” she said worriedly as he locked the door and handed her his house keys. She gave a good attempt at stalling when he ushered her toward his snowed-in truck, but her feet slid along the path.

Passing her the leash, Connor started digging at the snow around the driver’s door with gloved hands until he could yank the frozen portal open. Luckily, with the neighborhood being a community and relatively crime-free, he hadn’t locked it. He was in the freezing cab within minutes, coaxing the cold engine to rev to life. As soon as it roared into action, he set the heaters on full, climbed out, and went to attack the passenger door.

“I’ve lost the girl, not the plot,” he corrected belatedly as he kicked a chunk of solid snow clear. “That fucker might think he’s won, but he’s

started a goddamn war. Did he think I'd just sit back and let him take her without a fucking fight?" He slammed his hand against the side of the truck viciously, sending snow avalanching to the floor. "Arrogant sonofabitch!"

Sarah took a wary step back. "Maybe Zeke should go with you."

"No." Connor hauled the door open with a brash squeak of hinges, gestured her in. While his friend hesitated, Luna did not. The snow-dusted Shepherd leaped onto the front seat, bounced confidently into the back with her leash trailing behind her, then sat proudly as if to say *well let's go get this shit done, boss*.

Defeated, Sarah brushed the scatter of snow off the seat and jumped in, wincing as Connor slammed the door shut. He jogged back to the driver's side and got in, remembering to fasten his belt before he stuck the vehicle into reverse and backed slowly out of his drive.

"You don't even know where the scene is," she pointed out, shivering as the air in the cab slowly warmed. "Montana is a big place, Connor, and there's any number of routes Hadley could have taken to get to the hospital."

Connor drove slowly despite the urge to ram his foot down on the gas pedal. He wouldn't forgive himself if he put Sarah's life in danger, and neither would Jenna. "There's any number of routes *if you know them*," he corrected. "Hadley's an outsider. More than that, he's city. The most direct route is the one he'll have followed. I go that way, I'll find where Sire took Jenna, and I'll go from there."

"This is a suicide mission!"

He didn't care. Giving up, letting Sire take Jenna without a protest, without retaliation, was worse than death. Because Connor knew what he'd done to her before was nothing compared to what he had in mind for her now. Sociopathic homicidal sadists didn't take kindly to being thwarted by their victims.

Someone would die when Connor found Sire. He vowed it would be Sire because if Connor died, if he fell, Jenna wouldn't be far behind. As much as he liked the idea of spending eternity with his woman, he wanted a rich, full life with her first—marriage, children, the works. Love, laughter, tears and spats.

Connor's thoughts slipped to the Du-Ha storage box he'd had installed under the back seat for his hunting trips with Cain. Never one for having

guns in the house, Connor preferred to keep his Winchester XPR locked in his truck. The only other person who knew where it was stored, was Cain.

Daddy was hunting bigger prey than deer tonight.

“Documents for the house, my will, everything the lawyers will need in the event of my death, are in the bottom drawer of my desk. God willing, you won’t need them, but if you do, that’s where they are.” He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel as he turned the corner onto Sarah’s street. “I want it known that Jenna gets the house, Sarah. Cain won’t contest it, but Caleb might. She gets everything she needs to start her life again. And the dog. She gets the fucking dog.”

“Don’t, Connor.” The words were a pained squeak. “Don’t put this on me. Wait for the police, for the FBI. Let them do their fucking jobs!”

“You’re the only one with the balls big enough to knock Caleb off his perch if he makes a scene over this, Sarah. If I don’t make it through this and Jenna does, I want her protected. I want her safe and loved, and I know you’ll be there for her. You love her as much as I do.” He reached out and grabbed her hand. Her nails bit into his skin as she held on tight. “You, Zeke, and Cain are the three people in this world I trust with her. The *only* people I trust to see her through this if I...if I can’t.”

It must be a curse, he decided, to have the power to make the women in his life cry so often. He was a master, evidently, because the strongest woman he knew aside from his little girl was almost inconsolable.

He pulled up outside her house and let the truck idle as she cried. Movement caught his eye and he turned his head to watch Zeke come out onto the porch. The front door was open and twin faces peered out with glee, cherublike and giddy at the sight of snow. Zeke trudged down the shoveled path.

“That’s your family, Sarah. That beautiful portrait staring back at us. *I* want that. I need that. Without Jenna, it’s never gonna happen for me. So I have to do this.” Words wouldn’t stop tumbling from his mouth. “Promise me you’ll take care of her if she makes it through. I know I’m a selfish bastard for asking it, but I need you to promise me she’ll be part of what you have if I can’t give it to her. Jenna needs to live,” he said emphatically as Zeke rounded the hood of the truck. “She needs to be shown how to be a person again once the grief passes.”

Sarah looked at him, eyes devastated, as her husband opened the truck door. She unfastened her belt so she could lean forward and press her cheek

to his gently. “You’ll show her how, Connor. I have to believe you’ll be the one who shows her.”

Connor closed his eyes. There wasn’t any way he could answer her without making promises he couldn’t keep. He rubbed his cheek against hers, offering comfort he knew Zeke would give her more capably once she was inside.

She wasn’t his to tend.

“Don’t go,” she whispered. “Please don’t go.”

He opened his eyes and gave Zeke a silent signal. When her husband reached in and lifted Sarah out of the truck, she left behind a solitary tear on Connor’s cheek. The door closed, no questions necessary from Zeke, and Connor watched the big man carry his wife like a precious artefact back to the house.

Unable to observe anymore, Connor put the truck into gear and drove away, faster than he’d dared with Sarah in transit. He knew the roads like the back of his hand, and if he thought like an FBI from the city, he knew which ones he’d take for the quickest, easiest journey.

Luna popped her head between the seats, tongue lolling as she studied the world going by. With a snap of his fingers, Connor beckoned her into the front seat and she happily obeyed. He slipped the leash off her neck and navigated the snowy streets, mindful of anyone who was out in a storm that shouldn’t be.

It sure as hell felt like the last time he’d be seeing his town this way. Buildings and memories flashed by as he drove, a lifetime of surviving and thriving. He said goodbye to it all until he reached the highway.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Pain. Cold. Naked.
She remembered this state of existence far too well.

Jenna moaned, unable to move. God, her body was sure every single inch of it had been pummeled into mush by a hammer. Her arm screamed, the flesh hot and tight without touching it. She could barely pull in a breath without wheezing. Without spikes digging into her lungs.

It would be easier just to stop.

Yes, her bruised brain murmured in agreement. Just stop breathing. Don't try to survive this hell a second time.

She tried to open her eyes, but they were glued shut. As panic rose beneath the pain, she remembered the wound on her head, the blood running into her eyes. Her own blood blinded her, how wonderful.

She recognized the feel of rough planks under her back, the splinters digging into her skin and open wounds. The whistle of the wind coming through the gaps in the sides of the shed seemed louder, more ferocious, and the cold it brought along for the ride bit deep.

Not just into flesh and bone—it turned her soul to ice.

He'd found her.

Footsteps crunched toward the shed. Not one, but two sets. Hope sprang inside her at the thought she might be spared Sire's wrath. Then the door slammed open, bringing forth a swirling storm of precipitation to cover her already frozen body, and all hope died like a candle snuffed out in water.

"So you're telling me you made one hell of a fucking mess, and now you're packing up and leaving me with it?" Sire's voice was colder than the temperature in the shed. "Tell me why I shouldn't cut your throat now and be done with you."

Jenna cringed at the tone. She'd suffered through what came after that tone too many times to count.

The door closed again, a lot quieter than when it opened, and the voice that spoke was low and almost inaudible. "You told me to get her back, I got her back. She's here, isn't she?"

A foot booted her in the hip hard enough to scoot her body over wood an inch. She cried out silently, thankful her training kicked in and stole her voice. Attracting Sire's attention now would only mean his fury turned on her.

"You brought me a bloody, useless sack of meat." Another kick, this time into the top of her thigh. "Look at the state of it. Broken arm and covered in blood. Broken ribs looking at that bruising. If it moves, it'll puncture a lung," Sire snapped in disgust. "I might as well drag it to the clearing now and put it out of its misery."

Horror and fear knotted in her throat, but worse, there was an odd sense of relief beneath them. Death would be welcome. She would walk into his arms and beg him for a reprieve from this hell.

She could wait for Connor in peace.

Jenna imagined running her fingers through his hair, stroking the nape of his neck and tracing the muscles in his back and shoulders as he moved inside her. Envisioned his eyes growing darker, boring into her soul as her cries of pleasure stirred the air around them. If she concentrated hard enough, the memory of his mouth on hers was imprinted, strong and defined, in a kiss designed to link them together forever.

With that in mind, everything else cast aside, she banished him to the recesses of her mind and barricaded him in. Laid block after mental block of cement in place and sealed him away from what would happen all too soon.

She might wish he would come to her rescue, save her from Sire and his cruelty, but it wasn't a wish she wanted to come true. Not now. Connor had put so much time and effort into healing her once, exhausted himself physically and emotionally.

She couldn't ask him to piece her together again a second time.

Better for Sire to do what he did, what he was good at, and end her. Dispose of her body where Connor wouldn't have to see what had been done to her.

Tears tried to force their way through thickly dried blood. Some trickled through, forcing their way to freedom only to turn to ice on her skin.

“Do what you like with her. She’s yours, after all. Kill her, get rid of the body, and come with me. We start over, start fresh. The FBI have gathered enough evidence to start focusing their hunt in the area, mostly thanks to that cunt’s statement.”

That voice...was it familiar? Jenna’s ears strained to catch the rhythm, the small nuances of speech. She was sure she recognized it from somewhere.

“It has penance to make before I do anything with it. Filthy, unclean thing. Well, that’s easily remedied.”

Water poured over her face in a cold torrent that blocked her nose, her mouth. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t gasp. It wouldn’t stop, almost drowning her in a wall of liquid death. Her lungs screamed and her ribs threatened to shatter and slice them to shreds.

Jenna flailed, trying to escape the flood, but her battered body couldn’t move even to save itself. Then the flood lessened, turned into a trickle. The sound of a bucket clattering to the floor beside her head wasn’t worth acknowledging.

She sucked in a breath that sent a spear of pain angling through her chest, coughed up water. Her body spasmed with pain. Her head throbbed until her world was nothing but suffering the torments of the damned.

A hand fisted her hair, pulled her from horizontal to standing with frightening strength. Mouth working in deference to the agony ricocheting through her, she barely stopped herself from throwing up.

Sire pulled the roots of her hair free from her scalp as he dragged her limp body across the shed and slammed her body roughly against the wall. Wet skin stuck instantly to the wood. “Such a bad whore, Twenty-Two. You’re going to set an example to future numbers. Bad whores get treated as such.”

Thin wire looped around her wrist, tightened as the weight of her heavy arm dropped. The noose dug into her flesh, sawing into skin. Her system flashed white as he repeated the action with her broken arm, lifting it so she felt the edges of the bone scrape together sickly.

Wire in place, Sire let her arm fall, and stepped away.

This time she did scream as her arm jolted against the pull of the wire first. A moment later, unable to support her own weight, she landed on her

knees on the rough planks. The wires were too short, and she found herself hanging from her wrists, blood beginning to trickle down the frail limbs.

“Next time I’ll put one around your neck,” Sire told her casually.

With the scream still burning in her throat, she passed out.

It was late afternoon by the time Connor found his destination. With the help of several diversion signs—and by not following their directions—he came across the scene at a junction. Stopping well away from where he might contaminate any evidence with his truck, he surveyed the area with fear gnawing holes in his belly.

Hadley’s SUV was totaled. The black beast rested on its roof a good sixty feet away from the junction, and Connor could read the situation easily.

SUV passes the junction, car pulls out, collision.

But that scenario wouldn’t have resulted in the official FBI vehicle landing where it did. It sure as hell wouldn’t look as though it had taken on a freight train and lost.

He eyed the road leading to the junction, calculated. Park a ways back, wait for the FBI to come into view. There’d be a clear view of the direction Hadley was driving. Pick the timing, floor the gas, and hit the SUV full on. Yeah, you’d fishtail. Skid on the snow. But a good driver stood a chance of keeping the attacking vehicle on the straight and narrow rather than ditching it into a drift.

Gonna be some damage to the opposing truck, Connor mused. Not as much as Hadley’s, but sufficient to be able to identify it.

He watched men and women scurrying about in their winter uniforms, all marked with their own agency—FBI, Sheriff’s department, EMS and fire services. There was a recovery truck loitering to one side of the road, a hulking vulture waiting to pick the bones of what was now scrap metal.

The snow was finally starting to slow.

Connor frowned as he studied the authorities doing their jobs. This wasn’t going to work. Taking Luna to the scene wouldn’t help—there were so many people trudging over the crime scene, she’d struggle to pick up Jenna’s scent, if there was one left.

Plus, if the perp’s car was close by, the trail scent would only last until Jenna’s body was in the car, then Luna would lose it.

So he needed to reconsider his plan of attack carefully.

The bar.

He thought of the path Jenna had taken on her escape. She'd reached the bar on foot. She'd given Hadley and Connor enough details for him to have a general direction to start with.

Sire knew the FBI was on his tail—he wouldn't have his minions wiping evidence if he didn't. But Connor was willing to bet the sociopath didn't bear an ounce of worry over the fact he was on the agency's priority list and hadn't bothered to relocate after Jenna got away. A sociopath's arrogance was a tricky beast—they just didn't give a shit.

In their minds, they were God.

Unfortunately for Sire, he was only a man. Men could be killed, God complex or not, and Connor's qualms couldn't give a fuck anymore about the right and wrong of taking a life. Megalomaniac assholes like Sire deserved to die.

Connor threw the truck into reverse and backed up until he could turn around. Time ticked past too fast, and he felt the weight of the seconds sliding away as he headed back to the Creek. An hour wasted getting here and another one to get home, but something told him *this* was the right choice.

The bar was the center point.

And the road home would lead him to Jenna.

“What I just don't understand—”

Snap!

“—is why you would ruin something that worked—”

Snap!

“—so well. You ruined *everything*, Twenty-Two. You would have been a goddamn—”

Snap!

“—masterpiece! My finest and most acclaimed number I've ever achieved after years of dedicated training, and you spoil it all, you ungrateful bitch!”

Snap! Snap! Snap!

Jenna's eyelids fluttered as the whip licked lines of fire down her front. Her blood was the only semblance of warmth she had left as it trickled over mottled skin. Her hands no longer existed in her mind—they were long

gone. She couldn't see or feel them, her fingers wouldn't obey commands to move.

"Do you understand how angry I am with you? Do you?" Sire roared.

The single-tail cut gashes in her thighs, a nasty slash for each one, but she hardly felt anything after the sting of connection and quick flare of the burn. Her mind was as slow as the blood seeping from the wounds.

This was just his warm-up act. She'd been here before, although not under quite so tenuous circumstances, and he liked to warm his muscles up with this before he broke out what she silently called the snake-tongue.

One whip, two tails, double the pain.

She almost laughed. It bubbled up inside her hysterically, her voice desperate to be heard. Sire could beat her around the world, use any implement from his collection, and she wouldn't feel a thing. Too far gone, sliding down the path of no return.

A hand gripped her jaw, yanked her head up and back until the tendons in her neck shrieked for mercy. "Look at me when I'm talking to you, Twenty-Two. I want you to look in my eyes and show me how sorry you are."

Show him remorse? Repent for things she hadn't done?

The man was as insane as he was vicious, but then, she already knew that. Had understood *what* he was even if she didn't have a clue *who* he was. All she'd ever seen was the monster, whether he wore his mask of charm or not. That's all he was to her.

"If you want her to live past the next hour, she needs cutting down and warming up." The faceless voice spoke up quietly from the corner. "Otherwise you'll just have a cold corpse to fuck."

Sire sneered and released her jaw, letting her head snap down without support. "Now where would be the fun in that?" he murmured icily. "I want to feel the bitch kick with my cock in her, my hands around her throat." One slim, manicured hand locked around her throat, tightened. "The dead ones don't cry."

Neither did live ones, Jenna thought. Not when they'd given up.

"Dead ones don't talk either. Unlike a certain little bird." The anonymous voice grew hostile. "Seeing as I'm not staying for the final festivities, maybe you'll let me cut her tongue out before I leave. My contribution to the cause after all the shit she's dropped us in."

Fear stirred in her belly, rose up her throat. She made her eyes open in time to watch consideration seep into Sire's features. If he said the word, she'd probably choke to death on a sea of her own blood.

"No," he said slowly. "No, I don't believe that suits my plans for her. She changed the rules, she can sing as much as she likes. The more she sings," he added deviously, "the more it's going to hurt. Let's see if she can hold her tongue then."

The other man scoffed. "Getting soft, old man."

Sire's eyes flashed with lethal blue fire before he turned his head slowly and pinned the stranger with his gaze. "At least I'm not a coward, boy." He released Jenna's throat and straightened to his full height. "If you're tucking tail and running, I suggest you go now. Before I show you just how *soft* I've gotten in my *old age* and slice you from crotch to Adam's apple. The wildlife would feast well."

Jenna heard the whisper of a knife sliding free from its sheath, the blade *shushing* with deadly delight. She closed her eyes against the sight of blood and gore she knew would come, wished she could close her ears as easily.

Instead, there were two small puffs of sound before she fell forward, crashing face-first into the planks as her arms dropped like stones beside her. Whimpers escaped cracked lips as rough hands tugged the wires from around her bloated, purple hands.

Her torso seemed to implode at the jolt of impact.

"Good luck, Sire." The door opened and cool air blew in before it closed again, leaving her once again on her own with the monster.

He reached down and snagged her short locks, dragging into her into an almost sitting position. Murderous sky-blue eyes drilling into her brain. "Why is it whenever I take the time to *teach*, to *educate*, it gets thrown back in my face? Do you know, Twenty-Two? Can you tell me why people toss my fucking generosity back in my face as though it's nothing?"

Because you're a psychopath in a man's body didn't seem to be an answer that guaranteed she'd still be breathing in thirty seconds' time. So she held her tongue and waited for his ego to take over again.

"I'll tell you why. Because I'm too *nice* about it. I let people walk all over me. I could wipe them off the face of the fucking earth and no one would be the wiser." He flung her back with a flick of his wrist, careless as a child with an unwanted toy. "Eighteen years I've been teaching that boy

everything I know. Turned him into a master trainer almost on a par with myself. Then what does he go and do? What does he *go and do*?”

She assumed it was something bad but couldn't bring herself to care. Pain had returned tenfold, leaving her trapped in an eternal circle of suffering.

“He breaks every rule in the goddam handbook is what he does. Uses his own fucking truck to ram an official government vehicle, no doubt leaving evidence all over the FBI's fucking lap.” Ranting in full swing, he paced in a circle. “Then, *then*, the stupid asshole decides disabling the FBI agent in charge and the two hospital attendants wasn't enough. No, no, he makes an executive decision and shoots all three of them. I should have killed him. Shouldn't have let him walk away,” Sire muttered and swung out with his boot, smashing the hard toe into her hip.

Jenna clenched her teeth together hard enough she felt one crack under the strain.

“He'll be back. He always comes back. When he does, I'll make sure he pays for bringing the goddamn feds down on my doorstep.” Sire looked down at her. “Now, you. You're a different matter altogether. Such a disappointment of another kind. I want to take days punishing you but look at the state of what he brought to me. Are you even going to last the night?”

By all the powers at her disposal, she hoped not. If night was falling, her odds at surviving the temperatures on top of her injuries and the shock... peace filtered into her system. By the time the moon rose high in the sky, she would just...fall asleep. Fall into a deep and dreamless sleep she'd never wake up from. Painless and quick.

“You won't bleed to death,” he said conversationally as his eyes roamed over her broken body. “You might suffocate if your lung punctures. The concussion isn't particularly a worry.” He crouched and poked one long finger at a swelling in her stomach. “Possible internal injuries. Not much I can do about that.”

Just leave me here to die in the cold and the silence, she thought.

“I think we'll stick with the original plan, Twenty-Two, but just move up the schedule. I've waited two years to complete your training and this,” he swept a hand over her, “won't alter the execution of said plan. But that means you can't stay out here, doesn't it? Can't have you freezing to death before the big finale in the morning.”

