

A photograph of a rustic wooden cabin with a gabled roof, nestled in a snowy landscape. The cabin's windows and a small opening on the side are illuminated from within, casting a warm, orange glow. The sky above is a mix of deep blues, purples, and oranges, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. Silhouettes of evergreen trees are visible in the background.

KENDRA  
ELLIOT

A  
MERCIFUL  
PROMISE

## PRAISE FOR KENDRA ELLIOT

“Kendra Elliot goes from strength to strength in her Mercy Kilpatrick stories, and this fourth installment is a gripping, twisty, and complex narrative that will have fans rapt . . . Easily the most daring and successful book in this impressive series.”

—*RT Book Reviews on A Merciful Silence*

“Readers coming in cold to this thriller won’t have to worry about missing the series’ previous books: It reads just fine as a stand-alone plot, its wintry twists and turns paced adroitly and warmed up with a touch of romance.”

—*The Oregonian on A Merciful Secret*

“Elliot delivers a fast-paced, tense thriller that plays up the small-town atmosphere and survivalist mentality, contrasting it against an increasingly connected world. The romantic angle is subtle, with the established relationship between Mercy and Truman slowly and satisfyingly maturing as they solve the mystery.”

—*Publishers Weekly on A Merciful Secret*

“Each Mercy Kilpatrick mystery improves on the last . . . In this third installment, the whodunit, a tale that blends a hint of the paranormal with some all-too-human ghastliness, is engaging, but the real power comes from watching Mercy evolve as an individual.”

—*RT Book Reviews on A Merciful Secret*

“In the debut of her new Mercy Kilpatrick series, Elliot crafts an eerily fascinating small town. An air of menace is palpable throughout the story,

and the characters hide a wealth of secrets and twisted loyalties.”

—*RT Book Reviews on A Merciful Death*

“Kendra Elliot is a great suspense writer. Her characters are always solid. Her plots are always well thought out. Her pace is always just right . . . A super beginning to this series.”

—*Harlequin Junkie on Close to the Bone*

“In Elliot’s latest gripping novel the mystery and suspense are top-notch, and the romance embedded within will quench love story junkies’ thirst, too. The author’s eye for detail makes this one play out more like a movie rather than a book. It can easily be read as a stand-alone but is obviously much better if the prior three are digested first.”

—*RT Book Reviews on Targeted*

“Elliot’s latest addition to her thrilling, edge-of-your-seat series *Bone Secrets* will scare the crap out of you, yet allow you to swoon over the building romantic setting, which provides quite the picturesque backdrop. Her novel contains thrills, chills, snow, and . . . hey, you never know! The surprises and cliff-hangers are satisfying, yet edgy enough to keep you feverishly flipping the pages.”

—*RT Book Reviews on Known*

“Elliot’s best work to date. The author’s talent is evident in the characters’ wit and smart dialogue . . . One wouldn’t necessarily think a psychological thriller and romance would mesh together well, but Elliot knows what she’s doing when she turns readers’ minds inside out and then softens the blow with an unforgettable love story.”

—*RT Book Reviews on Vanished (Top Pick)*

“Kendra Elliot does it again! Filled with twists, turns, and spine-tingling details, *Alone* is an impressive addition to the *Bone Secrets* series.”

—Laura Griffin, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Elliot once again proves to be a genius in the genre with her third heart-pounding novel in the Bone Secrets collection. The author knows romance and suspense, reeling readers in instantaneously and wowing them with an extremely surprising finish . . . Elliot’s best by a mile!”

—*RT Book Reviews* on *Buried* (Top Pick)

“Make room on your keeper shelf! *Hidden* has it all: intricate plotting, engaging characters, a truly twisted villain. I can’t wait to see what Kendra Elliot dishes up next!”

—Karen Rose, *New York Times* bestselling author

A  
MERCIFUL  
PROMISE

## **ALSO BY KENDRA ELLIOT**

### MERCY KILPATRICK NOVELS

*A Merciful Death*  
*A Merciful Truth*  
*A Merciful Secret*  
*A Merciful Silence*  
*A Merciful Fate*

### BONE SECRETS NOVELS

*Hidden*  
*Chilled*  
*Buried*  
*Alone*  
*Known*

### BONE SECRETS NOVELLAS

*Veiled*

### CALLAHAN & MCLANE NOVELS PART OF THE BONE SECRETS WORLD

*Vanished*  
*Bridged*  
*Spiraled*  
*Targeted*

## ROGUE RIVER NOVELLAS

*On Her Father's Grave* (Rogue River)

*Her Grave Secrets* (Rogue River)

*Dead in Her Tracks* (Rogue Winter)

*Death and Her Devotion* (Rogue Vows)

*Truth Be Told* (Rogue Justice)

## WIDOW'S ISLAND NOVELLAS

*Close to the Bone*

A  
MERCIFUL  
PROMISE

KENDRA  
ELLIOT



Montlake  
Romance





This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Text copyright © 2019 by Oceanfront Press Company  
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Published by Montlake Romance, Seattle  
[www.apub.com](http://www.apub.com)

Amazon, the Amazon logo, and Montlake Romance are trademarks of [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com), Inc., or its affiliates.

ISBN-13: 9781503900325  
ISBN-10: 1503900320

Cover design by Eileen Carey

*For my girls*

# CONTENTS

[ONE](#)

[TWO](#)

[THREE](#)

[FOUR](#)

[FIVE](#)

[SIX](#)

[SEVEN](#)

[EIGHT](#)

[NINE](#)

[TEN](#)

[ELEVEN](#)

[TWELVE](#)

[THIRTEEN](#)

[FOURTEEN](#)

[FIFTEEN](#)

[SIXTEEN](#)

[SEVENTEEN](#)

[EIGHTEEN](#)

[NINETEEN](#)

[TWENTY](#)

[TWENTY-ONE](#)

[TWENTY-TWO](#)

[TWENTY-THREE](#)

[TWENTY-FOUR](#)

[TWENTY-FIVE](#)

[TWENTY-SIX](#)

[TWENTY-SEVEN](#)

[TWENTY-EIGHT](#)

[TWENTY-NINE](#)

[THIRTY](#)

[THIRTY-ONE](#)

[THIRTY-TWO](#)

[THIRTY-THREE](#)

[THIRTY-FOUR](#)

[THIRTY-FIVE](#)

[THIRTY-SIX](#)

[THIRTY-SEVEN](#)

[THIRTY-EIGHT](#)

[THIRTY-NINE](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

# ONE

Mercy held her breath and stepped back as they dragged the bleeding man past her. The other observers cleared a path, their faces solemn, their gazes locked on the moaning man. Two of the members, rifles slung over their shoulders, gripped the man's upper arms and pulled him toward their commander, Pete, at the front of the group. They threw him to the ground at Pete's feet, and he stayed down, curling into a tight ball, his gasps echoing in the forest clearing.

*What will Pete do?*

Pete's stance was wide, his hands clasped behind his back, his spine perfectly straight. His chin jutted forward, and he stood immobile. Without moving his head, he lowered his gaze to the beaten man, and his mouth pressed into a thin white line. Disdain and disappointment flowed from him, and mutters sounded through the group, its own anger growing.

The mob's ire was palpable, slamming through Mercy's skin and skidding up the back of her neck. Goose bumps lifted the hair on her arms as she stared at the man who stood in front of the group. Pete wore his usual dark-olive pants and shirt and a Glock on his hip. The weapon seemed to grow larger, almost pulsate with power, even though he didn't move his hand in its direction.

He didn't need to demonstrate his authority. His people fell into line. They hung on his every word, and right now the group leaned forward, greedy for his decision.

Ed Merrick had broken a rule.

Mercy knew the rules. Everybody knew the rules. What everyone didn't know was the penalty for breaking a rule. Pete was judge and jury, and the punishments were his decisions.

The muttering faded away, and absolute silence filled the clearing. Approximately forty people waited for Pete's declaration. Most were men. A few dressed similarly to Pete, in olive from head to toe. They also carried weapons. Either a handgun or a rifle on the shoulder. But most of the men wore jeans or rugged work pants. The weather was cool for late September, and everyone wore durable jackets, many stained with sweat and hard work.

Mercy tried to make eye contact with a woman to her left, but the woman stared straight ahead, her brows raised, impatiently awaiting Pete's declaration with the rest of the group. The few women in the camp had already shown Mercy that they did not speak out against injustice.