Sire tsked and wrapped his fingers around her ankle. “Lucky you, Twenty-Two. The only number to spend her last night in the warmth and comfort of the house.”

He dragged her out of the shed into the dwindling light like a kid pulling a little red wagon down the street. By her *ankle*. Ice hit her back, scraped like fingernails over bare skin, littered her flesh with tiny frozen cuts. The cold stole what breath she had left, giving her nothing to live on, nothing to scream with. Her arms dragged above her head, completely useless.

Snow gathered in her hair, burned into her scalp.

Sire whistled as he plodded steadily across what was a sprawling acreage of green lawn in the summer, heading for the house through the last dribbles of falling flakes.

Jenna choked on a cry as he bounced her up the three porch steps, then started to lose consciousness as her head smacked off the edge of all three. She slipped under into the darkness as the first welcome touch of heat caressed her skin.

To Connor’s confusion, the parking lot of O’Malley’s was conspicuously empty. It had been shoveled recently—Cain would have made sure it was clear for his customers—and Connor knew snow brought the brave and unwise flocking to the bar, looking for company, alcohol, and a night away from their other halves.

But tonight, the only other vehicle present was Cain’s.

The outside lights of the bar were switched off aside from the security lights over the doors, and there were no signs of life in the windows downstairs. A single lamp glowed in what was Cain’s living room on the floor above.

Before he could turn the engine off, Luna growled, staring out of the side window with predatory accuracy. Hackles pricked the fur down her neck, her back.

The rear passenger door swung open and a duffel bag launched onto the backseat, followed by two hefty torches and a rucksack. The door slammed shut, and Luna’s door wrenched open to Cain’s ugly mug.

“Took your sweet fucking time, bro. What did you do, drive to Idaho?” Cain jerked his head at Luna. “In the back, sweetheart. Clock’s ticking and your daddy can’t drive for shit in the snow.”

Connor blinked as the ferocious guard dog danced on the seat, licking at Cain's face, then bounded into the back and made herself comfortable amongst the bags. "Cain? The fuck are you doing?"

"I am riding to big brother's rescue. Sarah called me earlier, frantic because you'd driven off on a suicide mission. Now if you'd told me you were heading out to the accident, I'd have told you it was a stupid idea." His gaze slid sideways to Connor. "Sarah told me everything, Con. I'm sorry this happened. We're gonna get your girl back come hell or high water."

Still confused, Connor blinked. "If Sarah told you I was driving to the accident, why are you sat here?"

"Because, one, you're supposed to be driving that way," Cain retorted, pointing to the road leading right out of the lot, "and two, because you may have stupid ideas but you're not actually stupid, I knew you'd figure out the scene of the abduction isn't where you need to be. This is where it started, Con. Jenna came here, half-naked and on foot. That means she walked from wherever she was being held."

Great minds thought too much alike, Connor admitted with a nod of agreement. Cain had obviously given this a great deal of thought to come to the same conclusion. "Yeah. That's the way I see it."

"I checked the cameras from the CCTV and Jenna came down that road. If she left any evidence two months ago, likelihood is it's long gone. But in this snow? If anyone's been out in this, we should find some sort of sign."

"You kept the CCTV film from two months ago?"

"Figured the authorities would be interested in it. Caleb turned it down, but I kept it anyway." Cain gave his brother a quick flick of his hand. "Are you going to drive or are we waiting for daylight to roll back around?"

Connor swung the truck in a tight circle and headed back onto the road. He'd lost the light as winter claimed the last vestiges of daytime, but he figured darkness would work to his—their—advantage. "Sarah drafted you into the suicide mission?"

Cain snorted. "I volunteered. No insane fuckwit steals my brother's girl for nefarious purposes. That shit doesn't happen in the Creek and it ain't gonna slide."

God bless Cain. "I can never repay for you this, you know that, right?"

His brother shifted in his seat, narrowed his eyes at Connor. "Did I ask for motherfucking payment, bro? This shit is personal. I love that girl just as

much as you—well, obviously not in the biblical sense—but she’s basically my sister-in-law at this point. Fuck with the O’Malley’s and it’s all-out war.”

Connor glanced over his shoulder at the bags. “That’s what you’ve come prepared for? All-out war?”

“Yep.” The way Cain said it, it sounded more like *yerp*. “Got everything we need in that duffel. Most of my registered stuff, plenty of ammo, a grenade or two.”

“Sweet Mother of Jesus, a *grenade*?” He nearly slammed the brakes on.

Cain threw his head back into the seat and laughed, slapping his thigh in punctuation. “I’m prepared, Connor, but even I’m not a die-hard weapons enthusiast. No grenades, I promise, but I do have some quality firecrackers.” He slapped his thigh a second time. “The look on your face is just priceless.”

Connor gripped the wheel in both hands. The worrying thing was he couldn’t be absolutely sure his baby brother *didn’t* have an arsenal of grenades and other exploding objects in his bag, just for an occasion—rare occasion—such as this. Either that, or Cain liked to throw grenades at unsuspecting squirrels in trees.

Neither would surprise him.

Night dropped into place, bringing with it even colder temperatures. The digital reading on the dashboard read impossible lows, and Connor found himself adjusting speed accordingly. Miles ticked past as both brothers scoured each side of the truck like hawks for any sign of disturbances, of life.

“Are you going to kill him?” Cain asked suddenly, soberly. There was no part of the prankster left now, his brother was all business. Deadly, to the point business.

For the first time in over an hour, Connor allowed his mind to focus fully on Jenna. He couldn’t function if he let himself imagine what was being done to her, how Sire might be hurting her. Right now, he needed to concentrate on finding her, and only finding her.

But he thought back to the night he’d set her on the exam table for his first good look at the mute mouse she’d been. The infected wounds, the scars, the goddamn brand over her breast. The mental and physical torture she’d suffered through and how long it had taken him to break through the terrified shell into the sweet, loving woman beneath.

“Yes.” A wealth of dark emotion stained that one word.

Cain nodded. “Good.”

“Good? You’re perfectly happy with the fact I’m out here to kill a man?”

“I wouldn’t be if the *only* reason you were out here was to kill a man. But your primary goal is rescuing your girl. Killing the man is secondary. Plus, he’s not really a man. Real men don’t torture, rape, and murder women.” Cain never looked away from the window. “There’ll be a toll, Connor. Are you willing to pay it?”

“What, like on my soul?”

“Yes.”

Connor drummed his fingers on the wheel as he thought hard about what ending a life would feel like. Whether snuffing someone’s existence out would weigh heavy on him. Anyone else but Sire, he reasoned, and he’d be drowned in guilt, remorse. Living with himself would be hell on earth, and that was before he faced judgement in the eyes of whatever ruled over the heavens.

But Sire...Connor imagined ending that fucker would give him a sense of peace, knowing he couldn’t touch Jenna again, would never be able to harm another woman. Ensuring the bastard’s reign of terror was over, permanently, would be worth any weight on his soul. “When Jenna wakes screaming from nightmares, she’s inconsolable. Distraught from what haunts her, waking and sleeping. I’m willing to sacrifice part of myself to be able to tell her he’s dead and buried. I can pay the toll, Cain.”

“Well, if it comes down to it and you can’t...” Cain turned to look at Connor and his face was more serious than Connor had ever seen it. “You tell me. The sonofabitch dies one way or another.”

Well, hell. “I won’t ask you to become a murderer, Cain.”

“Murderer? Fuck that, I’m the exterminator, bro. Taking out the vermin one rat at a time.” Cain’s attention switched back to the outside world, then his hand shot up in the air. “Wait! Wait!”

Connor hit the brake and sent the truck skidding sideways, wrestling it to a stop as the wheels struggled for purchase. “What the fuck, Cain?”

But Cain was already leaning into the backseat, snatching up the torches and tossing one to Connor before he barreled out of the truck. Connor left the engine running and whistled for Luna, hustling through the drifts after

his brother as the flashlight beam switched on and cleaved through the darkness.

It was bloody eerie out here. The road ran through a thick section of woodland, heavy with snow-laden trees and gloomy shadows that set the hairs on the back of Connor's neck on end. "What the hell did you see, Cain?"

"It's around here somewhere!"

Cain was clambering onto the side of the road, torch swinging slowly from left to right. Connor wandered along the road, doing the same with his own flashlight and wondering what he was looking for.

Luna darted past him, nose lifted and sniffing, then bounded along the banking about twenty feet behind Cain. She let out a yowling whine, then plunked her butt down in the snow and signaled her find.

Both men charged down the road after her, plunging through drifts that came up nearly to their waists in places. A weird chunk of blue fabric, almost black in the torchlight, twisted haphazardly out of the snow.

Connor's chest went rigid as he recognized the fabric, and he grabbed it with a shaking hand. He knew what it was before he fought to rip the distorted material from the snow—so did Luna by the way she smelled it all over and wagged her tail.

"He brought her this way," Connor said darkly and fisted the solid material. "She won't be far."

"What is it?" Cain asked, running his beam over the long stretch of fabric. "Jesus, Connor. Fucking Jesus, is that—"

"My bathrobe. Jenna was wearing it this morning when Hadley arrived." Fuck, had it only been this morning when the nightmare spilled its greasy guts over their lives? "Hadley took her while she was wearing this. It was all she had on."

Cain's face was a mask of horror. "But if that's here and she's not... fuck, bro, she'll freeze to death. Naked in these temps? Her life expectancy is nil."

Something stirred on the night air. An engine, Connor realized as his head cocked. He stroked Luna's head as a reward, listening carefully. It was definitely an engine, but not his. This one had just started, was struggling to turn over with the cold if the way the motor was grinding was any indication.

His gaze searched the woods in front of him. “You know of any properties around here, Cain? Anyone who lives around here?”

“No, it’s all woodland as far as I know. Some of it is privately owned by some mega-rich townie, but from what I’ve heard he keeps it as a tax break. There’s no house, no electric, no running water. Just several hundred acres of trees.”

The engine caught, revved to life, and Connor saw Cain’s ears perk up. “I think there’s more than just fucking trees,” he said suspiciously. “It’s a fair distance into the woods, but somebody’s doing something in there.”

“Well then, let’s go wait and see who comes out.”

“No, we need to get back to the truck, shut it down. If he comes out, I don’t want him to see us if we can help it. We go on foot. My priority is Jenna, down the line. Sire’s a big, fat bonus if we get the chance.”

Cain grinned. “Open season, motherfucker.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Jenna desperately wanted to go back to the shed.

The shed was cold and numbed her flesh so she couldn't feel the majority of her injuries. Here, in the warmth, her skin felt stretched to splitting and throbbed viciously in time with the slow, stuttering beat of her heart.

She tried her best to curl into the least agonizing position she could manage in the rigid dog bed Sire had thrown her into, but her torso wanted no part of it. Sticky with sweat and blood, she panted through the pain as Sire sprawled regally on the couch in front of the roaring log fire with a glass in one hand and the TV remote in the other.

She listened to the channels flick over from one show to the next.

Her mouth couldn't produce any moisture. Her hands...she wanted to cry at the condition her hands were in and couldn't. Every drop of fluid in her body leaked from her pores. Her eyes slid back to her swollen hands, more than twice the size they should be and so discolored she didn't recognize them as hers.

Ligature wounds from the wires cut deep, and on her left arm, the swelling travelled down toward her elbow. She didn't know if it was part of having an untreated broken arm, but it didn't look good.

Who was she kidding? *Nothing* about her looked good.

Her eyes ticked around the room, a room she'd spent two years on her hands and knees cleaning, until she found the clock on the wall. Her heart sank.

Ten-thirty p.m.

Dawn remained hours away and Sire would let her suffer without mercy or aid until the sun rose. Her only saving grace was that the pain would be over before the sun fully breached the horizon.

“I think we’ll just see how that asshole gets on without cash at his disposal,” Sire muttered suddenly, startling Jenna from morbid thoughts. He sipped his drink and set the TV remote aside, reaching for his laptop on the small table in front of the couch. A table she’d once polished with a solvent-infused rag clenched between her teeth.

“That’s how...you live...this life,” she ground out, forgetting herself. “Thief.”

Sire visibly jolted as his silence was disturbed, and he glared at her for breaking his most treasured rule. Blue eyes gleamed with malicious annoyance. “I will permit you to talk simply because there’s nothing of note to watch on the goddamn television.” The screen demanded his attention again. “Hopefully you’ll pass out soon enough and leave me in peace.”

Jenna coughed hard enough to wind herself. Her ribs jarred together, stealing what little breath she had left. Taking a few minutes to gather her wits about her, she wheezed, “You’re a thief.”

His eyes rolled in her direction with a *You again?* expression. “I am, in fact, much more than a common thief, Twenty-Two. Technology is my ally, my weapon of choice.” He lifted his hands from the keyboard and wiggled his fingers at her. “Well, aside from these, of course.”

She flinched. No reminder necessary of what he did with those. “This is how...you don’t get...caught.”

“This is how I live a life of luxury, doing what I want. Taking what I want. Money, for one. All the money I could ever hope to use in my lifetime, multiplied by a thousand. I’m more than a thief—I’m a fucking genius.” His fingers resumed their manic typing before he hit one key with a flourish. “There. Let’s see how my protégé fairs without his ill-gotten gains at his disposal.”

Sire’s attention turned to Jenna fully. “I’m a hacker, Twenty-Two. A gift I have complete control over. The Pentagon, the White House, the FBI...” He laughed at that, and she knew he was thinking of the missing evidence Hadley had spoken of. It hurt to think of Hadley now, to know she’d been the cause of his death. The catalyst for three people dying. “Walking through their security is like taking a piss—and just as boring now. Banks, businesses, military compounds...whatever I want, I take.”

“W-Why?”

“Why am I like this?” he mocked. “What made me become this way?”

Suffocating from the inside out, she felt feverish and shivery. Luckily, Sire's sarcasm needed no reply. She wasn't sure she'd be able to formulate anything more than a few words strung together in barely coherent sentences.

"Such a cliché question, but I shouldn't expect anything less from a number. A failed number, at that. Would you like me to say *I wasn't always this way*? I could, and I'd be lying." He shrugged as though lying to a dead woman mattered. "The truth is, I like it. Years of grafting in the police force, mentoring cocky little assholes who should never have been given a gun, and all I got was a bullet in the back and a pathetic medical discharge. Eighteen months of being laid up with nothing but physical therapy and a laptop to keep me company. Boredom inspires a man to do things he ordinarily wouldn't consider—it gave me the impulsion to delve into technology in a way I'd never imagined."

Jenna's stomach twisted. This monster had been a *police officer*? An officer of the law sworn to serve and protect women like her? How messed up could this actually be? She wondered if Hadley's team had thought to look through personnel files for forcibly retired officers, then let the thought slide as she realized she had no way of dropping them a hint.

They were smart, those FBI agents. They'd figure it out.

"By the time I could walk again, I'd siphoned off a hundred thousand dollars from various small businesses. Enough to live off while I acclimated to civilian life. Met a woman, married her. Killed her. Liked it." Sire hissed through his teeth, the sound sexual and smug. "That was the start of my new existence. Fucking her with my protégé, throttling her, then wrapping a rope around her neck and swinging her from a beam on her porch was almost as satisfying as hacking into the morgue's computer and amending the coroner's report from rape and murder to suicide. After that, the thirst grew. Choosing women, plucking them out of their mundane lives and giving them a purpose within mine."

He was so blasé about it. So unconcerned about the lives he'd left broken in his wake so he could slake a *thirst* of blood and lust. As if he'd had the right to destroy a myriad of women in his pursuit of, what, the perfect woman? An addiction?

As her fever burned hotter, Jenna's mind played tricks on her. The drone of Sire's voice became a static hum, and her vision wavered with fuzzy red spots. When she blinked and they cleared, her worst nightmare loomed over

her like an avenging angel, arms crossed over a bare chest, eyes dark with sorrow.

“Don’t,” she whimpered, fruitlessly trying to cover her damaged body. “Don’t look at me.”

The angel crouched beside her wearing Connor’s face, the face she loved so much that seeing it now hurt more than all her injuries combined. A golden hand extended toward her, cupped her face while his thumb caressed her cheekbone. “Baby, look what they’ve done to you.”

Her eyes burned with the need to cry, but no tears came. “Daddy.”

“I need you to hold on, Jenna. I need you to stay strong for me, okay?”

Delirious, she turned her face into the blessedly cool palm and whined softly. “I can’t, Daddy. Not even for you. I’m so tired. Everything hurts.”

“Baby, you can do this. I’m begging you to do this.” His other hand mirrored the hold on her face so he grasped her securely. “Don’t leave me, Jenna. It’s not your time.”

She stared into his eyes, unblinking, and willed every last memory, thought, and drop of emotion into those stormy depths. “I love you, Connor. I love you so much.”

Pain shattered the wonderful illusion and she choked on a mouthful of blood as the sharp backhand sliced her cheek against her teeth. There was a figure leaning over her, but it wasn’t her beloved. It wasn’t her Daddy, her Connor. He was miles away without a prayer of finding her. She was left with Sire, and the monster was mad.

“What bullshit are you babbling on about now?” he demanded furiously. “I’m talking to you, treating you like a *person*, and all I get is a rambling mess of words I can’t understand? I don’t think so, Twenty-Two. I don’t fucking think so.” He grabbed her chin, digging his thumb into the tender underside of her jaw. “Don’t mistake my hospitality for kindness, bitch. The only reason you’re in here tonight is so that I’m not fucking a dead body in the morning.”

He might end up sorely disappointed on that score.

Jenna winced as the grip on her jaw turned into a spike drilling through her mouth, then just swallowed hard when he released her with a shove. The room swam in hazy shades of gray and white.

“I’m going to bed. I’m not wasting my time on a useless number who can’t remember her goddamn manners. The sooner I get rid of you, the better. You were supposed to be my shining star,” he told her bitterly,

standing straight and kicking her leg in a petulant tantrum. “You’re nothing but another body to throw away.”

Too tired to be afraid, Jenna let the fire of fever consume her.

Side by side, Connor and Cain trudged through the woodland with rifles over their shoulders and Luna sniffing through the undergrowth. Backpacks in place, they looked like hikers out for a midnight ramble in the snow.

Flashlights in hand, they found it much easier to walk under the cover of the trees, even as the canopies overhead blocked out the moon’s natural light. But making faster time without the hindrance of drifts to wade through was more important than complaining about the lack of light.

They’d been walking for hours, searching for the truck they’d heard fire up, but so far they’d heard and seen nothing else. No paths other than those made by deer and other wildlife. No drives or even logging tracks that showed signs of recent use.

“We could be in the wrong place, Connor. We haven’t heard a damn thing other than a fucking owl.” Cain’s flashlight swung in a circle, scanning the trees. “Not to mention I think we’re lost in this goddamn snow globe.”

Connor shook his head and continued to plod on. His legs ached, his back strained from the weight of his pack, but he wasn’t turning back now. Instinct told him they were closer than Cain believed. “She’s here, Cain. Something tells me she’s here, and we’re getting close.”

“Something tangible, or something fanciful? Because, bro, there ain’t nobody out here but us.” Cain’s hand clapped down on Connor’s shoulder. “Another ninety minutes and the sun’s gonna rise. We can come back, bring reinforcements, search the entire place from top to toe *in daylight*.”

“You head back if you want,” Connor told him, and shrugged off the supporting hand. If he didn’t keep moving, he would just sit on the cold ground and go to sleep. Bad, *bad* idea. “Catch up with me when you have those reinforcements.”

“Connor, you haven’t eaten since before Jenna was taken. I haven’t seen you touch the damn flask in your pack, which means you’re dehydrating the further we go. I’m a big fucker but I ain’t strong enough to haul your passed-out ass back to the road.”

“Not going to pass out. I know my limits, Cain.”

“I don’t think you do, not now. Jenna’s the only thing you can think of, and it’ll get you both killed. This isn’t a hike through the woods to find a tourist with a sprained fucking ankle. Sire isn’t likely to be welcoming us with open arms, and he won’t hand over Jenna without a fight. You ain’t fit to fight a gopher, Con.”

“Don’t need to fight; just need one clean shot.” Connor paused as Luna sniffed the ground and went on the alert. He watched the dog circle madly, the laps extending bit by bit as she hunted for whatever scent had caught her attention. “What’s she found?”

Cain stopped in mid-lecture and frowned, shining his light over the rough ground. “Unless Jenna got away again, there shouldn’t be a scent trail fresh enough for Luna to pick up on. It’s been months since she was last in the area—if this is where she escaped from last time.”

Luna’s nose led her to the trunk of a broad-trunked tree, standing on her hind legs to reach a certain spot. She pressed her nose into the cracks and crevices in the bark, then sat and signaled her find with a long whine.

Connor nearly tripped over his feet in his haste to get to her and he dropped to one knee beside her, torch aimed on the spot Luna focused on. The stain was old, barely noticeable to the naked eye, but it was there.

He imagined Jenna as he’d originally seen her, pulled her wounds to mind and stroked his fingers over the mark in the wood. The longest and deepest of her four whip wounds, he thought. She’d stopped to catch her breath, leaned against the tree. Blood seeped through the shitty shirt she’d worn and left a clear indicator of her presence.

Small miracles. Small but fucking mighty.

“She came this way the first time.” Fatigue forgotten, Connor looked around with determined eyes. “Which fucking way did she come from then?”

“Connor, for God’s sake, don’t get your hopes up.”

“Don’t stand in my way, Cain. That’s her blood. It’s old, but it’s hers.”

“How the fuck can you tell that? Luna’s good but she’s not a freaking blood tech. You have nothing to match that mark with Jenna, let alone confirm it’s blood.” Cain tried to reason with him. “Could be deer blood. Could be something Luna’s just taken a fancy to.”

Connor slipped his rifle off his shoulder, checked the safety. From here on out, he’d be ready and willing to fire on anyone who resembled the description Jenna had given him of Sire. “Luna’s trained for this, Cain. We

put her on Jenna's trail, and she found something. I'm not dismissing it because you don't think it's feasible."

"I don't doubt the dog's training, Connor," Cain said with no small amount of exasperation as he brought his gloved hands to his mouth and blew into them. "But it's been weeks. Even if it is Jenna's blood, there's nothing for Luna to actually *follow*."

Logically, Connor knew that. But he had faith in Luna, and he'd spent fucking hours praying to higher powers for a sign. If this wasn't a sign, he didn't know what else to do. "Do me a favor, Cain?"

"Anything, Con, you know that."

"Go home." As his brother sputtered a protest, Connor lifted his hand to silence him. "Go back to the truck, go home. Get more supplies, kick Zeke up the ass and bring those reinforcements. Police, FBI, whoever the fuck will come. Sarah was right. I should have brought more back-up to start with. You and me, we just aren't enough."

"Can't just leave you out here, Con. It's fucking freezing, I don't have a clue where we are or how I'm gonna find you again. I'd prefer not to have to defrost your frozen ass come spring."

Connor rolled his eyes and shrugged out of his pack. Digging through, he found the one item he hadn't actually expected he'd need. He pulled out the flare gun. "I have three canisters. I'll let the first one off at..." he checked his watch, calculated the time it should take Cain to get back to town, do what he had to do, and come back. "Nine a.m. The second one at eleven. The last one at noon, if you haven't found me by then."

Cain huffed out a breath that sounded more like a growl as it curled around him like dragon smoke. "For fuck's sake, can't believe I'm agreeing to this insanity. Fine, fine. I'll head back, but you sure as fuck better make sure you don't get yourself killed, Connor."

"Not until Jenna's out of harm's way, anyway. I'm not planning on dying tonight, Cain," he assured him with a sober face. "But I'm not walking into this thinking everything's going to be sunshine and roses either."

The flashlight swung so the beam hit Connor in the face. He yelped and threw his hand up to block it. "What the fuck, Cain? Are you trying to blind me?"

"I'm double-checking."

"For what?"

“That you’re still the brother who believes he can change the outcome of a situation if he wants it badly enough. That you’re *not* gonna do something fucking stupid like throw yourself on your goddamn sword for that girl if you don’t have to.”

“I don’t—”

“Bullshit, bro. Look me in the eyes and tell me you won’t throw yourself into the fray without taking a second to weigh shit up first.” Jabbing his finger into the puff of Connor’s jacket, Cain rolled his eyes. “Can’t do it, can you, hero?”

Connor shoved the flare gun back into his pack, zipped it up tight. He ran a hand over Luna’s head as he stood. “I’ll do what I have to do, as I’ve done from the start, Cain. My life for hers, if that’s what it takes.”

“Just wait until I bring the cavalry, yeah?”

Knowing his time was ticking down, Connor nodded and stepped forward, yanking his brother into a bear hug Cain immediately reciprocated. Arms tight, they gripped each other without a word, then broke apart.

“Go get your girl, Connor. I’ll be back.”

Cain disappeared back the way they’d come, leaving Connor and Luna gazing after him until the light from his torch was long gone. Connor stood, fondling the dog’s ears as she leaned against his leg, and prayed his brother made quick time getting back to the road safely.

“Looks like it’s just you and me, Luna.” He glanced around at the darkness, waited for something to usher him in the right direction. He couldn’t deny it was fucking creepy out here, especially now he was on his own—having another voice helped keep the irrational boogie monster from freaking him out, he discovered.

Without it, he felt incredibly isolated.

Luna licked his hand and whined, stirring him into action, and he ordered himself to think reasonably. He discounted the route behind him—Luna hadn’t signaled anywhere along the initial part of their trek. The next part of the journey began here, but where...

“I think it’s down to you, girl. Find, Luna. Find Jenna.”

She waited for a moment before she padded off, head lifted, black nose snuffling softly in the freezing air. She didn’t rush, didn’t break into a run. She just meandered along, sniffing and searching, leading Connor deeper into the woods and up steeper inclines.

Soft ground underfoot became rocky, icy. While Luna took the change in conditions in stride, Connor found himself having to step more carefully, assessing where he placed his feet. One tumble back down the craggy hill and it was game over.

Twenty minutes later, Luna signaled against another tree. Another, smaller smear of dark brown at waist height. Connor saw Jenna rushing down the hill in her bare feet, picking up uncontrollable momentum, banging into the tree and holding on for dear life before terror sent her staggering down the hill again.

Again and again, he let Luna take the lead, stemming his impatience when she faltered and backtracked. Without her, he'd have taken completely the wrong direction. They found a scrap of material—which he identified as part of the dirty rags she'd been wearing—caught up in a buckthorn bush. More blood on several trees, and the dog went crazy when she found a hidden dent in soft earth beneath an overhanging rock.

Shelter, he thought as he laid his gloved hand on the earth.

Dawn began to shimmer over the peak of the hill. Shimmering light turning the darkness to gray. A bird trilled prettily, a lone song echoing in the snowy wilderness, only to be joined by another, and another.

And through the rising gloom, he saw it.

“Luna, heel.” The command rang sharp and low, summoning the dog to his side without hesitation. She pressed against his leg, alert despite the long and fucking exhausting night.

How the fuck did no one know about this place, he wondered as his eyes raked over the two-story log cabin sprawling over the hillside. It wasn't immaculate on the outside, far from it, but he was willing to bet the inside was decked out to fit a king.

Smoke curled lazily from the chimney, a dying fire ready to be extinguished or replenished. Lights were off in the dozen windows he could see, but that didn't mean anything. Not everyone flipped on a switch when they went for a piss at the crack of dawn.

No vehicle out front, he noted, and no garage he could see. If this was Sire's place, he had to have a method of getting his victims up here in the middle of nowhere. Not that anyone would hear someone scream—they were miles away from any form of civilization.

Connor decided he was buying the damn dog a fucking buffalo leg as a reward.

He searched the property he could see from five hundred feet away. There was no garden per se, just the natural wildness of the hillside surrounded by trees. The house was essentially sat in an alcove carved into the hill. His gaze tracked left and his heart stopped beating when he saw the vague outline of an outbuilding.

A shed.

The motherfucking shed Jenna had spent two years of hell.

Connor moved before he knew what he was doing, running through the trees with Luna silently on his heels. His backpack banged against his spine, the gun a dead weight in his hands. His breath churned out in streams as he sprinted toward the ramshackle building without thought for his own safety.

Twenty feet away from the hellhole, he slowed, stopped. Took a second to catch his breath and take cover behind a tree, peering around the trunk to check the coast was clear.

So close. He was so close.

He shrugged off the pack, ordered Luna to stay. He debated over the gun and decided he might need both hands to deal with Jenna. He left it leant against the tree as he crossed the distance between the tree line and the shed.

Fear and anticipation warred inside him as he pressed his back to the rotten wood and just listened. Silence spread around him, an unsettled feeling building at the base of his spine.

He slipped his fingers down the door for the locks, found it open. Heart, stomach and hope plummeted into the pits of hell. He wrenched open the door and almost gagged at the stench that emanated from the dark, stagnant shithole.

This was a place of suffering; he could feel it in his bones. Blood, terror, rot, urine. A collective odor that screamed of unmentionable atrocities. Against his will, already sensing the emptiness telling him Jenna wasn't in here, Connor stepped inside and searched for a light.

Nothing.

What kind of creature kept women locked away in the dark? No wonder Jenna was so scared of it. He flicked his flashlight on, using his free hand to block most of the beam, and took in everything about the shitty abode she'd been forced to survive in.

Holes in the roof, some as big as his fist. More than enough to let in all manner of insects, and useless against any form of Montana weather. The sides were disintegrating but what soured his gut were the shackles chained to reinforced wooden beams. Some of the rotten planks had been fixed recently, the workmanship poor.

He used the torch to hook a cuff, and the garrote wires behind it dangled loosely behind. His rage ignited at the sight of fresh blood coating the smooth wire. Still fucking wet.

He looked down, saw the drops and small pools of blood on the warped floorboards. Still red, still fresh. The whip discarded on the floor disgusted him, the single-tail tossed aside with evidence of Jenna's pain still on the lash.

Fury blinded him to the rest of the shed and he stormed out of Sire's torture hut, barely remembering to catch the door in time before it banged shut. His back rapped against the wall and he braced his hands on his knees, breathing deep of cold, cleansing fresh air.

Sire had to die.

Gathering his thoughts, Connor straightened and corralled his destructive emotions into something more manageable. There would be a time when he let them loose and they would tear the world around him asunder, but it wouldn't be now.

Not yet.

He dashed back to Luna, shrugging into his pack. The dog greeted him with unabashed joy, her butt wiggling in place. One stroke to the head, and his attention returned to the cabin.

Two options, he determined. Monitor Sire, take him out as soon as he came out of the house. If the motherfucker ever left the safety of his palace. Or storm the place and take him down unawares. But—and it was the biggest of *buts*—there was a high chance Jenna would be caught in the fallout.

Sire knew the layout of the cabin, maybe even had weapons stashed inside in case of an outside breach. He had all the advantages except the element of surprise.

"We have to wait," he murmured to Luna, scratching her behind the ears even though his hands yearned to rend the whole place to the ground. "When we find her, you need to protect her, okay? Keep her safe while I deal with the bastard who stole her from us."

Though his mind roiled with seething animosity, he found the strength to fade back into the trees, merge into the shadows created by rising daylight.

Turned out he didn't have long to wait.

The ground glittered beneath the first pure rays of sunlight when the cabin door opened, and Connor caught his enemy in his sights. He snarled, and Luna reacted with a low growl of her own. He shushed her, gave her the order to be quiet, and she settled uneasily by his feet.

Sire stepped onto the small porch with a mug of coffee steaming in his hand. Tall, undoubtedly handsome, and radiating evil Connor sensed all the way from where he stood. Hair artfully tousled in a classy bedhead—for fuck's sake, who did that? Tacky, just tacky—the monster welcomed in the new morning as though there was nothing wrong with the world.

Connor reached for his rifle, snicked off the safety and raised it to his shoulder. It was a clean shot for a novice shooter, let alone a hunter, and as he lined up the crosshairs with that perfect face, he was more than prepared to pull the trigger.

The man stepped forward, tossed the dregs of his coffee into the yard, then turned and walked back into the house.

Connor cursed and slammed his hand into the tree in frustration. Ten more seconds, five even, and he'd have nailed the fucker clean between the eyes. For the next ten minutes, he kept the rifle trained on the door, ready to pop Sire's head like a watermelon as soon as he stepped out.

The sun grew stronger, bouncing off the snow and blinding his view. Cursing again, he lowered the gun and bared his teeth. His patience ran low, ramping up his temper until he was surprised Sire couldn't feel it shake the walls of his house.

When the door opened again, Connor dropped the gun.

A mangled body tumbled out into the frozen world, hitting the porch limply. Naked, bruised and bloody, it barely resembled a human being. And it didn't move.

Not when Sire walked out after it and drove his hiking boot into its midsection. Not when he bent and latched long fingers around a narrow ankle. Not a sound did it make when he dragged it down the steps and across the yard.

Oh fuck, no. Please, no.

Connor couldn't breathe. Couldn't move. His eyes blurred with tears when the head rolled toward him and Jenna's swollen, battered face was illuminated by sunlight.

Thoughts escaped him. There were none. Just grief that cleaved him down to the bone and beyond.

Then he snapped. The backpack hit the floor with a thud, and he bent and scooped up the gun on the fly as he bolted from the trees with the singular focus of causing pain. His fingers fumbled with the safety, flicking it on as his hands shifted onto the barrel.

Covering ground in what seemed like seconds, he was almost on top of Sire before the bastard clicked on to the shitstorm raining down on him. Connor saw the shock and surprise flash over pretty-boy features, then the fear and *what the fuck?*

Sire dropped Jenna's leg and reached for the small of his back, but Connor was already swinging, using the heavy rifle like a baseball bat. The thick wooden stock resisted the pressure as it parted air, then connected with Sire's knee from behind.

The impact resonated up Connor's arms like a bomb blast, and a scream ripped through the morning as the harsh pop of Sire's knee breaking cracked. The monster went down like a sack of bricks, thudding to the ground.

Blind with rage, Connor swung again, hitting the same knee again with just as much force. Another savage crunch, another scream, followed by a pained masculine wail. The sound only fueled Connor's bloodlust, and he didn't hesitate to switch the gun to a backswing for Sire's other knee.

More bone crunching, a plaintive plea for him to stop.

Breathing heavily, Connor paused, his vision clearing briefly enough to take in the pathetic sprawl of his girl in a bloody heap. Already gone, her skin ash-gray, she'd suffered in the short time Sire had possessed her for a second time.

No more.

"Have some of it back," he snarled at the man cowering on the ground. "Have all of it back, you motherfucking prick." He lifted the gun vertically, brought the stock down on a vulnerable hand hard enough to turn the appendage black almost immediately. "Torturing women gets you off? Kidnapping and murder get you hard? There are special places in hell reserved for things like you, and you'll get there once I'm done with you, I

promise.” His voice was so unlike his usual easy-going tone, he didn’t recognize it. “Lucifer won’t have much left to play with by the time I’m finished.”

“Please. Please! Don’t! Oh Christ, it fucking hurts!”

Connor knew his sanity had slipped, accepted it and his actions. If he went to prison for this, what did it matter? Without Jenna, nothing fucking mattered anymore, so why hold back in punishing her killer?

Flipping the rifle around, he flicked off the safety and pressed the muzzle directly against the small bulge of Sire’s cock. “Oh, it’s going to. I hear extreme genital wounds can cause a person to bleed out pretty quick—you’re not going to.”

“Please, I don’t know who you are, but I have money. I have property. Anything you want, you can have it.” Eerie blue eyes, frightened and desperate, pleaded with him. They morphed into Jenna’s beautiful green ones, full of pain and terror, and Connor’s teeth bared in a snarl savage enough to send Luna scurrying back. “I have millions at my disposal, billions. Take it all. Take everything!”

“You think I want your dirty money? You think I want anything from you but the blood in your veins and your heart beating in my fist?” Connor roared the words, past furious and heading toward berserker status. “You took the *one* fucking person from me who could have spared your pitiful life.”

Sire’s gaze darted to Jenna. “Twenty-Two? Have her. Take her, for fuck’s sake. She’s been more trouble than she’s ever been worth.”

“I don’t need your permission to take my dead woman home.”

“Dead? She’s not dead. Not yet.” Obviously sensing a weakness, Sire spluttered over the words, his tongue and lips not moving fast enough to keep up with his brain. “She’s still alive. You can save her if you take her now, get her to a hospital.”

The notion distracted Connor from his killing mission, and he took a wary step toward the brutalized woman. How could someone so decimated still have a heart beating?

He realized his mistake when Sire rolled onto his side with a groan and yanked a handgun from the small of his back. The motherfucker grinned manically as he aimed, fired.

Fire blitzed up Connor’s thigh as the bullet ripped through muscle, seated deep into hard flesh. He bellowed, staggered as pain tore through his

nervous system, then lunged faster than Sire expected. Berserker rage turned Connor's brain into an automaton, his body working on autopilot, and he barely felt their bodies collide with enough force to snap his teeth together.

More fire streaked through his right shoulder, and a dark laugh bubbled free as he straddled Sire's chest, snatched the gun from his hand, and struck the insanely grinning asshole across his perfect cheek. He heard the crack of bone breaking and tossed the weapon aside without thought. If he was going to smash flesh and bone into pulp, he would do it with his bare hands and take the ultimate satisfaction from doing so.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Blood rivered over sun-kissed ground. Sitting beside the remnants of what had once been a man, Connor stared blankly at Jenna's body and tried to remember what the fuck had happened during the apparent mental blackout he'd experienced. His hands were swollen, the knuckles ripped and bruised, and even with the body beside him, he couldn't figure out why.

He couldn't understand why his body hurt in so many places, or where the hell he was. He'd never been here before, didn't recognize the sprawling cabin or the forest.

But he knew why Jenna had died.

His little girl was dead because he'd failed her. They'd all failed her. Her family had put into motion a set of circumstances that gave Sire the opportunity to kidnap her. Connor hadn't stopped the FBI from taking her from his home. He hadn't been fast enough to stop her being terrorized again. He hadn't found her fast enough.

He hadn't. He hadn't. *He hadn't.*

The bulk of failure fell on his shoulders and Jenna had paid the price.

Unable to leave her laid alone on the snowy ground, Connor crawled to her. Shock froze him to the core better than the weather, but he inched his way toward her with the last of his strength. Blood streaked behind him, more than a little of the ice-covered lake of fluid his own. Too much had poured from his leg, his shoulder, for him to function normally, and the journey to reach her seemed to take hours.

Luna bellied over to him, nudging and whining at him before she darted to Jenna and pawed at her. Her whines continued as she settled her body into Jenna's, cuddling up close to her mistress.

Jenna's foot twitched.

Not three feet away from her, Connor stopped and stared. His body shuddered and jerked with cold, but it was forgotten as he willed her to move again. Part of his brain scoffed, aware he was probably hallucinating out of desperation and grief, but the rest of him kicked into action.

He all but dragged himself the last couple of feet, forcing his body past its limits as he felt for a pulse in her throat. For several long seconds, he couldn't feel anything but the slowing beat of his own heart. Under his ice-cube fingertips, her flesh was cold, but he swore her pulse kicked under his touch.

"Fuck," he rasped. "Fuck, he was telling the truth."

How much time had he wasted on Sire when he could have been saving Jenna? The thought gouged his stomach out with razor-tipped nails. His girl was dying, and he'd spent precious minutes satisfying his need for revenge.

And now he had no way of helping her.

The first aid kit in his pack was useless against the wounds inflicted. Antiseptic wipes and Band-Aids weren't any kind of match for the...fuck. Connor dropped his head to her shoulder. Catastrophic injuries. She needed a hospital and she needed it hours ago.

His watch beeped, just one quick blip of noise in a world gone silent. Chiming the hour of his uselessness. Tipping his wrist, he wiped the blood away splattered all over the screen.

Nine a.m.

Nine a.m.

Maybe there was hope yet. His eyes searched for the pack, found it lurking in the shadows where he'd abandoned it in his haste, and he cursed.

"Luna." A hoarse whisper but enough to rouse the dog. "Luna, fetch."