*This won't end well.*

Foreboding filled the air, and Mercy shifted her balance to her toes. Her partner, Chad Finn, felt her move and tightened his arm around her, giving her upper arm a reassuring squeeze. She leaned into him, grateful for his touch, and rested her cheek against his shoulder. He smelled of sweat. Everybody smelled of sweat. Showers were scarce, and the laundry system was primitive.

Pete raised his gaze to take in the crowd. He scanned the group, and even Mercy felt anticipation of his words. He made eye contact with her and moved on, leaving her feeling acknowledged and included. It was one of Pete's gifts. He looked at you as if you had a fascinating story to tell, as if you were relevant, as if you mattered.

Everyone felt accepted.

"Ed had a cell phone." Pete's calm voice reached every set of ears. "You know cell phones aren't allowed." His gaze scanned the group again, and heads nodded. "If you need to make a call, you come to me. I will help you." More nods.

*They believe he is generous, but he outlawed cell phones.*

"We all know what the phones can lead to. We can't have that. We won't be divided."

One of the men who'd dragged Ed to the front handed Pete an old flip phone. Pete tossed it in his hand a few times, a crisp slapping sound against his palm.

"Why did you break the rule, Ed?" Pete asked, keeping his gaze on the group.

A collective intake of breath came from the crowd.

Still in a ball on the ground, Ed shook his head, his eyes squeezed shut. Fresh abrasions covered one side of his face. The men who'd dragged him to Pete stared down at the victim, their expressions impassive.

Pete and the crowd waited for Ed to answer. People shuffled their feet, glancing among each other. Some eyes were worried; some were eager. They all wanted something to happen. To get it over with.

Pete abruptly stepped back and pointed at a pole ten feet to his right. "String him up. Twenty lashes." The two soldiers hauled him to his feet.

*"Pete! No! I won't do it again!"*

"I don't give second chances. We'll dissolve into anarchy if everyone believes they can break the rules without consequences."

Ed shrieked as two men stripped off his shirt and tied his wrists to the pole, his back to the audience.

Terror made Mercy straighten. *I can't just stand here.* She leaned forward to look past Chad and froze. Someone had brought the children. Two women clutched small toddlers as a few children between five and ten silently watched the proceedings, their little faces blank.

*Surely Pete will send them away.*

"Hold still," Chad hissed. His arm cemented her against him. The earlier care and affection gone.

"He's going to whip him," she whispered back. "For a *fucking phone.*"

"Ed knew the rules."

She stiffened. "This is wrong."

"Shhhh!" Gripping her jaw, he turned her face up to meet his gaze. His green eyes were hard and cold.

"Mr. Finn!" Pete snapped.

Chad jerked his head toward Pete. "Yes, sir!"

"Quiet your woman." Pete's impassive gaze met Mercy's.

Swallowing hard, she looked at her feet. A rare second chance.

She tamped down the fury in her chest and scanned the group, searching for someone, *anyone* who supported her. Fifteen feet away, Eden caught her eye. The teen read Mercy's expression and held her finger against her lips, silently pleading for Mercy to be quiet. Then she drew the finger across her throat.

*Eden knows any protest will earn me a turn with the whip. Or worse.*

The whip cracked, and Ed screamed, his shrieks echoing through the tall firs.



Mercy closed her eyes and turned into Chad, her knees slightly weak.  
*How did I end up here?*

# TWO

## *Two days earlier*

“What does Jeff want?” FBI special agent Eddie Peterson asked Mercy as they simultaneously tried to pass through the conference room doorway. Eddie stepped back, a laptop under one arm and two books under the other as he precariously gripped a cup of coffee by its lid.

Mercy darted through before he lost control of the coffee. “I don’t know, but he told me to clear my afternoon.”

Eddie frowned as he set the cup on the conference table. “He didn’t tell me that. I’ve got three meetings.”

Mercy shrugged. It was part of her job to change direction on a dime, and Jeff’s vague message had perked up what had promised to be a dull day of paperwork. Mercy had been a special agent with the FBI’s Bend, Oregon, field office for nearly a year after spending five years at the big Portland office. Including her and Eddie, Bend had five agents, in contrast to the hundred agents in Portland.

But Bend was close to her heart. She’d been raised thirty minutes away in the tiny town of Eagle’s Nest, and until she arrived in Bend on a case last September, she hadn’t visited in fifteen years. After that case she left behind Portland’s hustle and bustle for the stunning vistas of the Cascade mountain range to Bend’s west and the wide-open plains to its east.

Her boss, Jeff Garrison, entered the room with two official-looking strangers close behind him. Instinct told Mercy they weren’t FBI—but something about them felt very governmental, and she noticed instantly they were discreetly armed. The woman was tall, dark, and elegant—she could have been a model twenty years earlier, and her gaze zoomed in on

Mercy, studying her from head to toe. After the moment of intense scrutiny, she gave Mercy a warm smile. Whatever evaluation she had performed, Mercy had passed.

The male looked as if he could be Eddie's brother. Young, hair too long, a bit of scruff. He wore jeans and a light jacket.

Jeff made introductions. Carleen Aguirre was the resident agent in charge from the Portland ATF office, and the man was ATF special agent Neal Gorman. As they took their seats, Neal frowned at Mercy, studying her in the same fashion that Carleen had. Mercy returned his stare as Jeff shut the door.

"Nothing said in here leaves this office," Jeff announced, looking directly at Eddie and Mercy.

Mercy hid a small spark of irritation; she and Eddie weren't gossips. She lifted a brow and gave Jeff her best side-eye, wondering if she should be offended or immensely curious. She decided on immensely curious and gave the ATF agents the same deep scrutiny she'd received.

Carleen grinned and leaned forward, resting her arms on the table, her dark gaze holding Mercy's. "One of our agents is undercover in a militia-slash-conspiracy-theorists-slash-arms-selling group outside of Ukiah."

Mercy blinked. "That's a mouthful."

"Where's Ukiah?" asked Eddie.

"About thirty miles south of Pendleton. It's a tiny town. About two hundred people," answered Neal.

Mercy followed a road map in her head. "That's a good four hours northeast from here."

Neal nodded. "Just west of the Umatilla National Forest. If you're looking for a good place to escape society, this is it. No one will bug you here."

"But clearly something about this extensively labeled group bugged you enough to embed an agent," Eddie stated.

"They call their compound America's Preserve. The group has approximately forty people living in an abandoned campground," Carleen told him. "The camp is the type of place churches rent for retreats. It has several cabins with bunk beds and a large hall with a kitchen for meetings, but it hadn't been used in twenty years until this group took up residence about a year ago. The property is owned by a Ukiah resident who gave them permission to move in." Carleen grimaced. "The ATF doesn't want to

reveal our interest, so no one has talked to the owner, but the general word in Ukiah is that the group is repairing the buildings in exchange for living there.”

“And you embedded an agent because of the arms-selling aspect,” said Mercy. Selling guns secondhand wasn’t illegal. The ATF was holding something back.

Both agents nodded. And didn’t expand.

Mercy waited, but neither Carleen nor Neal jumped in to fill the silence. Or the holes in their story.

But Eddie did. “What do you need from us?”

Carleen took a deep breath. “We need Mercy. Tomorrow a second agent was to join our undercover agent and pose as his girlfriend, but she came down with shingles.” She turned pleading eyes on Mercy.

Sweat started under her arms, and her pulse pounded in her ears.

*They want me undercover in an arms-selling militia?*

Last winter she’d gotten uncomfortably close to a budding militia outside of town and nearly paid for it with her life. It wasn’t something she cared to do again.

Jeff met her gaze. He knew how dangerous her last experience had been. His eyes were sympathetic, but he sat silent, allowing the agents to ask.

“Get someone else,” Mercy forced out. “It doesn’t have to be me.”

Carleen and Neal shot each other a look. “We’ve searched,” Neal told her. “You are the only federal agent similar in looks and build to our agent.”

“Expand your search,” Mercy argued. “I can’t be the only tall female with long, dark hair.”

“We’ve searched the ATF and FBI in the Pacific Northwest. You tick every box—not just in looks. You’re conveniently close, you know this state, and from what I’ve read, you know the surrounding culture. Our undercover agent has convinced the leader that his girlfriend will be an asset to America’s Preserve. Reportedly Jessica Polk—that’d be you—has medical experience.”