She licked his face as if to ask what he wanted fetching.

His arm was numb when he tried to lift it. Muscle damage and blood loss had done a number on him. He managed to make a sloppy gesture toward the bag. "Go fetch, Luna. Bring it here."

The Shepherd took off, bouncing along as she hunted for the prize. Sniffing, she made her way slowly to the pack, but it was too slow for Connor's liking.

"Away, Luna!" he called out and nodded when she moved closer to the backpack. "Good girl, there, you've got it." Shit, his words were slurring. "Fetch it. Fetch it to me."

She sank her teeth into the shoulder strap and began to drag the heavy burden toward him, her furry silver-blue butt bunching and releasing with the force of her pulls. Her tail tucked beneath her, she hauled it over to him then sat and seemed to grin at him.

He rubbed her head, leaving bloody streaks over that glorious fur, then rummaged one-handed through the contents of the pack until his thick fingers closed around the flare gun. Another forage into the depths, and he found the canisters.

He dropped one through fumbling, almost cheered as he got one into the chamber. Rolling onto his back with the last of his energy, he pointed the gun toward the sky and fired.

The last thing he saw was the flare shoot up into the early morning sky, a tiny rocket with his last hope tied to it like a ribbon, to explode in a shower of red.

“We’ve got you, Connor. Keep fucking breathing, brother.”

Cain’s voice was close to his ear as Connor’s eyes cracked open to a blurred existence. Black shadows danced around in slow motion, and noises were hollow, echoing through of a barrier of molasses.

“Jenna,” he croaked, the word cracking on the *na*.

A hand gripped his, held it tight. “I don’t know, Connor. They’re working on her now but she’s in a bad way. She might not make it home.”

Well, one thing his brother wasn’t was a liar. The truth hurt worse than the hands piling pressure onto his thigh, his shoulder, but Connor slipped over the physical pain and mired himself in the emotional.

“They’re trying to stabilize her so they can load her into the chopper. You’re going with her,” Cain added as Connor tried to sit up in protest. “Zeke made it clear you go with her, brother. But she’s not the only one in need of immediate medical attention.”

Jenna was the priority. Connor vocalized the thought as his body was poked and prodded, rolled and lifted. Cain stayed by his side, hand gripping like a vise, as the bright outside world faded into the relative warmth of a small, dark chamber. Blankets piled on top of him, needles slid under his skin.

New voices broke through the quiet, snapping orders he vaguely recognized. Sweet relief cruised through his veins as the drugs worked through him, erasing the pain. Shivering under the blankets, he rolled his

eyes toward the open door of the freaking *helicopter* some smart soul had commandeered.

“How’d you find...”

“Zeke had already organized rescue teams with the police and FBI. Someone reported your truck as stranded to the Creek PD, so they were on route this way. We were halfway along the trail—barring a few wrong turns—when the flare went up. Pointed us in the right direction, Connor, and saved us a hell of a lot of time.” Cain’s face was bright red in places where the cold had burned his skin. “One of the FBI team radioed the chopper, diverted it from its sweep into a concentrated area over here. Found this place within ten minutes. If Jenna lives, brother, she owes her life to you for a second time.”

No, there would be no debts. Nothing to tie her back to this hellhole. When this was over, she would never have to come back here. They would work on erasing everything about this time, even if he had to convince her to give hypnotherapy a try. Anything to wipe the trauma of this from her mind.

He tried to process the huddle of people surrounding where Jenna still remained, and saw the dog bounding around them, barking and snapping. A guy in FBI gear was attempting to catch her, but Luna evaded him at every turn.

Connor whistled—well, gave his best shot at a whistle—but just spluttered through chapped lips. Someone tsked at him and shoved an oxygen mask over his face in response.

Cain glanced over and his expression grew dark. He squeezed Connor’s hand then released it. “I’ll be back in a minute. That idiot’s gonna have his leg bitten off in a minute if he doesn’t stop winding her up.”

Chuckling weakly at the idea, Connor closed his eyes and breathed deeply into the mask. God, it felt nice just to breathe. Between the oxygen and the painkillers, he floated for a few minutes on a sea of peace, until the lick of a cool tongue against his hand stirred him into coming back to the world.

Luna leaned against the stretcher, nudging his hand so the weight of it rested on her head. Understanding her need for comfort, he made his fingers scratch behind her ears. Never would he regret spending a small fortune on bringing her into the family—she could raze his house to the ground and he wouldn’t bat an eyelid.

Without Luna, they'd still be trekking through the forest in the wrong direction. He owed her that damn buffalo leg and so much more.

"Are we sitting around with our thumbs up our asses?" Someone barked the question like a gunshot. "Why the hell isn't this bird in the sky and on its way to the hospital? And can someone *please* tell me why there's a motherfucking canine in there?"

Connor's fingers tightened in Luna's fur. Gunshot wounds or not, they weren't taking his dog.

"Just waiting on the female victim, Sir. The team have almost got her ready to move." Another voice answered the first briskly. "Fairfax sent down orders for the dog to remain with Doctor O'Malley until his wife could meet us at the hospital to take it into custody. These two wouldn't be here without it, by all accounts."

"Not *it*," Connor mumbled from behind the mask. "*She*."

"It's okay, Con. They don't mean it like that." Cain's hand rested on his uninjured shoulder. "Oh hell, here we go. Brace yourself, brother."

A swarm of people suddenly surrounded the chopper, and space was limited. Cain enticed Luna into the corner beside him, out of the way of the chopper medics and FBI agents helping to lift another stretcher into the aircraft.

The frame of the chopper shuddered as blades began to chug, whirling slowly to life. Some of the chaos evaporated when most of the people who'd entered the helicopter with the stretcher disembarked, leaving two medics, Cain, Luna and the stretchers.

The sliding door slammed shut and a face peered through the window, hair blowing madly as the main rotary blades kicked to life. With a thumbs up, the person disappeared, and the engines kicked into gear.

Connor tried to reach for Jenna's hand, but his fingers barely brushed the edge of her stretcher. He clung to it, fingertips sliding on the metal.

Did she know he was there?

Did she know he'd come for her?

"Relax, Connor." Cain leaned over and murmured to the medics. As the chopper lifted off the ground, the EMS techs lifted the stretcher six inches closer, and Cain took Connor's hand, gently placed it on top of Jenna's badly damaged one. "Get some rest, brother. We're monitoring you both and we'll be at the hospital before you know it."

One of the medics switched sides, moving to Connor and checking him over. While he knew it was necessary, the irritation of being examined crawled under his skin. He'd lost a lot of blood, but whatever they'd jabbed into him had slowed the bleeding.

"If she wakes," he rasped.

"If she wakes up, she'll know you're here, brother. I promise."

His fingers flexed lightly on Jenna's as he shut his eyes against the medic's firm prodding. There was an eternity of hell waiting for him at the hospital, he was well aware, between Jenna's treatment and his own. Blood transfusions would be the least of his issues—he thought the bullets were still lodged in his thigh and shoulder.

The logical side of his brain demanded to know the full extent of Jenna's injuries so he could work out how to treat her effectively, with the best possible outcome.

Another part of his brain took a decidedly different train of thought. "Cain?"

"Yeah, bro?"

"Sire?"

Long, long silence. Even the whirr of the chopper blades seemed to stop in mid spin. Cain sighed softly and patted Connor's shoulder. "You did good, Connor. That's all you need to know."

Satisfied with that answer for now, Connor let go.

Three days later, he was going insane with worry and boredom. The constant updates from Sarah and Cain didn't make him feel any better, especially when he was hooked up to an IV, his leg elevated, and his shoulder swaddled like a newborn.

Hadley had pulled through his own surgery and remained in intensive care. He hadn't regained consciousness yet, his body was fighting to heal itself, but the doctors were hopeful he'd have a full recovery in good time.

Jenna...it caused Connor physical distress to recall her injuries. So much damage inflicted upon such a small woman. Months, if not years, of physical therapy ahead of her.

Sarah had told him the surgeons had managed to save Jenna's hands, but only just. Cutting edge methods had been used to repair the nerve damage, but it wasn't enough to guarantee she'd regain full use of them. Loss of circulation caused by the wire cuffs, as well as exposure to the freezing

temperatures, had brought the surgical team to a hard decision; to amputate both appendages, or repair what they could and let nature take its course.

They'd opted for repair and time.

The broken arm had been pinned and plated, with good results expected for recovery. The broken ribs were being left to heal on their own, but they'd inserted a chest tube to alleviate the pressure from the traumatic pneumothorax she'd sustained.

A plastic surgeon had been brought in to assess the numerous lacerations from the car crash and Sire's whip. The cuts on her legs from broken glass had been cleaned and deemed minor enough not to need interference, while the gashes on her head and thighs, the ligature wounds on her wrists, had been taken care of by the surgeon.

Sarah assured Connor the man had done exceptional work.

CT scans had shown internal bleeding and bruising from repeated kicks to the stomach. Doctors were monitoring it, but apparently weren't too concerned. It was a case of letting it heal by itself.

Jenna's concussion was severe, but not life-threatening. There were hairline fractures in her jaw and cheekbone, and Connor could only surmise that Sire had used his fists. From what Sarah recounted, the bruising and swelling had finally begun to subside.

All in all, his woman had gone to hell and back, and hadn't yet finished the trip.

Alone in his room, Connor stewed. He shouldn't be here while Jenna laid in a bed down the hall surrounded by strangers. It didn't matter she hadn't come around yet; she needed familiarity when she did. She'd need him.

Fuck it.

Connor flipped the covers back and grimaced at the sight of his bruised body. Sire had gotten in a few punches of his own, not that it mattered to Connor. But the bastard had still left his mark.

Dressed in only a pair of cotton pajama bottoms—he'd refused to wear the stupid fucking gown point-blank—he swung his legs over the side of the bed and blew out a long breath. This might be harder than he anticipated.

He pulled the IV free, switched off the flow so it didn't leak all over and give the nurses a headache trying to clean it up, and let his bare feet touch the cool floor. Using his good arm, he braced his weight with a hand on the

mattress and stood, swaying with a light head as he tried to gather his balance.

Not trusting his legs completely, he shuffled forward, ignoring the twinge and burn of his bum leg. Propping himself against the wall, he all but dragged his body to the door, and was exhausted before he gripped the handle.

Opening it, he poked his head out and peered along the hallway. Clear in all directions. Slowly, acting as though he had every right to be sneaking out of his room without doctor's clearance—hell, he *was* a doctor, he could clear himself for physical activity—he edged down the empty corridor using everything he could for support.

“Connor Jameson O'Malley, what in the ever-loving hell do you think you're doing?”

He didn't stop, didn't so much as pause even though Sarah used his full Sunday name. If he stopped, he was going down and not getting back up. “Doing what I should have done three damn days ago.”

“Zeke, darling, would you help Connor back to bed?” Sarah called out as she hurried to Connor's side and slipped her arm around his waist.

“I need to see her, Sarah.”

“I know. I know you do, Con, but now isn't the time.”

Ignoring her gentle attempts to stop him, he plodded ahead, his bad leg dragging slightly. Two doors to go. Almost there. So close to Jenna he could smell her hair and hear her laugh.

Sarah stepped away and two incredibly strong arms hooked around him, halting him in his tracks. He smacked a clenched fist down on them in frustration as they carefully—and far too easily—hefted him off his feet.

“Goddamn it, Zeke, put me down!”

“Sorry, big guy. Sarah's right; now isn't the time.”

A door opened down the hall, the very same door he'd been heading for, and a tall masculine figure exited the room. Jenna's room. It didn't take Connor ten seconds to figure out *why* they thought it wasn't a good time—Jenna's family had swarmed in on her like locusts.

“Fuck that, Zeke. Those bastards put her in there through their actions. They don't get to hold her hostage and make nice while she's not even conscious to tell them to go fuck themselves!” His voice carried down to the man, whose head lifted, turned. “Yes, you! You, you sonofabitch!”

It didn't shock him when Jenna's father shook his head and walked away in the other direction, shoulders slumped as though the asshole carried the weight of the world on them. What right did he have to act the martyr after the events he'd set in place?

Pain blasted through Connor's shoulder as he thrashed in Zeke's hold. One way or another, he was going to Jenna. "Don't make me kick your ass over this, Zeke, not when you saved her for me."

Sarah's massive husband chuckled as he simply carried Connor back to his room. "The saving was all you and Cain, Connor. Mostly you, seeing as you got shot twice for your trouble and nearly froze your big personality off."

Hell, was he ever going to live his *big personality* down? He scowled at Sarah as she hurried ahead to open the door to his room, giggling quietly to herself. "I don't know what you're laughing at, missy."

"Me? Nothing. Nothing at all."

"Zeke, I'm not asking again." Connor kicked out with his good leg and connected with a steel shin. The only thing that came of it was a bruised heel. "You can't keep me away from her!"

"Her parents have custodial rights, Connor. Until the judge and the senator overturn the order, she still remains legally under their care as a mentally-ill patient." Zeke's tone, apologetic and gentle, did nothing to assuage Connor's wrath. "With the additional circumstances of the last several days, it might take some time to discern whether the order remains."

"So we're going to have to fight this all over again?" Connor demanded as his impromptu flight ended with a bump. His feet touched the floor only briefly before Sarah and Zeke worked together to shove him back into bed. "I can't do it. I can't go through all this again. *She* can't."

"Right now, Jenna doesn't have a clue what's going on around her, Connor. We're fighting for her, and there's more people on her side than you know. We're hopeful we're going to beat this; fingers crossed, by the time she wakes, this won't even be an issue anymore." Zeke crossed his arms over his chest. "Don't let the nurses catch you out of bed, Connor. They have instructions to sedate you if you try to go near Jenna's room."

Indignation ripped through him as fiercely as the pain in his shoulder when he shot up in protest. "Says who?"

"They're trying to put a restraining order through against you," Sarah interjected quietly, pushing him back down and deftly reinserting his IV.

“I’d rather see you zoned out than handcuffed to the bed, boss.”

He hissed and slumped back against the pillows. “You?”

“Group decision,” she replied, checking the IV bag and tube. “Cain, Zeke, and I. Everything’s moving as fast as we can push it, Connor, but you have to be patient and we know you can’t. Nobody could expect you to be.”

No, but they were forcing him to stay away from the one person he couldn’t live without. The woman he’d killed for. He grimaced as images of Sire’s pulverized face floated into memory, the result of an all-consuming rage and loss of control. “I’m surprised I’m not in cuffs already.”

Zeke scowled. “Do you think I’d let them, if they’d been inclined to do so?”

“I don’t think you’d have much say in it, actually. Murder is murder.”

“I’ve seen the crime scene photos from the house, the shed. I saw what was done to Jenna and read the reports from the responding officers, police and FBI.” Zeke’s arms unfolded and he placed his hands on the bed, leaned forward into Connor’s face. “Don’t you dare apologize for what you did to that bastard, Connor. Don’t you feel guilty over ending his life. Jenna was damn dear dead when the EMS crew started on her. You weren’t far behind. There’ll be a brief investigation to wrap up the details, but it’ll go down as self-defense. With the evidence the feds are pulling out of that house, there won’t be any protests.”

“Evidence?”

“Seems Sire had a little black book of numbers. Details of every woman he kidnapped. Some names, mainly dates, places, descriptions. The feds will match some of them to the bodies already found. They’ll track others down through missing person reports.” Zeke glanced at Sarah. “They’re combing through the property. I expect there’ll be forensic evidence coming in soon enough, and...they found his killing spot.”

“The clearing?”

“Yeah. Just as Jenna described. From the look of it, and from your statement, it would seem he was on his way to take Jenna there when you took him down. Another twenty, thirty minutes, and it would have been over.”

Connor scrubbed his hand over his face. “Luna.”

“Luna’s okay, she’s doing good. Missing you guys, but she loves the boys. I don’t think they’ll want her to go when it’s time for her to come home.” Sarah stroked his arm in reassurance.

“Good, that’s good. But I meant...fuck, I wouldn’t have found them without that dog. Cain and I, we were way off the mark. We could have spent another two days wandering around in there before we found that place, but Luna...she was relentless. She just kept going until she found the next scent marker, and the next. She’d have tracked Jenna to the ends of the earth, whether I asked her to or not.”

A nurse slipped into the room, quiet as a mouse, and performed the same checks on the equipment that Sarah had just done. He ignored her, ignored the fact Sarah moved around to talk to her colleague. He looked Zeke square in the eyes. “That damn dog deserves a fucking medal, Zeke. I’d have lost more than a shitload of blood without her.”

“I’m starting to see that.” Zeke shifted his stance and his attention flicked over to the women huddled around the IV stand, pointing at something on the automated system. “No matter what happens over the coming days, I need your word you won’t attempt to get into Jenna’s room, Connor. I’m working on getting you in there, but the family is resistant. I’ll get you what you want, but it has to be on their terms for now. Do you understand?”

He wasn’t an idiot. Perhaps seeing Jenna and making sure she was truly alive was worth more than taking his next breath, but even he wasn’t stupid enough to break into her room to do. At least, not stupid enough to get caught doing so...

“You can’t let them have control over her, Zeke. She’s a grown woman, an adult, and she’s been manipulated into surrendering herself for years.” Connor worked his tongue in his mouth, wondering why it suddenly felt thick and sluggish. “Jenna isn’t crazy. She isn’t insane, she just...”

His eyes rolled lazily to the side, blurring as they locked on Sarah. The other nurse, a mature lady with silvering red hair, walked out of the room, humming softly to herself. “Oh fuck, Sarah. Whatcha do that for?”

She gave him a sad smile and stroked her hand over his forehead as his eyes tried to flutter closed. He fought it, bearing down to stave off the sedation, to no avail. “I love you, Connor, but I don’t trust you. The moment our backs are turned, you’ll sneak off and cause a war.”

His lip twitched. Damn straight he would.
Just as soon as the drugs wore off.

“What aren’t you telling him, Zeke?”

Sarah continued to stroke Connor's forehead even though he was well away with the faeries. A low blow, sedating him unawares, but if it kept him from making a huge mistake, it needed to be done. She'd spoken to Ilene Abernathy, Jenna's mother, and disliked the woman on the spot. Aaron, her husband, wasn't far behind his wife on the unlikability scale.

They were already making plans to have Jenna—Penelope, as they insisted on calling her—moved as soon as humanly possible to a medical facility in Denver. An undisclosed facility where Jenna would be admitted as a psychiatric patient for an unspecified period of time, and where Connor wouldn't be able to find her.

Where Jenna would be lost in a prison not of her making.

Sarah trusted Zeke to make sure that didn't happen, but if Connor found out, if he did anything to anger Jenna's parents...she dreaded to think what would happen.

Zeke—the man she loved with everything she had inside her, the man who'd given her two precious sons, the man who gave her the world—looked her in the eyes and sighed. "This goes no further, Sarah."

When he used *that* tone of voice, she knew not to joke around. She nodded, her fingers pausing on Connor's forehead as a sense of foreboding fell over the room. She didn't like it, not one bit. The deathly silence implied something bad, and hadn't they had enough bad shit to last a fucking lifetime?

Didn't they deserve some semblance of a normal life in a small Montana town? They didn't live in a big city, for God's sake, they lived in Howler's Creek where the total sum of residents could have filled a handful of blocks in a city. Shit like this shouldn't happen here.

"The feds are looking into the possibility more deeply, but from certain things found in the main residence, it's looking highly probable Sire wasn't working alone—he either had a partner or a protégé."

Sarah blinked twice. "Well, fuck. That's bad."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Ouch.

Despite the warmth and the softness of whatever cloud she drifted on, Jenna decided she didn't like dying based purely on the fact her body was riddled with pain. She'd always believed death was supposed to be the end of pain, unless a soul ended up in hell and then, well, all bets were off.

If that were true, she was in hell.

Laying still didn't pose a problem. Reluctant to move, to breathe, she gathered data from her body and came to the conclusion Sire had really done a number on her before he sent her plummeting to the next stage of her miserable existence.

It was easier to catalogue the three places on her body that didn't hurt, rather than pinpoint all the areas that did.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

Everything inside her ran cold at the sound. She knew it, feared it. There was only one place she could recall with a machine that made that noise, and it meant she wasn't dead. She wasn't in hell. She was somewhere far worse.

She tried to swallow, found her throat obstructed. Panicking, choking, she clawed at her neck with a hand bundled into a mitten. Her breath squeaked around the blockage, agony imploded through her chest like a grenade, and the machines went wild with alarms.

The racket speared through her head, made her face throb as she scrabbled desperately at the thing stopping her from taking a full breath.

"Penelope, darling, don't fight it. Don't fight it. Aaron! Aaron, get the nurse, a doctor!" An unfamiliar voice twined into the cacophony of noise and sent her panic rocketing. "Quickly!"

Her eyes popped open, darting frantically around the white hospital room for a glimpse of Connor. A sliver of sanity among the chaos of what she found herself in. But he wasn't there. There was nothing, no one, familiar in her godawful surroundings.

Two new faces rushed into her line of sight. One grabbed her forearms, avoiding the mitten-like things that had been Jenna's hands, and careful not to touch the thick bandages around her wrists, the bulky cast on her left arm.

"Steady now, sweetheart. Just relax and let us take this nasty tube out so you can breathe properly. Give us a minute." Sympathetic brown eyes, so like Sarah's, stared into hers calmly. "Stay still for me, there's a good girl. Just like that."

Jenna choked, retched as the tube inched free. Each dry heave drove a knife between her ribs, twisted the blade deeper. She tried to clutch at the sheets beneath her, but pain ripped through her hands, up her arms until she screamed hoarsely the moment her throat was clear.

The nurses tossed orders between themselves, working quickly and effectively to make Jenna comfortable, but her instincts had been drop-kicked to their absolute limits. Ignoring the hands of strangers attempting to soothe her, she screamed for Connor.

Her lungs burst into flames. Not literally—no smoke poured from her mouth or nose—but it damn well felt like it. Wheezing, she couldn't catch a full breath. She called for him again and again between shallow, burning inhales.

"He's not coming, Penelope." A more mature version of her own face loomed over her even as one of the nurses tried to nudge her back. "You won't be seeing him again."

"That was a stupid move," the nurse muttered and physically pulled the woman away from the bed. "Do not upset the patient when she's in this condition."

Jenna's heart stuttered, faltered in mid-beat. Disbelief washed her mind clean of everything but Connor. He wouldn't leave her. He wouldn't abandon her into the *care* of these strangers. Strangers who had ripped her from her home, her lover, her world, and thrown her into a nightmare of biblical proportions.

"Penny, sweetheart, don't you remember us?" The man from the photo eased nearer, his hand resting on the bed close to her leg. "I'm your father."

Jenna jerked her leg away, bit her lip as wounds pulled and broke open. Struggling to breathe, she forced her body—her very broken body—to inch toward the other side of the bed. If they wouldn't bring Connor to her, she would go to Connor.

"Maryanne, catch her!" The nurse holding the woman—Jenna's mother—by the arm shouted in alarm as Jenna's weight started to tip over the edge. "Jesus Christ, she's not awake ten minutes and all hell breaks loose."

Hands supported her gently, eased her back onto the mattress. With a snap, Maryanne locked the siderails into position. She set her hands on her hips and glowered. "That's the final straw. Everyone who is not vital personnel, get out. That's you," she said, pointing a finger at the man. "And you," she added, turning to Jenna's mother. "The patient is recovering from several major surgeries on top of other traumas. You do not get to upset her on my watch. Get out, stay out, and do not come back in here until you are told otherwise!"

"How dare you presume to give me orders!" Ilene Abernathy planted her feet, fists on her hips, and skewered Maryanne with a deadly gaze. Jenna saw the insult written over her former mother's face and had a horrible moment of wondering whether her own features took on that bitter cast. "My daughter needs her family around her in this difficult time. Do you have any idea what her circumstances are?"

"The *patient* needs familiarity and quiet rest time—neither of which you can provide," Maryanne snapped back. "This is my floor, Mrs. Abernathy, and I'm fully apprised of her circumstances. You are not permitted back inside this room without express permission from me. Joanna," she addressed the other nurse with calm authority. "Please see Mr. and Mrs. Abernathy from the room and ask security to send a man for the door."

Relief swamped Jenna, enough she simply melted into the mattress. It grew as the people she no longer accepted as her family were ushered out by a stone-faced Joanna, and Jenna tried to convey her gratitude silently when Maryanne nodded once decisively then turned to her.

"Now then...Penelope?"

"God, no," she whispered tiredly. Exhaustion overwhelmed her. "Jenna."

"Jenna. Okay, Jenna, we'll wait for Joanna to come back so we can move you back into the middle of the bed without hurting you. No more trying to roll away—you hit the floor, you're gonna hurt far more than you

do now.” Maryanne examined her with warm, gentle hands. “Would you like me to get anything for you, Jenna? Someone other than those two out there?”

“C-Connor? Can you get Connor?”

The nurse’s hand laid lightly on Jenna’s forearm. “It’s the talk of the ward, sweetie. There are some legalities in place which means Connor can’t see you right now. He knows you’re here, he knows you’re okay, and we’ll get him in to see you just as soon as we can.”

Her arms twitched, but Maryanne shook her head to discourage any movement. “Please. I want Connor.”

Maryanne bit her lip. “Let me check you over so you can sleep. I’ll see what I can...” Her voice dropped to a murmur as she glanced toward the open door. “Arrange, okay?”

It was a difficult decision. War against the anxiety of being trapped in hospital with strangers or submit and be given Connor as a reward for good behavior. Turned out the decision wasn’t difficult at all. She acquiesced reluctantly, delicately processing all the factors her muddled brain could think of.

Connor trumped every negative consequence.

Joanna came back in and shut the door firmly behind her, closing off the raised voices following her into the room. Her pretty hazel eyes rolled as she walked hurriedly to the other side of Jenna’s bed. “Wow. They are seriously miffed, Maryanne. I think they’re gunning for you—they keep demanding to speak to the head nurse.”

Maryanne smirked. “Lucky me. As head nurse, I’m sure I’ll look forward to that conversation later on in my busy, busy day.” They dropped the sides on the bed in unison. “We’re going to be as gentle as we can, Jenna. Quick and gentle.”

She cried out when they lifted her, yelping like a kicked puppy as her bones seemed to rattle painfully together, settling her back in the center of the bed. Hands petted her, trying to take away some of the pain, but every banked fire inside her ignited into raging infernos.

The oxygen mask was a welcome gift, and she sucked air into her aching lungs as quickly as the pain allowed. Her eyes ticked over to the door as it swung open and a figure darted inside, pressing their back to the wall as they closed it behind them.

Sarah pressed her finger to her lips in warning.

A second later, a gruff male face peered through the window, eyes scanning the room intensely, before it vanished.

"You're clear, Sarah," Joanna muttered, watching the door without moving her head. "How'd you get past the dragon pair?"

Elation sent Jenna's heart into fits of rapture. She cried, hands reaching for her friend without lifting off the bed, whimpering behind the mask helping her breathe.

They hadn't left her. They hadn't abandoned her.

"Sweetheart." Sarah rushed to her, her hands immediately going to Jenna's face and fluttering like butterfly wings over her swollen features. "Don't cry, sweetheart. Don't cry."

She couldn't help it. A long, keening wail echoed inside the mask and tears trickled from her puffy eyes. The touch of familiar hands, feeling the love only her friend could give, was too much to bear. Her body strained, frantic to have Sarah's arms around her and be held.

"No, stay still, beautiful. Stay still. You need to be calm, okay? I know it looks like we've left you, sweetheart, but we're here. I promise you, we're not going anywhere." Those dark eyes filled with righteous fury. "Not if I have anything to say about it."

"Taking a risk," Maryanne murmured.

Sarah glanced at the nurse. "I heard her screaming. It's not right they have her isolated away from what she knows, Annie." She stroked Jenna's forehead. "I can't stay long—they've only gone down for coffee—but I needed to make sure Jenna knows she's not alone."

Don't leave me. Jenna wheezed and flopped her useless hand for Sarah's. Her friend captured the bandage-swaddled limb, bent and pressed her lips to it before setting it down oh-so carefully.

"We've got her, Sarah. She needs peace and quiet so she can rest, and I've taken precautions to ensure she gets it. I've assigned Joanna to her and only her." Maryanne folded her hands as Sarah drew the light blanket from the foot of the bed up and over Jenna to her chest, careful to avoid the drain in her side. "Once we get a handle on her guardians' routine, we'll let you know when visitors will be allowed."

"They're not her guardians," Sarah muttered mulishly. "They're her goddamn jailors. Thank you, Annie, I know you're risking a lot letting me do this."

Maryanne gave the machines one last check, then headed for the door. “Our job is to do what’s right for our patients, Sarah. Even if we hadn’t been friends since college, I’d still do what’s best for *her*. You’ve got five more minutes,” she warned gently. “Joanna will check the way is clear before you leave, and I’ll do my best to waylay the parents. I’ll come to you when it’s safe to come back.”

Sarah nodded, and Jenna shook her head. The words coming from behind the breathing apparatus were garbled, a product of tiredness and drugs. But their intent was the same as if she’d shouted them, clear and precise.

Don’t leave me.

“You need to sleep, sweetheart. The more you sleep, the faster you’ll heal. You’re going to lose time, but at the moment, that’s not a bad thing. I want to stay, I *wish* I could stay, but if I get caught in here, it’s just going to cause hell.” Sarah closed her eyes, head dipping. “If you need me, if you need anything, you tell Joanna and she’ll come to me, okay? I’ll do my damndest to sneak back in as soon as I can.”

Jenna moaned in protest. Her body wouldn’t respond to any command now, it just lay useless and shattered in its cocoon of bandages. Labored, her breathing grew shallow as she realized the seconds of her time with Sarah were drawing to a close, and she’d be left alone again.

“I’ll give her some morphine now,” Joanna said quietly, and Sarah lifted her head from whatever silent prayer she’d been offering. “She’ll sleep for a few hours so you don’t have to worry about her, and I’ve got my chair right there beside her. Maryanne banned the dragons from the room, so she won’t be disturbed.”

There was a low snicker, and Sarah grinned. “God, I love that woman. She has the biggest balls this side of the Big Belt range. If you’re giving her meds, do it now. I’ll stay until Jenna goes under.” She sighed and rested her hand on Jenna’s forehead. “Everything will be okay, sweetheart. We’re going to make sure of it.”

Half-lidded, Jenna’s eyes tracked the nurse’s movements. Pain destroyed every fiber of her being, but if the stuff Joanna was injecting into her IV would erase Sarah’s presence from the room, Jenna didn’t want it. She’d take every moment of suffering to keep her friend beside her.

“Nice and easy, Jenna,” Sarah crooned, running her fingers through the matted blonde hair on Jenna’s head. “Just slide away for a little while. Let

the pain go.”

Don't leave me.

Jenna blinked and was gone.

“You’re going to need those goddamn handcuffs if you don’t let me see her soon.” Connor snapped at Zeke as he propped himself on the side of the bed. Two days after Sarah had conspired with the nurses to sedate him, he was borderline frantic with worry. “I’ll take you down, you great big orc.”

Zeke chuckled and sat elegantly in the flimsy visitor’s chair. It squeaked under his weight, but he settled himself into it without a care. “The insults are improving, kudos. I’ll worry about the cuffs when you can stand on two feet without falling over.”

Glaring, Connor blew out a hard breath and pushed himself back upright. The muscles in his thigh screamed, pain ricocheted down past his knee, but he gritted his teeth and forced his body to deal with it. “You know this qualifies as torture, right?”

“Physical therapy is often torturous, yes.” Zeke steepled his fingers and watched his friend over the peak. “But that’s not what you’re referring to.”

“At least I don’t have to spell it out for you.” He grunted as his leg began to tremble, then gave way and sent him toppling back to his starting position.

“Jenna is doing well. She has a nurse with her twenty-four-seven, and for the most part remains sedated to give her body a chance to heal. Sarah’s clandestine visits are few and far between now that the rest of Jenna’s family has descended upon us, but Jenna’s been aware of her presence.”

“It’s not enough.”

“No, it’s not. My father and the judge should reach a decision today about Jenna’s future. I’ve already stalled two attempts by her family to relocate her to a more...specialized facility, but you need to be prepared for a decision that takes matters out of my hands.” Zeke used the point of his joined hands to rub a line between his eyebrows. “Jenna’s nursing staff assure me she’s unaware of her situation. The meds are keeping her relaxed and stress-free. She’s not fighting, she’s not panicking.”

So essentially they were doping her to keep her quiet. Fury sparked in his veins, propelling Connor back onto his feet. This time, he didn’t just stand. He gathered momentum, using all the strength and stamina he’d exhausted himself to build over the past two days, and beelined for the door.

He fought with the handle, battling to keep his balance, and noted Zeke hadn't moved from the chair. As the door swung open, Connor went down to his knees with a jarring thud. "Fuck. Shit." He slapped the tiled floor and breathed through his teeth. "Get up, idiot."

"Need a hand?"

Connor snarled. "Don't you have kids to see to? Someone else to annoy?"

"Between my mother, Sarah's parents, and Cain, the boys are having the time of their lives. Everyone's pitching in to keep them occupied while we deal with the aftermath of Sire." Footsteps treaded lightly on the tiles, big hands scooped Connor's body off the floor effortlessly and set him back on his feet. "Going for attempt two, or ready to head back to bed?"

Connor poked his head around the jamb. So few feet to get to Jenna, but they might as well have been miles. He gripped the doorframe one-handed as his shot shoulder was giving him a few complications. With a careful eye, he perused the outside area.

Nurses, orderlies and a few doctors buzzed about like dedicated bees in a hive, all with a mission to complete. Maybe they'd stop him, maybe they wouldn't. But the two females sitting outside Jenna's room most certainly would.

Her sisters, he knew from the photograph.

They hated him without saying so much as a word to him. Not one member of Jenna's family had been to see him, to talk to him or ask about his relationship with their daughter or sister. Not one had thanked him for saving her life for a second time—not that he wanted or needed thanks from the likes of them.

A doctor approached the women, said a few words, then disappeared into Jenna's room and closed the door.

Connor frowned. He didn't recognize the doctor from the revolving whirlwind of medical professionals who came into his room on a daily basis—not that he knew every doctor in the hospital, or even the names of a handful. He'd been too engrossed in concern and self-pity to pay much attention to anyone who didn't bring him news on Jenna.

Zeke's cell phone bleated noisily. A common occurrence these last few days. If he wasn't answering calls, he was usually texting or emailing whoever he needed to confer with. The man was a machine, seemingly

running on eternal solar power, and capable of a wealth of patience Connor couldn't fathom.

"Fairfax," he said bluntly.

Connor heard the scream and reacted before he knew what he'd done. The sound was high, terrified, and set the hairs on his neck and arms standing like needles in the way only Jenna's fear could provoke. He tripped out of the door, stumbled down the corridor in his pajama pants and slippers, barely upright.

He heard Zeke shout his name and ignored his friend. No doubt Zeke would strip several layers off his hide for breaking the court order, but who gave a fuck? Jenna's screams cut off in mid-pitch, and Connor shoved her sisters out of his way as they huddled around the door to Jenna's room, trying to peer through the tiny window.

Connor didn't bother with the window.

His weight and clumsy momentum slammed him through the door, sent him sprawling. He shook his head to clear the dizziness of adrenaline pumping through his blood, heard distressed whimpers and the rapid beat of the heart monitor as it struggled to keep up with Jenna's overwhelmed pulse.

"Who the hell are you?" The doctor asked incredulously, then tsked. "Mr. O'Malley, you're forbidden to enter this room. I'm afraid you're going to have to leave. Nurse, please help him back to his room."

"Make me," Connor growled. His breath came in pants, reducing the effect of the threat as he crawled to the nearest stationary object and gave his best shot at pulling himself back up to standing.

Shit, he'd done some damage to himself.

Blood seeped through the bandages on his thigh, staining the cotton with bright red blood. More dripped down his back, his armpit where the bullet had gone in. Stitches ripped, he diagnosed. An easy enough fix if he discounted the lecture he'd get at the same time.

For the first time in almost a week, he saw the love of his life, and it damn near broke him. He hadn't seen her, hadn't touched her since they'd lain in the snow beneath a winter sun, when he'd believed she was dead. The part of his brain that could recollect some memories from that dark morning had known she was in a bad way.

He'd misjudged just how bad she'd been.

A lot of the swelling had receded, especially around her face and eyes. What remained was puffy, deflated, and bruised in all shades of black and purple, yellow and green. Her eyes themselves were dead, hollow inside, with no spark of life lurking. They'd suffocated it out of her, smothered it with isolation and drugs.

There was still an IV plugged into her arm, and a drain in her ribcage. An oxygen mask rested over her chin as though it had been knocked from over her mouth in a struggle. A tube ran from beneath the blankets to a bag with yellow liquid, and Connor wondered if she knew she'd been catheterized. Hopefully not. She hated the goddamn thought of one.

His gaze travelled down, to the limp limbs draped beside her torso. One was bound in a cast, while both hands were swathed in bandages from below the wrists.

God knew what else the sheet concealed, but what he saw was enough for him to handle right now. He staggered over to the bed, snagging the bedrail before he went down again, his bloodied leg refusing to bear weight anymore.

"Jenna. Jenna, baby, I'm here." His heart sank as those lifeless eyes flicked toward him, assessed him as her heart bounced in vocal beeps. He shot an accusing glare at the doctor. "You sedated her again?"

"That's none of your concern, Mr. O'Malley. You shouldn't be in here."

"It's goddamn *Doctor* O'Malley, asshole. What were you doing to make her scream?"

The fresh-faced moron ignored Connor and shouted for security.

"Security won't be necessary," Zeke drawled from the doorway. His eyebrow shot up when Connor turned to look at him, then his attention dropped to the floor. "You're bleeding everywhere, Connor. Congratulations."

The doctor puffed himself up. "As you well know, Mr. Fairfax, there is an order in place restricting *Doctor* O'Malley from entering this room. Security is necessary when he refuses to leave, and the nurse in charge is obviously inept."

Said nurse scowled and folded her arms stubbornly over her chest.

Zeke just wiggled his cell phone in the air. "The court order has been revoked by Senator Fairfax and Judge Swinton. The paperwork has been processed and is being faxed here as we speak for confirmation. Connor has

every right to be in the room, and any attempt to further deny him access to Jenna will result in legal action.”

“I...what?” Connor sucked in a shocked breath. “They dropped it?”

“Statements have been reviewed and it has been deemed in Jenna’s best interests to be left to recover as a normally-functioning human being. There’s no medical evidence to imply she’s suffered irreversible mental trauma requiring incarceration. Custody of her rights remain in her hands.”

“I won’t stand for it.”

Connor’s gaze flashed beyond Zeke’s figure to the gathering outside the door. Jenna’s sisters had been joined by the rest of the Abernathy clan, led by the matriarch herself. She stomped into the room, elbowing past Zeke, and squared off to Connor with a furious curl to her mouth.

“Mrs. Abernathy, I’m guessing.” Connor said, using Jenna’s bed as a crutch. He’d be damned if he was going to sink to his knees in front of the bad-tempered crone. “Pleasure to finally meet you.”

His sarcasm sailed over her head. Ilene’s resemblance to her daughter—actually, all three of them—was ridiculous. For a moment, Connor thought he’d snapped forward in time, thirty years to when Jenna aged gracefully. But his Jenna wouldn’t be this bitter, so...abhorrent on the inside. Ilene’s rotten core stained the skin she wore.

She stamped her foot in its Gucci-clad heel, so the sole cracked on tile petulantly. Her voice rose as she stated again, “I won’t stand for it!”

“Sit down and shut up then,” he suggested, his manners and patience shattering like glass under her judgmental stare. He started to wobble, cursed as his thighs quivered. “You shut up and listen.”

Bristling, Aaron barged into the room, eyes alive with hatred so deep, Connor wondered if they’d been acquainted in a previous life. The way Jenna’s father looked at him was the same way Connor had skewered Sire with his gaze. “Don’t you dare talk to her that way! How dare you!”