“I don’t have med—”

“Says the woman who kept me from bleeding out from a gunshot wound four months ago,” muttered Eddie. “You know how to handle medical emergencies. There’s no question. But why am I here?”

“You’ll be taking over Mercy’s caseload while she’s gone,” Jeff answered.

Eddie groaned as Mercy replied, “If I go.”

Neal slid a photo across the table. Mercy looked at it but didn’t pick it up. It showed a green-eyed, dark-haired woman in a polo shirt with the ATF logo on the chest.

Eddie had no qualms about picking up the picture. “The two of you could be related, Mercy. Actually, she looks a lot like your sister Rose, but yeah, they have a good match here.” He crinkled his nose as he looked from the photo to her and back again, his gaze curious behind his thick-rimmed glasses.

More uncomfortable scrutiny.

“We need someone tomorrow,” emphasized Carleen. “We worked for months to get our agent inside. The leader of the group doesn’t let his people out in public often, but our agent has permission to pick you up at the bus station.”

“Tomorrow.” Mercy sucked in a steadying breath. “I don’t have time to prepare. I’d make a mistake . . . I’d say something wrong.”

“We’ll work with you. The agents’ histories have been carefully created and vetted.” Carleen shifted forward in her chair, a hint of desperation in her tone. “We’ve spent a lot of time, effort, and money to get two agents into this camp. Chad—that’s the undercover name of our agent—says the leader, Pete Hodges, won’t let any more men join right now, but women are a different story. We might not get another chance.”

“Of course he lets in women,” said Mercy, her voice heavy with sarcasm. “With a big group of men, you need cooks, cleaners, and someone to keep your bed warm. I know how he thinks.” During the militia incident last winter, a sexual hunger had frequently burned in a few of the men’s eyes when they’d looked at her. If the situation had escalated, none of them would have cared about consent.

She shuddered.

“This sounds volatile.” Eddie planted his forearms on the table and glared at Jeff. “Why on earth would you even consider this?”

“You don’t know all the facts,” Jeff answered quietly.

“Then tell me,” Mercy stated. “Because I’m about to return to my desk.”

The two ATF agents and Jeff exchanged a glance.

Mercy started to stand.

“Wait!” Carleen asked, holding up a hand and rising from her own chair. “Give me a moment.” She leaned close to Neal, and they shared rapid, quiet words.

“You don’t have to do it,” Eddie said in a low voice to Mercy. “It’s just a favor for the ATF—a dangerous favor, it sounds like. Don’t let them pressure you.”

She glanced at the whispering couple across the table. “Does it feel like they’re desperate?” Both agents had appeared cool and calm, but an air of urgency simmered around them.

“I’m getting that vibe,” he said softly. “This must be bigger than they’re letting on. It’s not illegal for private parties to sell guns.”

“Okay.” Carleen cleared her throat, and her dark eyes focused again on Mercy. “You deserve to know what you’re walking into.”

“Damn right,” muttered Eddie.

Mercy ignored him, trying to read the body language of the ATF agents. It was impossible; both held perfectly still, their faces expressionless.

*They’re trying too hard.*

*It’s big.*

“We followed a buyer. A local guy. A small-time rancher. He bought a few guns from another undercover agent. Small stuff. Nothing to write home about. But he talked during the transactions, dropping a few references that we followed up on.” Carleen took a deep breath. “Now we’re looking for a big seller, and his lead has pointed to this group. We’re not positive who the big seller is—our assumption is it’s the gang’s leader, Pete Hodges, but that is not confirmed.”

“A big seller of *what kind* of weapons?” Mercy asked. Carleen’s story was still missing a few big pieces.

Carleen pressed her lips together. “We had a theft about eight months ago—”

“I heard about that,” Eddie interrupted. “Two of your agents died. A stockpile of weapons the police had removed from the streets in the Southwest got intercepted in transit with a big shoot-out in Nevada.” He looked at Mercy. “Some of the weapons collected are not legal in the US.”

*Aha. Murdered agents and illegal guns.*

“The guns were probably back on the streets within days,” Eddie continued.

Every agent’s nightmare. Mercy tilted her head, watching Carleen.

“We think most of the guns, including the illegal ones, ended up with this group, and possibly America’s Preserve was behind the attack.”

“And behind the deaths of your agents,” Mercy supplied as pain flashed in Carleen’s eyes. “Tell me about Pete Hodges.”

“He’s been on our radar for a while. He emerged back east several years ago when he was associated with a militia group out of Pennsylvania. He split from them after publicly arguing with their leader.”

“What was the problem?” Eddie asked.

“The militia group had decided to stand up for and protect all free speech—not just the free speech they agreed with.”

“As they should,” Mercy pointed out.

“Well, their idea of protecting free speech was to send their armed, fatigue-wearing members into the center of pro-immigration rallies to stand between neo-Nazi protesters and the organizers to protect both sides’ rights to speak.”

“They were acting as police,” Eddie said. “Good intentions, but that’s not how it’s done.”

“Correct, and Pete Hodges didn’t like this First Amendment stance one bit,” Carleen continued. “He’s quoted as saying, ‘You either fight fascism or you enable it.’ He said there is no neutral peacekeeping. This didn’t sit well with the leadership of the group, and Pete left. Before that he was associated with the Three Percenter.”

Eddie raised a questioning brow at Mercy.

Since she’d worked domestic terrorism for years, the group’s name was familiar. “The Three Percenter have strong opposition to gun control laws. *All of the laws*,” she emphasized. “They’re very vocal.”

“Yes,” said Carleen. “Pete Hodges refers to the ATF as out-of-control gun cops.”

“So it’s not surprising that he would have stolen an ATF stockpile of weapons,” said Mercy.

“Illegal arms, remote antigovernment group.” Eddie lowered his voice as he looked at Carleen. “You don’t want another Ruby Ridge incident.”

Desperation flashed on Neal’s face. “Why does everyone bring up—”

“No one wants another tragedy like Ruby Ridge,” Mercy answered quickly, attempting to check Neal’s response. Three people—including a child—had died in the eleven-day rural siege that had grabbed the attention of the nation decades ago. “That was one family with one minor weapons purchase. The similarities between this case and that one aren’t that close, but I understand why the memory pops up. The case will always be a shadow over the ATF and FBI. Both agencies learned to do better.” She met both Neal’s and Eddie’s gazes. Neal looked away, and Eddie grimaced. This wasn’t the time for an interagency argument.

“So now you see why we need more people inside,” Carleen went on. “We need to tread carefully because it is an unpredictable situation.” She paused. “Our agent told us he heard rumors of a big plan. Something targeting us.”

“Us?” asked Mercy.

“The ATF.”

“Define ‘big plan,’” added Eddie.

Carleen met his gaze. “Something to cripple the agency. I know that’s vague, but all Chad could say was that explosives had been mentioned.”

The room went quiet.

“I know some of these types of groups feel the ATF treads on their constitutional rights by enforcing current gun laws,” Mercy said slowly. “Crippling your agency would make this faction heroes to certain populations.”

“But how could they actually affect the workings of the ATF?” muttered Eddie. “A cyberattack would probably be the most effective, but I assume that’s not their forte. Blowing something up would make the largest visible message—I’d guess that’s their goal. Something splashy.”

“We want our agents to be safe. That’s our main objective.” Carleen looked at Mercy. “We need to know what’s going on in that compound.” She pressed her lips together for a long second, and Mercy knew she didn’t want to say the next sentence. “You won’t be allowed to tell your family what you’re doing or where you are. We can’t risk an accidental leak.”

“Are you kidding me?” asked Eddie. He turned to Mercy, shaking his head, concern in his brown eyes. “Truman will never go for it. Not after what happened to you last winter with that militia.”

“I don’t need Truman’s permission,” Mercy said, but the thought of being completely out of contact made her light-headed. Truman was her



rock; their wedding was in three months.

Carleen raised her chin and looked away from the FBI agents and out the window. "There are several children in the compound," she said softly.

Shock filled the room.

"Aw, shit," mumbled Eddie, slumping back in his chair.

Images flashed in Mercy's mind. Weapons. Explosives. Children. Bitter, suspicious adults.

A recipe for tragedy.

Mercy's doubts were shattered by a crushing mantle of responsibility. "I'll do it."

# THREE

The rest of the day was a whirlwind. Mercy felt as if she were cramming a semester's worth of information into five hours and the final was tomorrow. The FBI conference room table was now cluttered with files, notebooks, and photos. Mercy had read and reread each one.

A dry-erase pen in hand, Mercy stood at the whiteboard as Carleen drilled her on the history the ATF had created for Jessica Polk.

"Where did you get your associate's degree in nursing?"

*Easy one.* "Big Bend Community College. Moses Lake, Washington. Where I grew up," she added.

"Work history," Carleen requested.

"Uh . . ." Mercy turned to the board and made a list to keep it straight in her mind. "Three different nursing homes in Moses Lake. Good Heart, A Place to Rest, and Sally's Home." She emphatically underlined the last, pleased she hadn't mixed up the names this time. "I worked at each one for about two years. I left Sally's Home about six months ago and have been waitressing at the Lake Diner ever since."

"Parents' names and professions."

"Douglas Polk. Plumber. Susan Polk. Housewife, but she also worked at the Dollar Tree. Both passed away in a car accident ten years ago." She raised a brow at Carleen. "Convenient."

"Just keeping it simple."

"Nothing about this is simple."

"Your college mascot?"

Mercy stared at Carleen, her mind blank. "Seriously?"

"Seriously," she said calmly, suddenly transforming into every instructor Mercy had disliked in college.

*The Avengers.* "Thor—I mean, Vikings for Big Bend."

“High school mascot?”

“Something with feathers.”

Carleen made a face. “Chiefs.”

“Chiefs,” Mercy repeated as she slumped into the chair by Carleen. “This is ridiculous.” She picked up a photo of her “boyfriend,” Chad Finn. “Chad and I met two years ago at a Kenny Chesney concert in Seattle,” she muttered. Carleen wouldn’t tell her Chad’s real name, and Mercy was not to tell him hers. The man in the photo was clean-shaven and wore an ATF polo.

He looked like a Verizon cell phone salesman.

His fake backstory included ranching and work as a mechanic. Carleen said that in real life, Chad was one of those guys who always had his head under the hood of a car. He’d repaired a truck at the group’s camp and impressed them, and now he was in charge of their fleet—which was about five vehicles.

Supposedly Chad had convinced Mercy—Jessica—to leave her miserable waitressing job in Moses Lake and come live with him and his like-minded friends at the compound for a new beginning.

Every woman’s dream.

“Chad knows there’s been a change in girlfriends, right?” Mercy asked as she tossed his photo back on the table.

“No. We don’t have a way to get ahold of him.”

Mercy spun her chair toward the agent. “*What?*”

“I told you there were no cell phones. The arrangements to bring in Chad’s girlfriend were made on a pay phone in town two weeks ago.”

“I have to instantly convince Chad that I’m her replacement? Possibly with other people watching?” Mercy leveled a stare at Carleen, stunned at the lack of communication. She felt unprepared and untethered, as if she were floating high above the earth without a landing site. “I look a little like your agent, but we’re still different. What if they’ve seen pictures of her?”

“Fake Jessica’s social media is being altered as we speak. They’re doing a little Photoshop to the few pictures of her online.”

Mercy sighed. “Any other big things you haven’t told me? What does your agent do if he’s in trouble?”

“There is a satellite phone hidden outside the compound. He knows where it is. It’s for emergencies only. If he is caught with it, they’ll probably kill him.”

Mercy said nothing, searching Carleen's brown gaze. She spotted a flicker of the woman's concern for her agent before it vanished. Carleen was fully aware of the danger and the unknowns.

"We considered sending in a backup battery with you for the satellite phone. It has one, but another can't hurt." She grimaced. "I was voted down. Too risky if you're caught."

*Great.* "How did Chad use a pay phone?"

"A perk of being the guy in charge of maintaining the vehicles. He drives into town occasionally."

Neal entered the office with an ancient duffel over his shoulder. "I added a heavier coat," he said as he dropped the bag on the floor. "It can get cold at that elevation at night."

Mercy stared at the ugly bag. "What is that?"

"Your belongings," he answered, his hands on his hips. "No fancy polycarbonate hard-sided suitcase when you're roughing it."

"Oh no you don't. I pack my own stuff." Mercy was instantly on the ground, digging through the duffel.

"We were very particular about what we chose for you," Carleen said. "This has been worked out for weeks. Everything you need is in there."

"No gloves, no poncho. Not even a first aid kit," Mercy muttered as she scattered the belongings. "I'll bring my *own* underwear, thank you very much," she said, tossing *used* underwear into the wastebasket.

"They're new," Carleen clarified. "But they've been washed."

"Still . . . I'll wear my own shit." She set aside three pairs of pants. "These aren't my size. I'll grab my own tonight." She held up a sweatshirt, eyeing the proportions. "This works."

"Don't pack designer jeans," Neal told her. "Jessica wouldn't have the money for those. Pack old stuff. There's little power out there, so that means no hairdryers or curling irons. And you can expect your belongings to be searched by members of the group—possibly a few times. Privacy won't exist."

"I know what to pack when roughing it," Mercy stated. She wasn't surprised by the prospect of multiple searches. Paranoia was rampant in that type of crowd, and it started with the leaders, trickling down to everyone else. "I need my own bags from my vehicle."

Mercy was always prepared. She'd grown up the child of survivalist preppers and had never been able to shake the compulsion to plan for

disaster. Any disaster. Fires, destruction of the nation's electrical grids, attacks from foreign governments. Even attacks from her own.

Secreted in the Cascade mountain foothills, she had a cabin prepped and ready if she and her loved ones needed to hide. They could survive for years. Maybe decades.

"No. Everyone is allowed a single bag of belongings."

"Then I'll cram my contents into this." Mercy looked up from the floor. "It'd be stupid to show up without appearing semiprepared." An idea struck her. "My person has a medical background. She'd have some supplies on hand." She spoke quickly before Carleen could disapprove. "I'll let you examine what I choose to take with me, and you'll see it's not out of character."

The ATF agents exchanged a glance. "We'll take a look," Carleen agreed.

Mercy tossed her key fob to Neal. "Black Tahoe. Second row. There's a backpack and a medical kit in the back." He spun and left without saying a word. Mercy continued to empty the duffel. "Jessica isn't stupid," she mumbled. "She grew up in the center of Washington State. She'd know how rough the weather and land can be. She'd be prepared for that."

*I don't even see a Leatherman tool.*

Carleen was silent as she watched Mercy root through the bag. Mercy kept the socks, the T-shirts, two sweaters, and a jacket. She approved of the bare-bones plastic bag with basic hair products, toothpaste, and toothbrush.

Neal reappeared with Mercy's GOOD (Get Out of Dodge) bag and medical kit, both of which she always kept in her vehicle. She thanked him and proceeded to dissect the contents of the GOOD backpack, weighing what was most important. Neal opened the medical kit and inspected each item. He set most of the products to the side as she watched out of the corner of her eye, clamping her lips shut.

That was her equipment. Her lifelines. Her preparations. And he was artlessly dividing them up.

He might as well be slowly removing each of her fingers.

Neal eyed the packs of large syringes full of tiny white tablets and tossed them in the reject pile. Her heart jumped.

"No!" Mercy shuffled over on her knees and grabbed the packages, shoving them into the duffel.

He stared at her. "What are they?"

“Fucking lifesavers,” she told him. She’d plunged the tablets of crustacean shells into a gunshot wound in Eddie’s chest. They’d expanded, stopped the bleeding, and saved his life. She wouldn’t leave them behind. Ever.

Neal sat back and let her sort. Bandages, tape, Benadryl, ibuprofen, an analgesic inhalant, scalpels, supplies for stitches, and on and on. She mentally grappled with leaving any of it behind.

The old duffel was nearly bursting at the seams by the time she was done. She’d also added water purification tablets and a few MREs, crossing her fingers that food wouldn’t be an issue at the camp. She’d wear her own boots and heavier coat, but she still needed space for her own pants and underwear.

*Screw their one-bag rule.* She had a casual shoulder bag with a deceptive amount of storage. They’d expect a woman to have a purse.

She sighed and sat back on her heels, feeling satisfied with her preparations. Her earlier sensation of floating in the air had been tempered by the act of packing. Neal and Carleen silently regarded her.