He wasn’t strong enough to stand in a fight, Connor mused, but again, he was damned if he would bow under the threat of violence. He’d drop to his knees for no one but Jenna. “How dare *you* do what you’ve done to Jenna? You took deliberate steps to take her away from everything familiar in her life as it is now. You put her in a position where the same psychopath she escaped could get his hands on her again, and for *what*? The sake of giving her a few days to get used to the idea of having a family again, of

trying not to disappoint you and diminish your memories of the girl she was?”

The silver fox was fast on his feet, a lot faster than Connor was in that moment. Braced for impact, ready for the crack of bone on bone, Connor inclined his head and waited for the first punch.

Zeke’s arm shot out like a steel bar, clotheslined Aaron and stopped the older man in his tracks. A second later, his fingers fisted in the man’s pristine shirt, hefted him so the tips of his shiny black leather loafers scuffed the floor. “Anyone who decks an injured man—especially the one who saved his daughter’s life at great personal risk to his own—is a fucking coward. Connor was shot twice protecting Jenna, and don’t you damn well forget it.”

“Penelope,” Ilene hissed. “Her name is Penelope!”

“Seems to me, her name is whatever she wants it to be.” Zeke shook Aaron once, hard enough to knock the man’s head back, then set him carefully back on his feet. “This is a hospital room and there is a patient in residence. You will show respect.”

Aaron hurried to his wife and was promptly set aside with a wave of her manicured hand. He remained at her back, a guard dog with a fraction less bite, and kept his mouth shut.

“You need to sit down, Con? You’re white.” Zeke asked pleasantly. “And still bleeding,” he added for good measure with a sly smile. “Busting those wounds open wasn’t a good idea.”

“Was at the time,” Connor muttered. He nodded after a moment, deciding sitting was a better option than collapsing in front of his future in-laws. They already despised him for whatever reason; no reason to give them an excuse to see him as weak as well.

Connor grimaced when Zeke walked over to the visitor’s chair the nurse offered, carried it one-handed to him. The show-off. His eyes narrowed when his friend set it beside Jenna’s bed in a silent statement, then winked and helped Connor into it like an old man.

Hell, he felt like an old man.

“Our daughter was abducted. She’s been gone for almost three years and then we find out she’s been cloistered away in some backwater town in the middle of nowhere when she should have come straight home to *us*.” Ilene’s wrath was a living thing, a snake with an agenda. “What else we

were to do but intervene when that government agent told us she'd been found?"

"Cloistered away?" Connor shook his head in disgust. "Jenna couldn't *speak* when I found her. Couldn't say a damn word for weeks. You have no idea, no goddamn idea what I've been through with her, what we've been through together." He leaned back gingerly, reached through the bedrail until his fingers touched bare, soft skin. "You might not like that she uses a new name now, or that she has friends of a different...style," he said tactfully, giving those Gucci shoes another glance. "Her hair's changed, she might talk differently, her sense of humor and her tastes could have altered. Twenty-six months of captivity and torture do things to people."

"And the months she's spent with you twisting her up in this alternate reality she doesn't belong in? What has that done to her?" Ilene spat.

He heard his teeth grind, forced himself to relax his jaw before it cracked. "If you're referring to the months where I bathed her, fed her, treated her wounds and comforted her after every goddamn nightmare, I'd watch your tone. Jenna learned how to be human again. She had to be taught how to sleep in a bed again, to eat with a knife and fork. How to talk."

"You warped a vulnerable mind."

"Oh, that is *it*, you ungrateful, snobbish, uptight bitch." Sarah's angry voice struck like a missile into the center of gathering tension, followed swiftly by the woman herself as she pushed through the throng blocking the doorway.

Cain was on her heels, eyeing one of Jenna's sisters with a *Hey, there* expression strong enough to whip her panties off without a single word passing from the sinful curve of his mouth. He flicked an eyebrow at her—Isabella, Connor recalled from Jenna's recitation of names—and grinned at full wattage when she dropped her gaze and blushed cherry red.

Flirtatious asshole.

Sarah bulled her way to Ilene, slipping so easily past her husband's quick grab, Connor was sure Zeke flubbed the move on purpose. Toe to toe, several inches shorter than the Gucci queen, Sarah bared her teeth. "That man gave up the entirety of his life to take care of Jenna when she needed him most. While the police and the FBI twiddled their thumbs trying to identify your daughter, Connor was the one on the front line, dealing with the fallout of her trauma. Don't you dare criticize him for giving her a

family, a support system, when she had no one else in this godforsaken world.”

“And you are?”

“Your worst fucking nightmare. You don’t get to keep him from the woman he loves, just as you don’t have the right to keep Jenna from the man she loves.” The finger jab between Ilene’s breasts might have been pushing it, but Connor didn’t have the energy to protest his friend’s passionate defense. “Only Jenna can choose whether she wants to be Jenna or Penelope, and you triggered that minefield when you forced the decision from her hands. Blew it up clean in your face. No second chances.”

“Why, you—”

“Yes, me. Take *me* on. You’re more than willing to bring the axe down on the head of a man who’s obviously incapable of defending himself when he’s half-passed out in a chair, bleeding from wounds he sustained saving Jenna’s life. Take on someone who isn’t incapacitated.”

The hollow crack of a slap rippled through the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

She wasn't sedated.

She just didn't want to be here anymore. Couldn't bear the physical pain anymore, handle the isolation anymore. She wanted no more *anymore*. She only wanted to be able to let go and...cease to exist.

She hadn't meant to scream when the doctor came in and started prodding and poking at her injuries, but he'd startled her from a foggy doze, and in the dim light of the room, all she'd seen was Sire, looming over her as his hands brought the pain.

Once the first scream let loose, the others followed unbidden.

When the hallucinations came in the form of Connor, she didn't brush them away or close her eyes to get rid of him. She missed him so much she was willing to take even a shadow of his presence to keep her company.

Now there was shouting and chaos, more people in her little hell than there'd been in days. Joanna was nice, but she wasn't Sarah. The doctors were kind, but they weren't Connor. Even though her solitary existence now teemed with life, Jenna couldn't find the spark needed to appreciate it.

She watched with dead eyes as her former family went head to head with a battered Connor and spitfire Sarah. The hallucination was bleeding badly and looked pale. She almost believed he was real.

Words tumbled in Sarah's voice, her mother's. Flung like arrows, striking hard and fast until Jenna's head rang with the clarity of church bells. But it was the slap, that sharp connection of narrow hand against her friend's cheek, that pushed Jenna to escape the cold dreariness of her emotional prison.

There'd been enough violence without that.

She opened her eyes as wide as the baggy lids would allow. "No."

Several pairs of eyes flicked to her, but the ones whose attention she demanded remained steadfastly locked in battle. People rushed toward her—Cain, her father, her sisters, but Zeke blocked them all except Cain. The doctor protested, spluttering as her lover's brother came to her side, only to be shushed fiercely by Joanna.

A red handprint bloomed over Sarah's fair-skinned cheek, but she barely flinched as she smiled darkly. "You hit like a girl." Her fist clenched, raised, and was ready to strike. "Hope you can take it better than you give it."

"No. Sarah." The effort of speaking winded her. "Please."

Dark chocolate eyes snapped to Jenna, softened. With a glare for Ilene, Sarah capitulated and dropped her tiny fist, folding her arms over her breasts. "She deserves it for what she's put you through, sweetheart."

Jenna nodded in agreement. Her head didn't like the movement, and the stitches pulled. The ache in her chest was worse, the loss of what had been, what could have been. Maybe making the choice now when her system was full of drugs wasn't the wisest thing she'd ever done, but she was sick of the fighting, tired of being directed by outside forces in her life.

She'd nearly died. She didn't know how she'd gotten to the hospital, couldn't remember anything that had happened after the lights went out in the cabin that last night with Sire, but someone had intervened and hauled her from death's door.

She swallowed thickly, her throat dry and sore. An instant later, Cain's hand slipped beneath her head, raised it an inch while he presented a straw to her cracked lips. She drank slowly, thankful for the water. When she was done, he settled her back into the pillow with the utmost care.

"I don't...want you here," she told her mother brokenly. "Not now. You don't...hit my...friends or...insult them." She wheezed softly and Cain held up the mask in question. "Don't need it. Thanks." She tried a smile, but it shattered when her lip split. "I was...happy as...Jenna. P-Penelope is...dead."

For the first time, Jenna saw something other than anger in the eyes so like her own. It struck her that this was their big family reunion after her abduction and incarceration, and that it really wasn't going the way she'd imagined.

No hugs, no tears, no love.

Just seething resentment against the people who'd taken her in, cherished and adored her. She felt safer with Connor and Cain, Sarah and Zeke, than she did in the company of her own blood relatives—how pathetic was that?

Calloused fingertips ran up and down the length of her forearm, lulling her. She smiled at the apparition of Connor even as her brow furrowed in concern. Should hallucinations bleed as copiously as that?

"For God's sake, Connor," Sarah huffed. She marched across the room, slipping into her role as nurse as easily as she wore the mantle of warrior. "Bloody men."

"You can see him?" Jenna whispered.

Joanna rushed forward and set her hand on Jenna's forehead as Sarah did the same. The rest of the room was forgotten as it narrowed down to two women who had the misfortune to spend their lives coddling her. In unison, they said, "No fever."

"Baby, I'm right here." Sweating, grimacing as he shifted in the chair beside her bed, Connor moved his hand so it covered her arm, squeezed gently. "I won't leave you again."

"I'm not sewing your leg back up with you sat in a damn chair, Connor. What the hell did you do to rip *both* wounds open again?" Sarah scowled and she lasered everyone in the room who wasn't part of their intimate oddball family with a glare. "Did one of this lot have a go at you?"

"Calm down, Sarah. I did this myself, somewhere between running down the hall like a lunatic and skidding across the floor after ramming the door." Connor smiled ruefully. "Totally worth it."

Ilene sniffed loudly.

"Are you still here?" Sarah demanded as she pressed the call button attached to Jenna's bed. "Jenna told you she doesn't want you here right now, so I suggest you leave until she decides she can stand looking at you."

Aaron eased forward, sheepish enough Jenna's heavy gaze landed on him and held his eyes. Memories flicked past—riding on his shoulders as a girl, listening to him sing *Happy Birthday* in a deep tenor as she blew out candles on a cake, swinging her around in a circle when she graduated high school. Good things, happy things.

"Ilene, we should let Pene—Jenna," he corrected carefully, "get some rest. Perhaps we've gone about this the wrong way in our haste to see her."

Taking his wife by the arm, he tried to lead her out. "Ilene. I want to get to know my daughter again. Don't ruin this further, please."

"Dad's right, Mom." Rosemary piped up from the doorway, her voice quiet and sad. "Things have gotten out of hand. We need to go and let things settle. Give...Jenna a few days. We've waited long enough, what's a few more days?"

"I'm sorry, ladies and gentlemen, I'm afraid some of you are going to have to relocate to the waiting area." Maryanne steamrolled through the huddle at the door, then stopped and surveyed the disaster awaiting her in Jenna's room. "I see. I should have known this eventuality would happen on my shift."

"Annie, I need some supplies. Hero over here has done himself an injury or two."

"So it would seem. Joanna, if you would get Sarah what she requires, I'll sort this out." Maryanne turned and selected the scrum of bodies in the doorway with a circle of her finger. "Surplus to requirements and blocking a patient's room. Please vacate the area." With a raised eyebrow, she set Jenna's parents in her sights. "Mr. and Mrs. Abernathy, I believe you were respectfully asked not to enter the room until told otherwise. The next time I have to ask, it will not be respectfully and there will be two armed security officers involved in your physical removal from my ward."

As Jenna watched her siblings edge away from the door, Joanna slipped through them all like an eel. Her heart was heavy when her parents walked away, her father offering her a sorrowful curve of lips before he pushed Ilene out in front of him, still sulking.

"Mr. Fairfax and the other Mr. O'Malley, as lovely as it is to see you, your presence is not necessary at the moment." Maryanne grinned at them and made a sweeping gesture toward the exit. "Cain, we're more than capable of taking care of Jenna's needs. Put the mask down and go treat yourself to some cafeteria coffee."

He looked a little disgruntled but set the mask within easy reach and bent to press his lips to Jenna's forehead. The contact felt like home. "Counting down the seconds until I can come back in and play nursemaid, sunshine. Your Daddy's not going anywhere."

Her eyes slid to the hand on her arm, studying the bruised and still swollen knuckles. It certainly looked like Connor's hand, and it felt real enough against her skin. "I locked him away. Kept him safe."

Cain's gray eyes turned dark. "The thing about Daddies, sunshine, is they never stay locked away when their little girl needs them. He didn't hesitate to come after you. It's his job to keep you safe, not the other way around, and he pulled out all the stops to bring you home."

She closed her eyes as Cain eased away under Maryanne's eagle stare.

"I, uh, don't believe I'm needed here," the doctor mumbled, and she thought she heard an undercurrent of uncertainty in his voice. Probably wasn't used to the madness of two warring families battling it out in a hospital room.

"Off you go, Doctor. I think Mr. Jenkinson in Room 438 was waiting for someone to explain his test results." Maryanne offered him a smooth way out which, by the sound of his shoes tapping rapidly away, he took without a second thought. "There, now that's more manageable. I take it the court order has been dealt with, Sarah?"

"I'm assuming so. Zeke would have carried Connor out bodily if it hadn't."

"Excellent. I think if we shift Jenna's bed over to the right, we might just have room to fit in another, mightn't we?"

Sarah's laugh was delighted. "Always a quick thinker, Annie. Saving time and resources. Jenna, would you be okay with us transferring Connor in here with you, sweetheart?"

Drowsily, still not convinced the man in the chair was really Connor, Jenna blinked at her friend. "Are you sure that's Connor?"

Sarah's face filled her vision. "I give you my word, Jenna."

Trusting her, too tired to contemplate anything else, Jenna nodded and wished she could feel a hand in hers. Squeeze Connor's fingers, touch him in any way possible to verify his existence was real and make sure he wasn't still hidden away like a secret. "Yes, please."

"Are you in pain, sweetheart?"

It was hard to tell when pain was her constant companion. Sometimes it flowed like a river, sweeping her away on a firm but gentle current. Never-ending but not overwhelming. Other times, it cleaved her apart one bone at a time, stripping muscle away from skin and setting her nerves alight with agony.

Right now, it tangled her up in strong silken threads, tightening viciously with every breath. But she didn't want the drugs to steal her away from Connor. They'd been apart so long it seemed like a lifetime, and

wasting more time capitulating to physical discomfort was the last thing she wanted to do.

“Just tired.” And her jaw ached horribly.

“Hmmm. Too much excitement for your debut back to the living, I think.” Sarah’s fingertips stroked around Jenna’s eyes lightly as she peered into them. “Yeah, we’ve overdone your tolerance. Say goodnight to Connor, sweetheart.”

“Don’t want to.” Her useless arm twitched.

“Yes, well, unfortunately you don’t have a say in it this time.” Maryanne stepped up to the IV stand, resting her hand on Connor’s shoulder as she pressed a button on the box. “Connor, we’ll get you cleaned up and settled in just a moment.”

He mumbled something and Jenna shot Sarah a worried look. He didn’t sound right, certainly didn’t look like her strong, confident Daddy. The soft warmth of soothing relief swept over her, lifted her high above stress and worry and pain.

“He’ll be okay, Jenna. I’ve got him now. He’s exhausted and in pain, just like you so he needs to sleep. Just like you.” Sarah cupped Jenna’s face so gently she barely felt the contact of skin on skin, but she took comfort from it as the tethers holding her cloud to earth snapped and sent her floating away. “You’re both in excellent hands, sweetheart.”

For the best part of a week, they missed each other. One waking while the other slept, and vice versa. An immensely frustrating dilemma, one that slowly drove Connor up the wall. Not a man used to lounging around, the days of boredom were only broken up by watching Jenna sleep.

Their beds were close together, the inner guardrails lowered. During examinations, the nurses moved them apart so they could work and the doctors could do their jobs unhindered, but in the time between, the beds pressed against each other.

After his skirmish with the door, Connor had taken Sarah’s sermon on his idiocy as she cleaned and stitched the holes in his leg and shoulder. Granted, he’d been almost passed out with fatigue and the painkillers pumped into his body at the time, but he’d gotten the gist of the lecture.

Do not rugby tackle unlocked doors when injured.

Or ever.

Just use the goddamn handle, you moron.

It had been a blessing and a relief to climb into his bed when Joanna and Maryanne rolled it into place beside Jenna's. They'd fussed, tucking him in so he could rest the back of his hand against Jenna's bandaged one while he slept. For the first time in a week, he'd slept properly, content with her proximity, knowing she was safe.

Now, while his injuries were recovering well, Jenna's were progressing more slowly. Connor had been caught more than once with his face in her charts, much to Maryanne's displeasure, and he made sure he knew each and every wound she'd sustained at Sire's hands.

Reading it hurt. Gouged at the tender spots beneath his professional exterior as his eyes scanned examination reports, studied x-rays and scans. His medical brain processed it all, concluded the patient was abnormally fortunate to survive her ordeal as well as the cold.

Connor's normal brain couldn't reconcile the image of her ruined body with the clinical medical jargon. For all intents and purposes, Jenna had been dead before Sire dragged her limp form down the porch steps.

His hands fisted in the sheets. She was alive, he reminded himself. She was right next to him, and the regular beep of the machines were telling him her heart still beat and her lungs continued to breathe oxygen into her veins. He'd heard her voice and seen her move. She was *alive*.

Yet the panic attack hit him square in the chest.

It was the most sickening of sensations, one he'd never truly experienced. He'd coached Jenna through her own—if this was what she went through, then his coaching hadn't done a damn thing, and Jenna was far, far stronger than he'd given her credit for.

A fist of tension gathered under his sternum, stealing his breath and his sensibilities. Nausea followed swiftly until he didn't know whether to vomit or gasp for air. He couldn't stop it, divert it, dispel it.

It consumed him.

"C-Connor." Jenna's sleep-riddled voice cut through the buzzing in his ears as he groaned. "D-Daddy, it's okay."

She'd nearly slipped through his fingers. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Emotions swirled into one indistinguishable riot, a terrible mess of confusion and terror. A howl of violent grief shredded him from the inside out, summoned by his deepest, darkest fears.

Twisting in the sheets, he rolled and tried to set his feet down on the floor, but his legs tangled in the covers and he went down to his knees, bent

over with his forehead pressed to the tiles, desperately sucking in air he couldn't get past the obstruction in his chest.

"Connor!" Jenna's breathy voice strengthened, lost the sleepy edge. "Connor, you need to listen to me."

He'd said that so many times to her in the past. Had willed her to set the panic aside and focus on his voice, his touch, and center herself with him. As his fingers dug into the cold tiles, he fought to follow *her* voice.

They'd been through so much since the beginning. Every tear, every haunted look and comforting touch. Her trust in him from the start had astounded him, and he didn't know where she'd found the courage to set her faith in him the way she had.

Was it any wonder he'd fallen for her so quickly?

"Sarah, help him. Please help him."

"Well, shit. Jenna, I love you but if you try get out of that bed, there's going to be hell to pay, I swear." Hands gripped his shoulders, one tighter than the other, and eased him down onto his side. "Connor, can you hear me?"

Blindly, he grabbed for the first thing he could reach and held on. Jenna's voice urged his manic brain to settle; his fingers around Sarah's slim ankle under her scrubs gave his overwhelmed body a chance to breathe.

"Christ," he wheezed.

Sarah pried his fingers from her leg so she could kneel beside him, offered her hand instead. She brushed her hand over his hair and shook her head. "Want me to get the oxygen?"

Hell, he could use a hit of it to reflate his burning lungs, but as the last of the panic ebbed away, he felt stupid enough without using a crutch to lean on. "No. No, I'm good."

"Sarah?" Jenna asked tremulously.

"He's okay, sweetheart. Just let him catch his breath and I'll have him back in bed in a few minutes." Sarah held him down when he struggled to get up. "I mean it, buster. Catch your breath or it's the oxygen mask and a sedative. That was one hell of an anxiety attack. We heard you howl from the nurses' station."

"You heard me *what*?"