“What’s next?” she asked.

Neal removed a folder from his case. “Time to learn about the people you’ll meet in America’s Preserve.”

“I thought you didn’t know much about anyone beyond the leader, Pete Hodges.”

“We don’t. This intel has been gleaned from Chad’s reports and the few background checks we’ve managed to do. A lot of these guys have changed their names several times.”

“Great.” Mercy checked the time. It was nearly eight o’clock. “One more hour. Then I’m going home.”

Carleen nodded. “We’ll pick you up at six a.m. tomorrow and take you to the bus station.”

Mercy exhaled and looked at the remains of her GOOD bag, feeling as if she were leaving half of herself behind.

*Jessica. My name is Jessica.*

*How will Truman react to my no-contact assignment?*



Eagle's Nest police chief Truman Daly heard the rumble of Mercy's Tahoe outside her apartment. He poured a glass of wine for her, which he'd been waiting to pour for the last three hours. His own glass had been filled twice, and it'd taken restraint not to have more.

Something was up.

It had sounded in her voice when Mercy had called to warn him she'd be late. She hadn't gone into details and had promised to explain when she got home. She'd sounded distracted, worried, her tone slightly higher than usual. He wasn't surprised. Their jobs came with twists and turns. Shit happened, and both of them knew how to roll with the punches.

He scooped two cheese enchiladas from the huge pan Kaylie had baked and popped them in the microwave. Mercy's teenage niece was a damned good cook and baker. Truman was pretty good with a grill, but whenever he heard Kaylie was cooking dinner, he always tried to eat at their apartment. Usually with Ollie, his eighteen-year-old ward, in tow.

Tonight the two teenagers were at the library. Kaylie was working on college applications, and Ollie was studying . . . something. Truman couldn't keep track of the teen's classes. The boy was driven. He'd grown up isolated in the forest until he came to live with Truman last spring and had attacked his education like a starving child. In a way, Ollie *had* been starving, and information was the only thing that satiated him. He would have his GED by Christmas, and then he planned to study to become a teacher.

Truman leaned against the counter and waited, watching the front door as Kaylie's cat, Dulce, figure-eighted around his ankles. Truman vibrated with energy. A common occurrence when he knew Mercy was about to arrive. From the first day she'd appeared in his life a year ago, he'd looked forward to every minute with her. Now they were planning their Christmastime wedding.

The doorknob rattled, and Dulce abandoned him, dashing to leap onto the back of the chair next to the door and stretch toward the woman who stepped through. Mercy's gaze immediately went to Truman, love and exhaustion shining in her eyes.

A smile stretched across his face, triggered as usual by the sight of her.

She dropped an unfamiliar duffel from her shoulder and had her arms around him, leaving Dulce to meow in protest on her perch.

Something relaxed in his spine as he kissed her, and he caught a hint of her usual light lemon-bar scent as he inhaled deeply against her hair. She leaned into him, taking longer than usual with their evening greeting.

“Hungry?” he asked.

“Mmmhmm,” she vibrated against his neck.

He held her several more seconds, absorbed in the headiness of her touch, the simple act of being in each other’s presence. They knew each other inside and out, enough to speak without words.

Pulling back, she met his gaze. Her green eyes were slightly bloodshot, and her lips curved to one side as she studied his face as if memorizing it. “Kids?” she asked.

“Library. Kaylie left enchiladas.”

“I need food.”

They reluctantly pulled apart, and he removed the enchiladas from the microwave as she took a seat at the kitchen bar with a sigh, her glass of wine in front of her. She rested on one elbow, her chin in hand, watching him intently.

“Yes?” He set the plate before her as she sipped her wine, her eyes never leaving his.

She set down the glass. “They’re sending me out of town.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow. Six a.m.”

So far this wasn’t a big deal, but the uncertainty in the tilt of her head told him she hadn’t shared all the details. He leaned on the bar, his weight on his forearms, his eyes level with hers, studying her face. She’d pulled back her long, dark hair and secured it in a messy knot at her neck, indicating it had been a tough day.

He savored the intensity of her green eyes. She was the queen of the poker face, but he knew how to read her.

Something was bothering her.

He waited.

“They don’t know how long I’ll be gone. Might be two weeks . . . possibly three.”

Surprise struck him. “That’s long.”

She sighed. “I know.”

“Where are you going?”



She spun the wineglass stem with her fingers and dropped her gaze. “They won’t let me tell anyone,” she said softly and looked up at him again.

He felt as if he’d been punched in the chest. He searched her face. Misery shone.

“It’s that important?” he asked.

“They believe so.” Her attention went back to her wine.

“Is it dangerous?” He held his breath but tried to sound nonchalant. Every part of their jobs held an element of danger. His question wasn’t fair.

She shrugged. “It could be. No more than usual, I guess.”

Her answer felt incomplete. The duffel on the floor caught his attention. “You’re already packed?”

Her lips twisted. “They packed for me—well, they tried to pack for me. I have a few more alterations to make.”

He understood. No one knew better than Mercy what she must have with her at all times.

“Jeff and Eddie packed for you?”

She hesitated. “No, this assignment is out of Portland.”

“I see.” *No, I don’t see.* “Can you tell me anything else?”

“Radio silence.”

His chest caught another blow. “You can’t call or email?”

“Nothing.” Distress flashed in her eyes again.

He moved away from the counter and ran a hand through his hair as he walked in a small circle. “Two weeks of no communication? I understand it—doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“You can always contact Jeff if you need to get a message to me.”

He stopped, taking in the lines between her brows. No wonder she had looked at him earlier as if she was memorizing his face. She had known it’d be a long time.

She was preoccupied with the assignment; she didn’t need to worry about his concern too.

He rounded the counter and slipped his arms around her, kissing the top of her head. “We can handle two weeks. I suspect it will go a lot faster for you than me. Good thing Rose’s wedding was last weekend.”

“I thought the same.”

He felt her shoulders relax under his arms. He had been right. She was more concerned about his reaction than about the assignment. “Go. Get it over with. We’ll finish the wedding plans when you get back.”

His mind raced ahead. It had been difficult to plan her surprise wedding present. If she was gone for two weeks, he would have time to finish it. The gift was to be delivered to the cabin tomorrow, and he'd worried she'd discover the present before he had time to assemble it.

It was a very thin silver lining to her news.

Neither of them was in charge of planning their Christmas wedding. Mercy's older sister, Pearl, had smoothly taken over with their blessing. Pearl had organized the majority of Rose's wedding, so it'd been easy for her to assist Mercy at the same time.

Truman smiled, remembering how his heart had stopped at the sight of Mercy in a lavender dress as she walked down the aisle at Rose's wedding. He'd been a groomsman and stood at the front of the church with Nick Walker. Mercy had carried Rose's infant son, Henry, and held him throughout the ceremony as she and Pearl stood by Rose.

The wedding had stirred soul-deep emotions Truman hadn't known he possessed. He and Mercy were already bound at the heart, but he deeply craved the legal attachment that proved to the world they were committed.

He'd given up trying to understand his need. All that mattered was that they wanted to be together.

Two weeks apart would make no difference.

"I don't know if I can ask my dad . . .," Mercy said, resting her head against his chest.

*To walk her down the aisle.*

Truman wasn't surprised. Karl Kilpatrick had proudly escorted Rose at her wedding, but he'd severed his relationship with Mercy fifteen years earlier. In the year since Mercy had returned to Eagle's Nest, she and her father had experienced more downs than ups.

Truman had hope that Karl would do it even though the man was a dinosaur, mired in beliefs that kept him at odds with his youngest daughter. Mercy pretended not to care, but Truman knew it hurt. He'd considered and discarded a dozen plans for approaching Karl on the sly about the topic.

This was Mercy's battle. She'd ask if she wanted help.

"Don't worry about that now. You've got plenty of time to talk to him after your return."

"Argh." She took a deep drink of the red wine. "Can't wait for that discussion. Do you think he'll laugh at me or tell me to fuck off?"

"He'd never say that to you. Your mom can help you talk to him."

“No. I need to do this on my own. No mediators.”

“When you get back,” Truman reiterated.

“When I get back,” she repeated. She picked up a fork and attacked her enchilada. The slam of a car door turned both their heads. “Kids are here.”

“Ollie will drive home to my house after he raids your refrigerator. I’ll stay here tonight.”

“Yes, you will,” she said, giving him a seductive stare as she put a melty, cheesy bite in her mouth.

Feet stomped on the stairs, and Kaylie’s giggle sounded outside. Affection for the two teens filled him.

Truman had acquired an unusual family over the last twelve months. Two stray cats, a teenage male orphan with a dog, and two female Kilpatricks.

Blood doesn’t make family; love does.

*I wouldn’t change a thing.*

# FOUR

“Why does Mercy’s cell phone keep transferring me to her office?”

Sitting at his desk the next morning, Truman frowned into his phone at the caller’s blunt question. Britta Vale hadn’t even greeted him before throwing out her inquiry. He wasn’t surprised; Britta didn’t do small talk.

“That FBI receptionist won’t tell me when I can talk to Mercy.” Anxiety laced Britta’s voice.

“What’s wrong?” Truman could be blunt too.

Silence filled the line.

“Mercy’s out of town for the next two weeks,” Truman explained. Britta and Mercy had an unusual friendship that had developed in spite of Britta’s distrust of every single human being. As a child, Britta had barely survived the attack that had murdered her family. Mercy had earned her trust when she’d shot a man intent on killing Britta last spring.

Britta confided in no one else.

She muttered something that Truman couldn’t understand. “What’s wrong?” he asked again.

“You better come out here.”

“Is this police business or personal?”

“Police.”

“You’re in Deschutes County’s juri—”

“No. You.”

Her emphatic tone implied she’d accept no other officer. The fact that she’d called him after trying to reach Mercy was huge. Britta was independent and a loner. Reaching out for help wasn’t something she did lightly. Something big must have happened.

“Are you safe?” Truman asked.

“Yes. This is about . . . someone else. You need to see it.”

“I’ll be there in a half hour.”



As soon as Truman turned onto Britta’s long country driveway, he spotted her in a field of tall grass hay off to his left, waving her arms. He pulled over and parked. The morning chill surrounded him as he opened his door and inhaled the sweet smell of the hay. Skies were blue and clear, and the temperature would hit the seventies that day. Fall in Central Oregon. Cold enough to freeze at night but warm enough to swim during the day.

It was nearly nine in the morning, and Mercy had been picked up at six as promised. Their goodbye had been brief; they’d spent hours saying goodbye during the night.

A black Lab bounded toward him, her tail wagging in excitement. Truman rubbed Zara’s head, her eyes ecstatic. *I must be moving up in Britta’s world.* Usually her dog never left her side. The dog was an emotional support animal for Britta’s anxiety and also a protector.

Britta strode up, dressed head to toe in black as usual. He knew she was a blonde, but she dyed her long hair a flat black. Today the bottom two inches were a brilliant blue. He blinked in surprise. She never wore color.

Her face was grim. Her pale-blue eyes devoid of emotion.

“What happened?” he asked in greeting.

She jerked her head in the direction from which she’d come, and he caught a glimpse of the tall tattoo that wrapped around her neck. She turned and marched away, the hay crunching under her steps, Zara immediately at her side.

Truman didn’t take the action personally as he started to follow.

Fifty yards later, they came upon a body.

The man was curled up on his side, as if he were cold, but the gray skin and bloating stomach stated he was long dead. His hair was salt and pepper with a deep widow’s peak, and his mouth was open, exposing a dark tongue and several silver fillings. Plenty of his gray skin was on display because he was naked except for sagging plaid boxers.

Shock froze Truman midstride. “Jesus, Britta. You could have told me on the phone that it was a dead body. Or when I arrived.” His breakfast threatened to reappear.

She crossed her arms. “I don’t know who might be listening.”

“No one is around for miles,” he muttered as he squatted a few feet from the dead man and swallowed hard. Britta’s home was in the rural countryside. Perfect for someone like her who preferred to avoid people at all costs.

Anger swamped Truman as he studied the corpse, hating the indignity someone had forced upon the man in addition to his death. *Why take his clothes?* Humiliation was the only answer he could come up with.

“How’d you find him?”

“Zara pulled this way when we went for our walk.” Britta frowned. “But around three in the morning, Zara had a barking fit and wanted out. I assumed she’d heard a coyote or cougar.” She lowered her voice. “Maybe if I’d let her out, we could have gotten to him before he died.”

Truman met her regretful gaze. *There’s some rare emotion.* “This man’s been dead a lot longer than six hours. I suspect Zara heard something as he was dumped here.”

Britta’s mouth formed an O before she smashed her lips together. A small tremor shook her frame. “That’s horrible. He was murdered, right?”

Truman looked to the body again. “Don’t know yet. Could have been a natural death, but then why dump him?”

“Fucking bastards.”

“Did you touch anything?” Truman asked.

“No.” She shuddered. “Is this aimed at me? Is someone trying to tell me something?”

“You think this is related to Ryan Moody’s attack on you last spring?”

Her pale skin lightened a shade. “It’s possible. It was all over the news. Maybe someone is angry he died, and—and they’re trying to get back at me.”

“You didn’t kill him.” *Mercy did.*

“People are nuts,” Britta rambled, her icy-blue gaze darting everywhere but at Truman. “Maybe they’re trying to set me up—”

“For what?”

“Murder, obviously.” She went down on a knee, wrapped an arm around Zara, and rapidly stroked the dog’s fur. “My property was picked for some reason.”

*Her anxiety is at warp speed.*

“Let’s not jump ahead of ourselves.” He started to rest a hand on her shoulder but pulled it back at the last second, remembering she didn’t like

to be touched. “Ryan Moody doesn’t have any relatives left. He was a murderer—he killed his own brother. I doubt anyone is seeking revenge for his death.”

She sucked in several deep breaths, and his heart contracted at the sight of the struggle on her face as she fought to calm herself. She patted her dog and stood. “You’re right.”

He doubted she believed her words. Yet.

Anxiety infested the brain with lies and wild scenarios, disguising them as truth.

“Do you recognize the body?” Truman asked.

“No.” Britta shot a quick glance at the corpse again. “That was the first thing I determined when I found him.”

His face wasn’t familiar to Truman either, but death had distorted the features. He doubted the man’s face was usually that bloated or the eyes that sunken.

“I’ll have you and Zara carefully move away from the scene. Watch where you step and let me know if you see anything unusual. I’m going to call the Deschutes County Sheriff’s Office.” He gave her a side-eye. “Which you could have done.”

She shrugged, a pulse still beating rapidly in her neck.

*She’s pulling herself together.*

Truman dialed. Britta did things her own way. After calling in the location and requesting a detective, Truman studied the dead man more thoroughly. He stepped in a careful circle around the body and crouched on the far side, peering closer at his head. There was crusted blood visible in the hair against the dirt. He wanted to turn the head and see if it was hiding a deadly injury, but he knew better.

*A blow to the side of the head? Gunshot?*

He didn’t see any exit wounds.

The medical examiner would answer the question.

He glanced at the rising sun. A distinct rotting odor already filled the area. The sun and heat would make it worse.

*How long has he been dead?*

He was pretty certain this level of bloating took at least a day or two. He glanced back at Britta and Zara, who had moved ten feet away. “Did you and Zara walk your property yesterday?”

Britta gave a short nod, her eyes focused on the mountains to the west.

If the body had been here yesterday, Zara would have led her master to the spot.

*Someone moved him to this location. Why?*

He watched Britta out of the corner of his eye. Her past was violent, but that wasn't her fault. Some people attracted trouble. Almost as if they put out an invisible lure. He knew no one wanted peace and solitude more than Britta, but turbulence seemed to follow her.

*Is this man part of her past?*



Truman watched Britta as the Deschutes County vehicles started to arrive. She shifted from foot to foot and constantly rubbed her forearms. Zara pressed her body against her owner's knee, her dark doggy eyes full of sympathy.

"I'm outta here." Britta gave Zara a command, and the two of them turned toward her home.

"They'll want to interview you," Truman said to her retreating back.

"You can tell them what I said," she answered without turning around or breaking stride.

"They need to hear it from you."

"You know where to find me."

"*They* need to find you, not me," Truman muttered, knowing she'd said the last line as a request that he be present during any discussions with a county detective. He watched as a crime scene van and an unmarked Ford Explorer pulled in behind the other vehicles. Detective Evan Bolton stepped out of the SUV and lifted a hand in greeting to Truman.