"Howl. Like a wolf. If said wolf had a noose around its neck and its leg trapped in a snare. Eerieest damn noise I've ever heard." Her fingers tipped

his face back so she could peer into his eyes before they slid down to his pulse. “I think you freaked out most of the patients on the ward.”

“Shit.”

“It’s fine. I’m sure they’ve heard worse.”

Connor let himself relax, releasing the last of the attack on a deep breath. It didn’t last long—tension turned his muscles to stone when a masculine cough shattered his tentative tranquility and a pair of black leather loafers stopped at the threshold to the room.

“Would you like some assistance, Doctor O’Malley?”

Aaron fucking Abernathy. Just the person Connor wanted to see when he was at his lowest point, collapsed on the floor and still perspiring the sweat of the tormented. He groaned softly and wondered how to avoid the mortification of hauling himself back into bed in front of this particular man.

Rabid guard dog that she was, Sarah was on her feet in an instant, ranging over Connor while angling herself to defend Jenna. “Mr. Abernathy. You’re not welcome here.”

“I know,” Aaron responded gravely. “I’m sorry for intruding. I...I’ve been down the hall in the waiting area for several days now and when I heard that sound...I assumed something terrible had happened to Pene—to Jenna. Only a man in extreme pain can summon the voice to expel it.”

Curious, Connor tilted his head where it rested so he could see the man’s face. Genuine emotion, he noted. Honest concern. Was there hope yet for a reunion? If not between Jenna and both her parents, between Jenna and her father? “Why are you still here?”

“We all are. I’ve been waiting for an opportunity to come alone, to apologize profusely for the way things went last week. For everything we’ve done to hinder Jenna’s progress since we learned she was alive. There is no excuse. Ilene and I have five beautiful children and we adore each one. But Jenna...” The older man’s gaze lifted to pin his daughter. “But you, my sweet girl, you were the perfection we strived to create. Losing you ripped us apart, the whole family. Where we should have come together, we fell apart. It’s taken months to rebuild the family into a semblance of what it was before you were taken, and even now there’s a huge hole in the middle of us.

“Stupidly, we believed if you came home with us, that hole would be filled and everything would go back to the normalcy we’ve yearned for. We

didn't take into consideration how much your ordeal would shape you, or that you'd make a life for yourself that didn't include us. It just seemed imperative that you come back to us, make us whole again, no matter the cost."

Well, fuck. Some of Connor's intense hatred toward Jenna's father broke off and wobbled away. After what Aaron had done, Connor didn't want to feel sympathetic toward him. He'd destroyed any chance she'd had at a beautiful, welcoming reunion with her family—the kind of welcome Connor wished for her—because he'd been so focused on keeping that family together, using Jenna as the cement to patch the cracks.

"The cost was far too high."

Grunting softly, Connor managed to prop himself into a sitting position. His shoulder and knees throbbed but he couldn't sense the warm trickle of blood anywhere, so he figured he was safe from the majority of Sarah's wrath. "So what the fuck is your problem with me?"

Aaron sighed wearily. "Isn't it obvious?"

"Not to me."

"You've been there for Jenna from the very beginning. You were her first contact with civilization after her escape, the man she trusted and depended on. You provided her with health care, food, shelter, social skills. You are everything we weren't when she needed it most." It was said almost bitterly, but without a cruel edge. "Then, quite evidently, you became more. I still love my wife despite our difficulties, Doctor. I recognize a man in love, and Jenna is the spitting image of her mother when Ilene first fell for me."

"So, you hate me because Jenna loves me, and I love her?" Connor summarized slowly. His brain couldn't comprehend the logic of that, but it wasn't his logic to deal with. "Do you know how ridiculous that is?"

"There are unscrupulous people in this world. How did we know you weren't taking advantage of a young woman, physically and emotionally abused, for a story to sell to the tabloids? To gain access to the family money, claim a reward? We didn't know who you were."

"Didn't bloody ask, did you?" Connor spat as the anger rose and gave him enough energy to clamber clumsily to his feet—with assistance from an uncharacteristically quiet Sarah. "You didn't ask, you didn't make an effort to know. You judged me without setting eyes on me, speaking to me."

“We were told not to approach your residence or make contact,” Aaron pointed out, stepping forward when Connor swayed. “My thoughts ran along the lines of you needed more time to finalize your seduction, ensure Jenna was tied to you completely.”

“Hadley told you not to contact Jenna until she was ready. A couple days, that was all we asked for. Instead, you slapped her with a mental health court order and were obviously prepared to let her spend her life as a prisoner in the psych unit.” Connor’s fists clenched, ready to swing.

Sarah set her hand over his. “Don’t turn this into an argument, Connor. He’s raised some valid points. Let him finish and clear the air.”

It would take a hell of a lot more than a spritz of apology to clear the air of the bullshit, Connor thought with a silent sneer. The actions of the family weighed heavily on the *fuck off and don’t come crawling back* side of the scales in his opinion, but it wasn’t something he could say for Jenna.

His little girl deserved to have her own voice heard.

“Connor.”

He shuffled carefully until Jenna came into view. Her beautiful green eyes were wide open, direct on his, with an awareness that startled him. Her spark outshone the bruises, the scars. “Baby.”

The smile she gave him could have coerced him into forgiving anyone without a whimper of protest. “You came back from the abyss.”

“So did you.” There were too many steps to walk to go around to her side, so Connor climbed back onto his bed, Aaron Abernathy forgotten in an instant. “I thought you were dead, Jenna. I honestly thought I was too late.”

“I wasn’t scared.” Her hand rose from the bed an inch, wavered in mid-air long enough for Connor to slide his under it. With a content sigh, she rested the bandaged lump in his palm. “The last thing I remember was the fire growing cold, and then I did. I just...drifted away on the quiet.”

He dropped his forehead to the back of her hand, throat tightening at the image of her sliding into death, cold and alone and shattered. “I swear I tried to find you, baby. Without Luna, I’d’ve cut down every fucking tree in that forest to find you.”

“Luna.” Jenna’s face became radiant at the mention of her dog, despite the perishing bruises. She looked around as though the faithful bitch might pop her head up from under the bed. “Where is she?”

“Living the high life with Sarah and her family while we’re recuperating. She loves the kids and I think Zeke might be spoiling her.”

Sarah cleared her throat softly. “That would be me, actually.”

The smallest, sweetest laugh hiccupped from Jenna’s chest, easing into a low moan. “The gang’s all here. Just like in the beginning.”

“Things are a bit different,” Connor mused, “but yes, we three are right back where we started. With a few very important changes implemented.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

God, he wanted to kiss her until time ran out. Erase the next six months of healing and discomfort so she could go back to living. Not as a number in constant fear for her life, but fully, freely, as a woman with a troubled past and a bright, hopeful future. “Like, I love you. Like, I can’t live without you.” He kissed the bandages covering her wrists. “Like, I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“Like, for real?”

He laughed. A *for real* sound of happiness that had eluded him for days. She brought sunshine and rainbows into his life, and he could never replace or replicate what she offered him every time she pinned him with those lush green eyes or blinded him with the beam of her smile on full. “For real, Jenna. We survived what could have been a tragedy, and I don’t see any reason to waste the time we have together. I can’t be me without you. I don’t want to be anything without you.”

She sucked a hard breath in through her nose as tears filled her eyes. They flashed to Sarah, then back to Connor. “Take these off. Take the bandages off.”

“It’s not time,” Connor argued. “The surgeon wants them covered for a little while longer, baby. Soon, I promise.”

“Now,” she insisted. “I want to hold your hand when you ask me.”

Fuck it. This was the biggest moment of his existence at the most inopportune time, but he couldn’t care less. His woman wanted to hold his hand, skin to skin, while he set the course of their lives spiraling off into a completely new direction, then so be it. “Sarah, can you please get some sterile hand gel and some fresh bandages?”

Wide-eyed, she glanced at the door as though the police were about to storm the room with smoke grenades and laser-sight rifles. “You’re going to do it?”

Connor grinned, understanding she wasn't referring to Jenna's hands. "The gang's all here, Sarah," he repeated Jenna's earlier words. "It's right. The three of us have been a unit since that first night, the night Jenna's life changed for the better." Damn it, he needed to feel Jenna's skin against his as much as she did. "We're heading into a fresh start now. Seems poetic we start it with the three people who made it possible to begin with."

His best friend, the woman who'd stood by his side for years and given him hope in the darkest times with Jenna, sniffled helplessly. "Damn you, you sappy bastard. Okay, okay. I'll get what you need, but there's a loose end Jenna needs to tie up first." She tilted her head toward Aaron as she wiped her cheeks dry, hurrying out of the room.

Connor met the older man's eyes, read the emotion in them, and realized this would never be over in its entirety until Jenna chose the ending to the chapter. "Five minutes. That's all you get tonight."

"Thank you. I...you're a good man, Doctor O'Malley. You'll be good for her. We didn't appreciate that before."

Connor nodded once, sharply, then slipped his hand from under Jenna's. "I love you, Jenna. I'll be right outside if you need me."

Her lips trembled. "Okay."

Flat on her back in a hospital bed was never the way she'd wanted to see her parents again. In her mind, her mother was on verge of being erased, but her father...she loved her father. He'd been her rock, her line in the sand when it came to rules and discipline, and her safe place when the monsters crawled from the closet.

It was clear Connor harbored anger toward him, and her mother. Jenna couldn't blame him; part of her hated her family for what they'd done, tearing her away from Connor and the life she loved after so long in captivity waiting to die.

"I'm not ready to talk about the future," she told Aaron slowly. "Not one that involves you and Mamma. I'm sorry for what you went through. I am. But what you did caused untold harm. I need time to learn how to forgive you for that."

"I don't expect forgiveness, Penelope." Aaron winced and pressed his hands to his face. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, it's hard to think of you as anything but Penelope. Half my life is full of memories of you, and you're my shining Penny in all of them." His hands dropped. "We acted rashly, Jenna.

Selfishly. Trying to save ourselves while sacrificing the one piece of us we couldn't survive without. I'm sorry for it."

Well, he got an A for sincerity. "I know, Papa. I know it even if Connor doesn't want to see it. He will, one day. He's angry and I don't blame him for that. I'm angry too, but I've missed you so I'm not going to shout and rage about what's done."

"Always did have a soft heart. I understand we have to earn a place back in your life, Jenna. All I'm asking for is the chance to do so. Losing you a second time would pull the family apart."

"That can't be my responsibility, Papa. You're asking for a chance; I'm asking you for the time you should have given me before. I want to build a life with the man who saved me. Who loves me enough to take bullets for me. Give that to me, give me that opportunity to work on this life, before you charge in and set my world upside down again." She sighed quietly. "I love Connor. He loves me. This is what I need, Papa. He's all I need."

Aaron closed his eyes and nodded quickly. "I can do that if you're sure it's what you want. I never meant to cause discord, Jenna. I just wanted my Penny back." His shoulders slumped, and she wondered if it finally dawned on him that his little shiny Penny had tarnished in the muck of her ordeal. "I'd like to...can I kiss you goodbye, Jenna?"

She hesitated, hating the vulnerable position she was in and how he'd crowd her personal space. It wasn't possible, not now. The wounds were too raw, physically and mentally. "I'm sorry. I can't...not today."

"I understand. I...I'll give you some breathing room. I love you," he murmured before abruptly turning on his heels and making a hasty exit.

Worn down to the bone, Jenna watched him go and, horribly, felt nothing but relief. A good indication she wasn't ready to tackle the minefield of her family just yet. Her body started to sing its usual aria of discomfort as she sank deeper into the mattress. A precursor to the swift onset of pain if not treated promptly.

But she hated the drugs, despised the way they stole her away for hours and hours at a time. So many minutes ticking away while she slept, oblivious to everything around her.

Connor stepped back into the room, smiled as his eyes roamed over her. He hobbled forward, swung himself onto his bed with an odd grunt, then just laid back and covered her hand with his. "You okay, baby?"

"Yeah. Yeah, it's all settled, for now."

“Good. That’s good.” He patted her hand gently. “Sarah’s persuading Maryanne to slip us some new dressings.” A yawn contorted his face. “Shit, no one ever tells you how exhausting recovering can be.”

She snuffled softly in reply, unable to form actual words. It didn’t matter. Her white knight rested beside her, her world was set to rights—or as right as they’d ever be—and she was happy.

She wouldn’t change a thing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

March 15th the following year...

Connor paced the yard, glancing at the sky and tugging at his jacket. Though the sun shone with all the hope of spring, he knew how quickly the weather could turn. Winter's influence hadn't completely vanished, and it had been a long, hard season this time around.

The snowstorm at the heart of Jenna's ordeal—nearly four months ago now—had been only the beginning of a winter riddled with unfathomably low temperatures, deplorable precipitation, and so many flu cases Connor thought the epidemic would never end.

Now he walked over green grass a little too long, wearing a path in the damn stuff, thankful for every vibrant blade beneath his feet. Four months ago, things could have been very different.

He and Jenna could have been under the lush green carpet instead of standing on it. They'd come far too close to kissing this mortal plane goodbye.

"Stop worrying, Connor. Everything will be fine." Zeke stepped up beside him, looking relaxed and self-assured as, like Connor, he took the time to survey the small gathering in the yard. "This is nice. Jenna's been cooped up for too long during her recovery, this will brighten her day."

It was nice, Connor supposed. His nerves jittered as he wondered whether it was nice enough. He'd asked only a handful of people to join them today, the anniversary of the day Jenna's life had turned upside down in the parking lot of a mall when Sire—otherwise known as Iverson Wyatt Ford, formerly of the Billings PD—for a small, intimate party to celebrate her life, her rebirth.

"Everything's in place, right?" he demanded of his friend.

Zeke's hand crashed down on his shoulder like a thunderclap, sound included. "Yes, everything is just as you asked. Sarah's on scheduling, so the timetable will run smoothly if she has to spank it into submission."

"Okay. Okay, it just needs to be perfect. I want everything to be perfect for her." It was his life's mission to make hers a shining beacon of perfection in a world where darkness and despair had prevailed for so long. "She's worked so hard to come back from her injuries, Zeke. It *needs* to be —"

"Perfect," Zeke finished gently. "Relax, Connor. We've got this."

Connor clasped his hands together, barely stopping himself from wringing them nervously. His gaze darted around the most amazing group of people he'd ever met—Zeke and Sarah were present, of course, although Sarah had flitted off with Cain an hour earlier, and Maryanne had brought her husband, Axel.

Caleb had returned from his enforced *vacation* just before Christmas but had steadfastly avoided any communication from either of his brothers. He'd lost his job as sheriff of Howler Creek, and according to Connor's sources, spent his days isolated away from human company at a ramshackle old farm he'd bought and was renovating by himself.

Connor hadn't sent him an invitation to the party.

Hadley, however, had been sent one. The special agent had been discharged from hospital in early February after complications from his gunshot wound caused a hemopneumothorax. Several surgeries later, almost as many as Jenna, Hadley was finally recuperating in a swanky hotel room in Helena, with his little Delilah by his side.

The sliding door into the house opened and Sarah hurried out, wiping her eyes cautiously with a finger. She paused, puffed out a breath and fluffed her dark hair carefully before plastering a casual, albeit smug, smile on her face as she walked across to her husband.

She wore a sheath dress that fell demurely to just above her knees, in a shade of blue so dark it would've been black if the sunlight didn't catch it just right and set the silver threads woven through the fabric to shining brighter than the stars in a night sky.

Zeke's arm curled around her shoulders protectively. "Warm enough?"

The smile blossomed into a grin. "Oh yes."

Connor's guts twisted as Cain stepped from the house, pausing to hold his hand out for the slim young woman moving slowly, carefully, into the

light.

God, was there anything more beautiful than his dream in sunlight?

Dressed in cream pants and a pale pink cardigan buttoned up to her chin, Jenna wobbled as she made the step into the yard. Connor moved forward, was stopped by Zeke's hand, and he let his brother steady his woman.

Her hair wasn't yet level with her chin, but it was clean and straight, glossy with vitality and strength. Her eyes searched the yard, a smile curving her lips shyly when she saw Maryanne and Axel. But her entire face changed when she set that happy gaze on him—she came alive.

"Are you ready?" Zeke murmured.

"God yes." He could hardly breathe for the wonder of her.

His friends moved away, and a few moments later, LP's *Muddy Waters* began to play. He waited and caught the instant Jenna recognized the initial bars of music. His nerves evaporated as she smiled so brightly, she put the sun to shame.

Cain remained by her side as she tried to walk faster, one hand on her elbow, the other on the small of her back. His brother's wicked eyebrow wiggle made Connor chuckle.

Two months of planning had come down to this.

"Daddy," Jenna murmured, reaching for him with unsteady hands.

He grasped them, running his thumbs over the damaged skin before lifting them to his lips and kissing each one. They would never be the same, those delicate appendages. Between Sire's torture and the cold, Jenna lost almost forty percent of function despite the surgeon's best efforts. She'd been lucky to keep her fingers. "Baby, you look...stunning."

She blushed, biting her lip coyly. "No, I don't. I'm just me."

Just me. After everything, she still didn't realize she was his entire universe wrapped in an amazing woman. The one person he couldn't survive without, the only woman he ever wanted to spend his life with. Well, maybe he could open her eyes.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Maryanne and Axel come closer, join the circle of family around Jenna's back. These people had defended her, loved her, cared for her when the shit hit the fan and chaos erupted. They'd held her while she cried in a hospital bed after her surgeries, fed her by hand when she refused to eat. Sat with her when he was dealing with his

own health, made her laugh, talked with her for hours until the black dog stalking her heels skulked away with its tail between its legs.

The important people were here, all aside from Hadley.

Connor dropped to his knees in front of Jenna, her hands still in his, and repeated the words he'd said to her all those weeks ago in the hospital. With a little addition, here and there. There was always room for improvement, after all.

"Jenna, I did this once when there was only you and me in a hospital room, numb from pain and stressed from everything we had thrown at us. I want to do it again. I want to do it right." He looked up at her, alarmed at the tears rolling down her face—she hadn't cried the first time. "You don't belong in the dark, baby. You deserve the light, and you were kept from it for too long."

Jenna's knees buckled as she tried to join him on the ground, but Connor switched his grip from her hands to her waist and held her firm. "My dream is us. You and me, for however long we have on this earth. I can't stop loving you anymore than I could have stopped myself falling *in* love with you. This is it for me—you're it for me. I know what you've lost, what you've given up to be with me. Family, friends, the life you had before your world went to hell.

"I want to give it all back to you. Family who loves you no matter what. Friends who'll stand at your back and protect you if I can't. A life full of love and strength and devotion. Children with your hair and your eyes and the laugh that lifts my soul up on the gloomiest days," he said quietly, resting his forehead against her belly. "I want it all with you, right down to the goddamn dog that keeps attacking the toilet rolls."

Jenna laughed then, watery and weeping, but filled with light. Her broken, beautiful hands rested on his head, her fingers twitching as they flexed to run through his hair. "It's only because she loves you."

Shit. If he didn't continue, he was going to drag her onto the floor and have his way with her. The touch of her hands sent tingles down his spine—it had been too damn long since he'd tasted her, touched her the way a man in love should worship his woman. "There are scars that won't ever go away and wounds that won't heal properly in our lifetime, but I'll carry them with you, baby. Between the both of us, we can carry that burden and turn it into something you can be proud of in the years to come.

“My life is yours, if you’ll share it with me. Everything I am is yours, Jenna. It has been for...hell, it seems like forever. That’s what I want with you, baby.” He blew out a long, slow breath and asked the question he’d waited four months to ask her again. “Will you marry me, Jenna?”

Cain stepped forward, helping Jenna down to her knees as she dropped. Her hesitation in using her hands for balance wasn’t new, and she still had pain from the ribcage and punctured lung Sire had left her with. But she battled through it with the innate strength he’d come to admire and settled herself in front of him, mindless of grass stains on her pretty pants.

“Big Jenna or little Jenna?” she asked quietly.

“My Jenna. Big or little, I need you both.”

Her tongue darted out, lapped nervously at her lower lip. “Forever?”