*Good.*

He trusted Bolton and knew from experience he was a solid investigator. Mercy called him the Angel of Death because he always turned up when someone was dead.

*It's his job.*

He saw Bolton glance at Britta's retreating figure as he strode up to Truman. Bolton was a few years younger than he, but his bleak gaze suggested he'd been a cop for fifty years. Truman wondered if anything ever rattled him. The two men shook hands.

"That my witness?" Bolton asked.



“Yes. Her house is farther up the driveway. She’s had enough of the scene and needs some time to regroup.”

“Understandable.” Bolton took a long look at the man on the ground, his face unreadable after a flash of anger in his eyes. Truman felt an accord with the detective. The stark scene was making him angrier by the moment. Bolton glanced back at his crime scene crew as they continued to unload their equipment. “When was he found?”

“Britta found him about two hours ago and—”

“Called you?” The question was clear on Bolton’s face.

“She tried to reach Mercy, and when she couldn’t, she called me.” Truman paused. “Britta has trust issues, but Mercy is on her safe list—and I guess I am by association.”

“I know the story of her family’s murder,” Bolton answered. “She went through hell as a kid. And then again last spring.” He raised a brow at Truman. “She a reliable witness?”

“Absolutely.” Truman had no doubt. Britta was a straight shooter. She just didn’t like people. “Her dog went berserk around three this morning and then led Britta directly here when they came out for a walk five hours later.”

“This man has been dead more than five hours.”

“Clearly. But Britta and her dog walk or run on the property every day. Her dog would have dragged her here if the body had been present yesterday.”

“Agreed.” Bolton pulled gloves out of his pocket as his crew approached. One of them had already taken several photos of the surrounding area. “Get initial shots of the body so I can move him a bit.” The tech nodded and proceeded to take another dozen shots.

“Let’s take a look.” Bolton jerked his head for Truman to join him.

The two men moved closer to the body, checking where they placed their feet.

“I assume no ID?” Bolton asked.

“Didn’t see any in the immediate area. Could be underneath him, I guess.”

“Lividity is on his back. Not his side,” Bolton pointed out.

In other words, he had lain on his back for several hours after he died, creating a purple mottled pattern where the blood had settled. Not curled up on his side as in his current position.

He had definitely been moved.

“Help me move him onto his back.”

Truman held his breath, and they gently rolled him backward, crushing more of the hay and exposing the right side of the victim’s head. His hair was a matted, dry mess of blood. His head and arms flopped.

“Rigor is gone,” mumbled Truman.

Rigor mortis typically came and went within thirty-six to forty-eight hours. He’d been right that the victim had been dead for longer.

Bolton got closer to the crusted mass of bloody hair. He carefully touched and prodded at the skull. “I think we’ve got a gunshot wound under this mess. No exit wound?”

“I don’t see one.” Depending on their size and the distance from which the gun had been fired, bullets could bounce around inside the skull, making scrambled brains instead of creating an exit. “Examiner coming?”

“Yes, I talked to Dr. Lockhart. She said she’d be out as soon as possible.” Bolton sighed. “I’ll start checking for missing persons of his description. Would you guess he’s somewhere in his forties or fifties?”

“Hard to tell.” His face had deep wrinkles around the mouth, and the partially gray hair was the main clue to his age.

“Fingernails are short and grimy. Hands dirty. He knew physical work,” Bolton suggested.

“Or he worked with plants or vehicles.”

Bolton lifted a shoulder in agreement. They were getting ahead of themselves.

“Hopefully the medical examiner will find some distinguishing marks—scars or previously broken bones to help me search.” Bolton made a notation in his notebook.

“I imagine he’s been reported missing,” Truman said.

“You’d be surprised.” Bolton’s writing hand froze, and he shot a sharp look back to the body.

Truman tensed. “What?”

Bolton stared at the man for a few more seconds. “Is this the same?” he asked under his breath. He continued to study him from feet to face for a long moment.

Truman waited, knowing better than to interrupt an investigator in midthought.

“We found a John Doe a month ago,” Bolton said slowly. “He was naked and dumped in La Pine. Decomp was a lot further along because the temperatures had been so high.” He frowned. “He was in his early thirties. This subject feels older to me.”

Truman’s skin crawled. “Cause of death?”

“Gunshot wound to the head, but there was an exit.”

“You said John Doe. You haven’t identified him?”

Bolton looked grim. “Not yet.”

“Do you see any other similarities to this one besides male, naked, shot in the head, and dumped?”

“Not yet. But that’s a lot in common. The other one wasn’t dumped in a country field. He was left close to a residence. The owners had been out of town for a few weeks, otherwise we would have found him sooner and possibly identified him.”

“The owners were cleared?”

“Yes, they were shocked to find the body on their property when they returned from a cruise to Alaska. Older couple in their late seventies. Good thing neither of them had a heart condition.” Bolton’s brown gaze met Truman’s. “I’ll know more after I run some searches and get the autopsy report.”

Truman squatted and studied the tall hay of the field at eye level. “Look in that direction.” He pointed. “I didn’t walk that way, and I’m pretty sure Britta came from the direction of her driveway. Something broke the grass in a faint path to the main road.”

Bolton crouched. “Could have been an animal attracted to the scent.”

“But left the body alone? No bite marks. No claw marks.”

Bolton put away his notebook. “Let’s take a look.” Another crime scene tech arrived, and Bolton gestured at the tech who had shot the earlier photos. “Hogan, come with us. Get some images of this trail.”

They followed the tech along the faint path as he snapped photos and they all watched for footprints. As they neared the fence along the country two-lane road, the grass faded away, replaced by firm soil. Obvious boot prints showed where someone had possibly ducked between the two horizontal rails of the fence. The three of them bent to awkwardly step over the lower rail, carefully avoiding the prints. On the other side of the fence, they spotted tire tracks and more footprints and crouched to take a closer look.

Hogan was pleased, a toothy grin on his face. “Excellent tire prints. We can easily cast those. The footprints too.” The ground was soft where the vehicle had pulled to the side of the road and left deep ruts.

“Two sets of boots,” Truman pointed out. “One appears to be a hiking boot and the other a cowboy boot.” The complicated grid of the hiking boot sole offered a sharp contrast to the smooth print of the cowboy boot. “They didn’t even try to hide them.”

“Not very bright or in a big hurry?” Bolton wondered.

“Both?” Truman shrugged.

Bolton straightened and twisted his back, making Truman wince at the staccato cracking sounds from his spine. “I’m ready to talk to Ms. Vale.”

Truman hoped she was ready to talk to Bolton.

# FIVE

Mercy glanced at the old clock on the bus station wall for the hundredth time. Her ride was nearly an hour late. Her nerves were on edge, and every possible scenario shot through her mind.

Had Chad Finn's cover been blown somehow? Had he been tortured and killed?

Would unknown men pick her up, lying that Chad would meet her at the compound? Would she be tortured and killed next?

Flat tire? Wrong date? Wrong time?

She squirmed on the hard seat. The tiny bus station had only two benches for passengers, and they looked like church pews. The wood backs were set at an angle that offered no back support yet also dug painfully into her spine. The nearly deserted room smelled of decades of cigarette smoke and old dust, along with a pine odor of cleaning agents that grew stronger near the bathrooms. Black crud filled every crack in the ancient floor tiles, and old water leaks had stained the yellowed drop ceiling.

Occasionally Mercy heard a tinny voice from a back room where a ticket agent watched TV. The woman had poked her head out when Mercy arrived, waited to see if she needed anything, and then vanished when Mercy took a seat.

A young man wearing faded jeans shared her vigil, sitting silently on the other bench, his gray cowboy hat beside him, his attention on the ragged paperback in his hands. His suitcase was beat-up and from an era before luggage wheels. Back when people had to carry their bags by the single handle.

Her parents still had a few.

She checked the time again and then pulled a cell phone out of her bag. It was a battered off-brand smartphone. Carleen had handed it to her

and stated, “They’ll expect you to have a phone, but it will be taken away and searched. We loaded a small history of calls and random texts to ‘friends’ and a bunch of photos.” On the bus ride from Bend, Mercy had studied the phone’s photos, stunned to see her face in places she’d never been and with people she’d never met. Overnight the ATF had created a visual history for her, skillfully replacing the original fake Jessica Polk’s face with Mercy’s face in social media posts and the images on her phone.