Cupping her jaw where it had fractured, Connor used his free hand to brush the hair away from her head where fresh pink skin marked one of her battle wounds. “Forever, baby. Until the stars burn out and the world stops spinning.”

“Yes.” More tears spilled when she nodded. “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

“Big Jenna *and* little Jenna?” he teased.

“Both of us. Both of us love you so much.”

Kissing her was the easiest, most natural thing to do. Kissing her was coming home to a roaring fire and warmed slippers before the heat level exploded and exposed them to passion beyond the physical.

Her mouth moved tentatively under his and he was catapulted back to that first kiss. The very first. Soft and sweet, the beginning of his obsession with her.

When he drew away, her eyes were heavy, the green smoked over with desire. If not for their already delighted audience, he’d have scooped Jenna up and carted her inside to their bedroom. To their bed. But there were things still to do, vital things he couldn’t let the day pass without finishing.

Connor whistled.

From the bushes at the end of the yard, Luna bounded. Every inch a puppy in a grown dog’s body, she wiggled and quivered as she ran toward the couple kneeling on the ground, much to Connor’s amusement. She licked and danced, bouncing around them until Connor laughingly ordered her to sit, then she obeyed eagerly, tail brushing over the grass in her excitement.

Sunlight glinted off her collar.

Hands sure and steady, Connor untied the ribbon keeping the rings safely attached to the dog. He'd given thought to letting Luna carry them in her mouth but hadn't put it past her to eat them instead of delivering them.

The engagement ring was part of a set he'd had modified. The silver band wasn't the thickest. The three emeralds weren't the biggest. But when Jenna all but melted over it, it made him feel like a god among men. He twisted it in his fingers, showed her the inscription running along the inside curve.

Daddy's little girl.

"This is mine?" Heart in her eyes, she looked ethereal.

"It's yours if you want it, Jenna. If you don't like it—"

She shot her hand out with a delighted smile. "I love it. I love it."

He grasped her carefully, running the pad of his thumb over her swollen knuckles. He stroked a finger along her ring finger, then popped open the band of the ring. A clasp ring had seemed the smartest way to find a ring to fit, and he was pleased with his decision—if her fingers swelled, he could unclasp her rings without causing her pain or injury.

"This is my promise to you," he murmured, sliding the ring down over the top of her finger and clicking it into place. "I promise to wake up every morning and say your name like a prayer. To go to bed every night with you on my mind. To love you to the depths of insanity."

Her lip trembled as she angled her hand, with his help, so she could study the symbol of their future.

"Jenna, will you marry me now?"

The love of his life blinked slowly. "Now? As in, *now*?"

Connor showed her the second ring, the matching wedding band to the one already on her finger. A wider band, bigger emeralds, and another line etched into the precious metal.

My Jenna.

"I didn't invite your family. I let your father know, asked for his blessing, but I didn't invite them. There's still too much unresolved, and this...I wanted this for us." He worried the ring in his fingers as he spoke. "Waiting to make you mine, for you to have my name, is killing me, Jenna."

Her eyes flashed. "Then make me yours, Connor. Now."

Every piece of the puzzle that was his life fell into place. Laughing, he surged to his feet, reaching down to lift her up. He kissed her soundly,

plundering her mouth for the last time before she officially became Mrs. Jenna O'Malley. "You're sure?"

"Why would I say no to the one person I only ever want to say yes to?"

She'd never imagined she'd get married on a spring day in the yard of a house she'd come to love. Binding herself to the man she cherished above all others while wearing cream pants with grass stains on the knees hadn't been part of the dream either, but when she thought of his proposal—Connor's beautifully remastered proposal—she didn't care about grass stains or white dresses or stained glass windows.

This was right, just how she wanted it to be. And the day...

Three years ago on this date, she'd been torn from a privileged existence. Abducted by a sadistic psychopath, and her entire understanding of the world altered irrevocably. Beaten, tortured, trained to become nothing more than a number with no voice, no opinion, no hope of survival.

She had survived against all odds, twice.

Three years. So much turmoil, so much change, in that period of time. She'd grown as a person, as a woman. Would continue to grow, to *flourish*, with Connor by her side. Wasn't that amazing? To have a man like Connor, her white knight, her fierce warrior, standing beside her for the rest of their lives?

Jenna looked down at herself. Pictured every scar, every disfiguring mark left in her flesh by a madman. Each one carried a separate pain memory, so clear she remembered them all individually. Sometimes she cried when nobody could hear her, mourning the devastation of her hands. They would never be the same, even if she worked at the physical therapy every day.

Connor saw those scars, knew those wounds intimately, and couldn't care less. He tended to her hands when they were so distended the pain blinded her. He didn't shy away from her touch or give her hard looks of disgust when her unattractive fingers stroked his face.

Marrying a man who didn't dismiss her flaws but simply accepted them as part of her was the unattainable dream. Becoming a unit with a man who never treated her like a cripple let her feel like an honest-to-God normal woman.

If he asked her to walk to the moon and bring back blue cheese, Jenna could never say no. She would do anything he asked, knowing he would do

the same for her.

"I...don't we need a priest?" she asked stupidly, coming back to herself as her thoughts continued to parade around her mind.

"Everything's been taken care of," Zeke informed her. "Connor's seen to everything. You have a marriage license, the blood test has been waived, and I've been drafted as your officiant. Witnesses are present, and the best man should have the groom's rings."

Cain's grin resembled the Cheshire cat's trademark smile. "Congratulations, sunshine."

"Are we ready?" Zeke asked.

Connor held out his hand in silent question; Jenna slipped hers into it. "I think I've been ready for years. I just had to find my girl."

"Awwwww."

Jenna found Sarah standing next to her mountain of a husband, and the joy on her friend's face mirrored what she felt inside. If she'd had any doubts about taking this next step, Sarah's infectious happiness would have scrubbed them off the board.

"Okay then, just remember I'm not an actual priest and this is my first ceremony." Zeke winked at Jenna. "Friends, we gather here today to celebrate the union of two special people. Connor Jameson O'Malley and Penelope Violet Abernathy."

Jenna winced. She hated that name but as she hadn't had chance to legally change her name to Jenna, she was stuck with it for now. But not for much longer. Once she took Connor's surname, she would take the plunge and make sure her full name reflected the woman she was.

"Connor, do you take this woman to be your wife?"

"I do." Connor kissed her temple. "I absolutely do."

"Jenna, do you take Connor to be your husband?"

"I do." She closed her eyes and sighed contentedly as a wave of security washed over her. "I absolutely do."

"Well then, by the powers vested in me by the state of Montana, I now pronounce you man and wife. It's been a short and sweet ceremony, so you can now kiss the bride."

"Zeke, you were supposed to let them say vows," Sarah pointed out.

"Honey, if we let Connor say vows, he'll wax poetic until dawn."

"Damn straight." Connor turned to her and she saw his heart in his eyes, hoped he saw hers in the same place because although her mind was filled

to bursting with equally poetic sentiments, emotion choked her into silence. “Jenna, my wife. I like the sound of that.”

“Dude, you forgot the rings.” Cain balanced Connor’s on the tip of his finger. “Zeke, man, I love you but you suck at officiating. They *are* married, right? You haven’t forgotten to include anything really important in that speech of yours?”

She couldn’t help it. Jenna laughed, a sweet giggle bubbling up until it became a delighted peal. “Rings or not, my husband should be kissing me right now,” she said breathlessly.

“Yes, he should.” Connor lifted her, cradled her. Her legs wrapped around his waist, her arms looped around his neck, then their lips touched, and the universe faded to black.

All she’d ever need was him.

She let him sweep her away, carry her from the yard to a chorus of whistles and applause as her mouth explored on its own. Along his jaw, the soft prickle of his stubble. Down his neck, up to his ear. Her hands might be useless, but her lips and tongue were not. “It’s rude to leave so early.”

“Don’t care. If I don’t get inside you in the next minute, I won’t be responsible for what happens.”

The chill of the outdoors turned into warmth as he carried her through the dining room and up the stairs. Unable to tug at his clothes and paw at the firm flesh beneath, Jenna wiggled in his arms.

“Two seconds, two seconds,” he chanted, then shoved through the bedroom door and laid her out on the bed. Her shoes and pants were gone in an instant, Connor dropping to his knees and yanking her panties off with a sharp tug of material.

Her head snapped back at the long, slow lick between her thighs. His name escaped on a throaty moan while adrenaline screamed in her blood. Hips arching, she welcomed him deeper, gasping as his wicked tongue went to work. “Connor, please.”

No matter what she did, how she begged, he remained focused on his task. Teeth nipped, his tongue became more effective than a magic wand. He ate at her until her legs were weak with the shakes and her orgasm shimmered over her like gold dust, seeping into taut muscles and relaxing her into a heap of malleable flesh.

She watched him undress—or more accurately rip at his clothing until the black jacket and white shirt fluttered to the carpet in an explosion of

buttons. God, he was built like a warrior. His own PT schedule and recovery had whittled his weight down until he was honed, toned and fit.

“I can’t believe you’re mine.” Connor stared at her as he kicked off his boots and shoved his pants down to his ankles before stepping out of them.

Every move he made was that of a predator, yet when he helped her remove her clothing, he couldn’t have been gentler as he eased the garments over her head and traced her scars. “My beautiful, amazing wife. If I ever figure out what I’ve done to deserve you, I’ll thank every star in the sky.”

“Please,” she said again, widening her legs to invite him in.

“Wedding nights should be slow and passionate,” he told her with a smile, his hand circling his cock and stroking it from root to tip. “Maybe we’ll save *slow* for later.”

No arguments here. Jenna reached out to him, groaning low in her throat when his weight eased on top of her, his mouth seeking the sweet spot on her neck that drove her insane. “I just need you, Connor. I don’t care how.”

“So trusting, baby.” He nuzzled at her, a wolf marking his mate.

The heated crown of his cock nudged against her, found her entrance without any guidance from his hand or hers. They moaned in unison, breath mingling as he surged forward, hips pushing his length into her in a smooth thrust that struck every nerve in her sensitive pussy.

“God, I’ve missed you.” Fully seated, Connor touched his forehead to hers as she whimpered and moaned. “You’re my girl, Jenna. My woman and my baby girl. My wife.” He chuckled, flexing his hips to elicit a rapturous gasp from her. “My *wife*.”

The wonder in his voice matched hers. She belonged to him, just as he belonged to her. They were bound by law and body, literally, and Jenna couldn’t begin to decipher the maelstrom of emotions that knowledge brought forth—safety, comfort, love, devotion.

“Don’t be gentle,” she panted, bucking under him. “I’m not fragile, Connor. My husband should be able to love his wife without worrying he’s hurting her.”

Gray eyes almost black, Connor leaned back to study her face intently. She felt the heat of a blush rise under his scrutiny. There was naked and then there was *naked*. “I don’t know, baby. It’s too soon.”

“It’s not. I can take it.”

She sucked in a breath as he withdrew, nearly yelped when he thrust inside her, harder and deeper than before. The clap of flesh on flesh echoed

raw in the room, keeping up with her heart, beat for excited beat. Her hands automatically lifted to hook over his shoulders. She wanted to dig her nails into his back, feel the muscles bunch and strain, urge him to go faster, take her harder. Make her his in her entirety.

Instead they slipped back to the mattress, useless, weak.

She cried out in frustration.

“Oh baby. It’s okay. It’s okay.” Breathing hard, Connor slipped his arms beneath her and rolled them until she sprawled on top of him, sweaty and breathless. “Straddle my hips, Jenna. That’s it. I’ve got you.”

Frustration switched to embarrassment as he smiled up at her, his hands helping her sit upright on his cock. Her weight inched him deeper until her belly rippled with the beginnings of an orgasm. “Oh God.”

“Daddy takes care of his little girl,” Connor crooned softly, taking her hands in his and pressing them to his chest so her nails bit into the defined muscles. “Ride me, baby. Steady to start.”

No, she couldn’t move. No matter how wet she was, how close to climax, this position made him feel like a monster wedged inside her body. If she so much as clenched around him, she’d pop off like a rocket.

“Someone’s shy?” He tsked playfully and reached down to strum his thumb over her clit. “That’s okay, Jenna. Relax and trust me.”

Quivering, her mouth dropped open. He didn’t play fair. If he kept this up, she’d come. If she wriggled to avoid his touch, she’d come. He had her over a barrel, one way or the other.

“Baby steps,” he coaxed. And killed her with a flick of his nail over her sensitive bud.

The scream took her by surprise, her brain turning static as her hips jerked and inner muscles clamped down on his shaft with rhythmic squeezes. Her body danced to its own tune, chasing the orgasm as it took her down in a hit-and-run.

Connor’s hands stroked down her ribs to her hips, then around to grip the globes of her butt. He urged her to lift and fall, his cock spearing deep, sliding out to the wide crown. “Fuck, Jenna. Just like that, baby. Just like that.”

“I can’t. Daddy, I can’t.” Delirious with pleasure, she was sure she was dying. All the pretty lights and the way her heart pumped blood through her veins at lightning speed had to be indicative of the heavens calling. “It’s too much!”

They rolled again and she stared into an angel's eyes as his arms pushed her legs higher, wider. She orgasmed viciously, tightening around the throbbing length in her core, moaning in delight when Connor growled her name and filled her with heat.

"I think it's safe to say we've consummated the marriage," Connor said wryly once he caught his breath. He kissed and nuzzled at her throat gently, teasing her oversensitive skin with each brush of his stubble and lips. "All mine now, baby."

Her lips curved slowly. "I've always been yours."

"I think you have. I think you were always meant to come here, to find me. I *know* I was put here to love you." His mouth covered hers, stealing her breath again. "I can't thank God enough for sending you to me."

He was such a softie. They were squashed together deliciously, still joined by Connor's flagging erection and copious amounts of sweat and fluids after sex hot enough to reawaken every ache in her body, and her husband offered thanks for all the heartbreak and pain she'd put him through in the last six months.

Softie.

Whatever hand of fate had intervened in her life to send her to this man needed a standing ovation. Gritting her teeth, Jenna lifted her hand to his shoulder and bore down, forcing her fingers to do something, anything. Was it so impossible to ask them to move normally, to let her stroke his skin, trail over his muscles?

But he was here, wasn't he? She might not be able to cuddle and stroke the way she wished, but they were *together*. They were man and wife, and she got to spend every day of her life with him until her heart stopped beating.

She had everything she'd ever wanted.

"When I stumbled into the bar," she said quietly, "I was so scared. Faces everywhere, strangers and wolves. Among them all was you. One serene face in the sea of animosity. Then you stood up for me, you protected me, and that was it. You became the one I could trust, the one person in my pitiful, solitary existence who didn't want me dead or naked or begging. Even when we were here and I had panic attacks, you never gave up on me." Her voice cracked. "You've been my one since the night we met, Connor."

"Baby, that won't ever change."

“I love you so much.” She threw her all into the words; heart, body, soul. She didn’t have his way with poetry, the beauty of the spoken word, but she needed him to understand. “I’m nothing without you.”

“Bullshit. You were a strong, brave woman without me, Jenna. The man doesn’t make a woman—she makes him. Fuck going back downstairs,” he decided. “It’s our wedding day. I’m going to show you just how much a woman defines her man.”

As he moved inside her again, showed her just exactly what he meant, the love he gave her without words left her speechless.

EPILOGUE

Deep in the woods, a small campfire burned, casting shadows over the man sitting in its warmth. Once a proud man, a man with dreams and ideas of changing the world for the better, he no longer held any of those pretty things in his hands.

A shadow of his former self, he had nothing left.

His mentor was dead. Perhaps not the greatest loss, and it certainly saved him the job of disposing of the arrogant prick, but Sire had been an influential element of his life for a long time. Two decades of tutoring and learning from the best in how to train, torture, brainwash and kill.

He flipped through the file in his hands. The life and chronicles of Iverson Ford, once one of Billings' finest police detectives and a man the police academy deemed one of their most successful instructors.

Everything had changed, first when Iverson took a bullet, and then he met Deborah. Post-recovery, the easy-going instructor had stopped meeting with his friends from work, spending more and more time at home. He'd turned down opportunities for training, lectures, and quickly lost his footing on the ladder rung to promotion.

His friends had never figured out whether it was the shooting or the woman who had changed Ford so completely. Whichever one it was, he hadn't become a better man.

It had gotten worse after they married.

The man in the firelight sneered at the papers in his grasp. Just his luck he'd been the one to answer the call the night the domestic disturbance was reported. Just his luck he'd been the one summoned to Ford's residence to witness the brutality and the sheer beauty of what Ford had reduced Debbie into.

He'd felt the draw of the lifestyle, seen the symmetry and gloriousness of how a true artist painted his canvas in shades of black and blue, purple and red. How rope could leave a woman's skin marked like a brand and the grip of a hand could sear her soul just as effectively.

His own selfish needs had been his downfall that night. That, and loyalty to a friend, a mentor. They'd struck a deal that cost him his soul and sealed his fate to follow in Ford's footsteps.

He'd let Sire go that night and taken his friend's place in Debbie's life as master and sadist. Reported the perpetrator as gone, cleared up the crime scene, and let Ford disappear into the ether to return as Sire.

Oh, the things he'd learned from Debbie. The hours he'd spent honing his newfound fascination with the human body, how it could be made to bend to his will, physically and mentally. A steep learning curve, yes, but so worth the sacrifice of everything he'd thought he once was.

He hadn't been born to be a cop, to change the world for the better.

No, his purpose was to re-educate the populace. Reset the balance back to how it should be—women at the feet of their men, obeying their master's commands, accepting their punishments with grace and in silence.

Twenty-Two had been damn near perfect, a testament to Sire's skill.

He wanted to kill her as slowly as he'd killed Debbie. The fucking slut had ruined everything, just as Debbie had shattered the idyllic bond of their relationship. Strangling Debbie, stringing her up, had been the defining moment of his transition—his point of no return.

Of course, without Sire stepping in to modify the coroner's report from murder to suicide and funding said coroner's early retirement, he would have been in the shit, but things had worked out well.

From that moment, he'd learned to work independently, selecting his own numbers, while also working with Sire as a team. Bouncing ideas off each other, growing their ideal. He hadn't enjoyed being drafted as Sire's body disposal unit, but it had benefitted him in the long run—body dumps in different states had given him a wider range of women to select from and had the additional advantage of throwing the FBI off their game.

His method of killing differed from Sire's. While his mentor left the sex to the very end, the punctuation to a number's demise, the protégé had a different view on the matter.

Numbers were not just for menial tasks. Cooking, cleaning, keeping house...they were the basics of what a number should be used for.

Sire took pleasure from the beatings, the floggings, the psychological pressure he dropped on his captives, which was understandable. He himself derived great satisfaction and physical pleasure from the crack of a whip on soft, unblemished skin. The cry of an unbroken number when flesh yielded to a strap had the power to make him cream his pants like a teenager.

But in his opinion, they were there for a reason. Three holes available with unfettered access? There was no reason *not* to exploit them. A number had no say, no voice, no opinion.

Iverson Ford might be dead and gone, but his teachings, his legacy lived on in his protégé, and his student was more than willing to carry the torch further, take it to new levels.

Everything the FBI had on Iverson Ford was in his hands. All data had been scrubbed from their systems, erased from human knowledge. They'd have to dig, and dig deep, to recover any shred of his existence once the file was gone.

Caleb tossed the papers into the flames.

The End

SPEECHLESS PLAYLIST:

LP – Muddy Waters*

Billie Eilish – Bad Guy Death Cab For Cutie – I Will Follow You Into The
Dark Lewis Capaldi – Hold Me While You Wait Lewis Capaldi – Someone
You Loved Miley Cyrus – Nothing Breaks Like A Heart Carina Round –
For Everything A Reason Marilyn Manson – Killing Strangers Alec
Benjamin – The Saddest Song Sia – Unstoppable
Calum Scott – No Matter What *Jenna's song

Other Works by Kay Elle Parker:

Hangman's Haunt Series:

Wild

Nocturnal

Eclipsed

Destined (novella)

Sanctuary (2020)

The Shadowcrown Duet:

King Of Shadows

Queen Of Shadows

Standalones:

Monsters & Guardians – banned by Amazon

Speechless