She enlarged a photo of herself and Chad, committing her boyfriend’s face to memory.

*I won’t mess this up.*

She was concerned about the reunion with Chad and prayed he wouldn’t reveal his surprise when he realized Jessica was being played by someone new.

*Like replacing a TV actor midseason. Awkward.*

Chad Finn had to be good at his job. The ATF wouldn’t have placed him undercover if it didn’t have faith in him. Mercy hoped its faith in her wasn’t misguided.

She dialed Chad’s number, knowing it would appear normal to call him because he was late. A recording told her he was unreachable. She dropped the phone in her bag and accidentally made eye contact with the suitcase man. He’d been watching her. He nodded solemnly and went back to his book.

*Is he a spy from the militia?*

She slowly exhaled and spun a curl around her finger. *I need to chill.*

If he was a spy, all he’d seen was an impatient, uncomfortable woman waiting for her ride.

When she’d stepped off the early-morning bus in Ukiah, she’d smelled snow and spotted a white dusting on the tops of the hills surrounding the area. *Winter is coming.* The sky was a perfect blue, but the bus had traveled east, into an area of the state where the land did not retain the heat as it did back in Bend. The elevation was slightly higher than home, and the vegetation was an assortment of hearty survivors, plants and trees that could withstand the cold dryness of the winter and the heat of the summer.

Somewhere up in those snow-dusted hills was her destination.

She’d studied the satellite photos of the camp. There were several small buildings and three larger ones scattered around a clearing. Chad had reported that the larger buildings were a mess hall, a supply depot, and the

command center. Carleen had rested a finger on another big building that sat in the center of a different clearing near a large carport, several hundred yards from the other structures. “Chad hasn’t been allowed in this building. It’s brand-new. He says it’s been a priority construction project, but no one will talk about it.”

“What could it be?” Mercy had murmured.

“Your guess is as good as ours.” Concern had darkened Carleen’s brown eyes.

The forty-acre camp was bordered on two sides by a river that flowed out of the mountains and on a third side by a deep ravine. The fourth side was fenced, with constant patrols and a gate that was the only way a vehicle could enter the compound.

As Mercy sat on the bus station bench, staring out the window, her mind tried to make sense of the new building, wondering if it was used to store weapons. Stolen weapons.

A white pickup drove into her view and swung into an angled parking space in front of the bus station. Mercy glanced at her companion. He ignored the truck. She sucked in a breath and slung the ugly ATF duffel onto her shoulder, her large slouchy purse on her other arm. Two men in worn clothing got out and eyed the building. The younger removed his sunglasses and pushed up the brim of his camouflage baseball cap. *Chad.*

She pasted a grin on her face and flung open the door. “Chad!” she yelled as she jogged down the half dozen steps.

Surprise flickered in his eyes for the briefest second. “Jessica!” He grinned, took two big steps, and caught her in a giant hug, lifting her feet from the ground and spinning her. After setting her down, he slid the bags off her arms, pulled her close, and then his mouth was on hers. Instinctively her arms went around his neck.

*Thank God he didn’t hesitate.*

His kiss was nothing like Truman’s.

Chad had a short beard, and the odd sensation of the bristly facial hair distracted her from the tongue that had skillfully entered her mouth. After a long moment, he pulled back and held her face in both hands, giving her a warm smile as he examined her. She concentrated on smiling back, dying to wipe her mouth.

“Damn, it’s good to see you.” Then he kissed her again. A hand ran down her back and pressed her hips to him.

She stiffened and then relaxed. He released her mouth but kept her in a tight embrace. Chad was taller than Truman but had the same lanky yet muscular build. His eyes were a vivid green, and the hair visible below his cap was a light brown. He no longer looked like a cell phone salesman. He was all Eastern Oregon rancher. Dust on his boots, sweat marks on his cap, and faint stains on his jeans. He smelled of motor oil and fresh-cut wood. Not horrible scents.

He slung one arm over her shoulder and turned her toward the other man. “Ed, this is Jessica.”

The driver touched the brim of his cap and nodded solemnly. “Ma’am.” Ed looked to be in his late forties and was small and trim. Unlike Chad, he had a close shave, his leathery skin indicating many years of sun exposure.

“Nice to meet you.” Mercy gave him her best smile. She and Carleen had agreed Jessica needed to appear trusting and willing to follow orders. She was to fly under the radar. Gain everyone’s confidence. Be unthreatening and reliable.

Ed climbed back in the truck, his movements quick and precise.

Chad pulled Mercy to him in another passionate hug. “What happened?” he said softly in her ear.

“Shingles,” she whispered back.

He kissed her on the mouth and then picked up her bags. He tossed the duffel in the open bed of the truck and handed her the purse. Mercy climbed into the cab, pretending not to feel awkward as she sat between the two men on the wide bench seat. Chad took her hand, intertwined their fingers, and held it in his lap. Ed focused on the road.

“You’re going to love it out here,” Chad said in a cheerful voice. “It’s the peace we’ve always wanted. Lots of wide-open space and nothing but good, hardworking people.”

“Sounds perfect.”

He launched into a description of the last vehicle problem he’d fixed, and Mercy pretended to listen in fascination, schooling her expression into one of adoration.

He lobbed a few easy questions her way, and Mercy answered comfortably, using his reactions and eye contact as guidance. So far it’d gone well.



After the second kiss in the cab, Ed muttered, “You better dial it back with the kissing shit. Pete’s not gonna go for that.”

“I’m getting it out of the way, Ed,” Chad replied with a deliberate kiss on her neck. “Give me a break. I haven’t seen my woman in months.” He winked at Ed. “I know you can handle it for an hour.”

“An hour?” Mercy asked.

“Yeah. It takes a while to drive to the camp. Out in the boonies and the roads are curvy and slow. Borders the national forest. It’s the only way to have some privacy.”

“I tried to call you,” Mercy told Chad. “You told me the reception was horrible, but I was starting to worry I had the wrong day.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ed shoot a look at Chad.

“No phones allowed in camp,” Ed announced.

“What?” asked Mercy. She’d prepared for Jessica to be surprised and slightly resistant to this detail. “You’re joking.”

“You didn’t tell her?” Ed asked sharply, leaning forward to glare at Chad.

“Didn’t come up,” he muttered.

“You said the lack of reception at the camp was why you rarely called,” Mercy said in her best disgruntled-girlfriend voice.

“That’s true. There’s virtually no reception up there, but that’s not the point. People don’t focus on what’s important when everyone’s got a phone in their hand,” answered Ed. “They’re huge distractions. And we don’t want strangers showing up because someone posted about our home on Facebook.” He was stern. “Everybody who joins us is highly vetted. We don’t let in every Tom, Dick, and Harry. You have to prove yourself.”

“I’ve never been without my phone before.” She gave a nervous laugh. “Might be a bit addicted.”

“Pete will ask you for it,” Ed told her. “It’d really impress him if you handed it over with no fuss. Good way to make a first impression. Shows him you want to be here.”

“I *do* want to be here. Chad, is that the best way to handle it?”

“Yeah. It’d probably be a first for Pete. I’ve seen new people get pretty upset about the phone rule.”

“What if someone has an injury?” asked Mercy.

“Pete can make a call in an emergency,” Ed told her.

“If he drives out of the compound a ways,” Chad added. “Takes a while to find a signal.”

“I guess that’s better than nothing.” She sat silently for a long moment, as if struggling to accept the rule. “I didn’t realize how exclusive it was here,” she said. “I’m flattered I was accepted. I can live without my phone.”

Ed beamed. “Good girl.”

*Yep. That’s Jessica. Rule follower.*

She snuggled up to Chad. “I can’t wait to be with you all the time.”

He coughed. “I know I told you we’d have our own place, but it’s not quite ready yet. Until then you’ll have to bunk with the other women.”

“Oh.” Mercy wondered how long Chad had known that. She and Carleen had counted on joint living quarters for the two of them to have some privacy.

“Soon,” Chad promised.

“I’m disappointed, but I get it. I don’t mind sleeping somewhere else for a little while. You’re worth it.” She beamed at him. Chad Finn—whatever his real name was—was a good-looking man, but for the first time she saw a hint of stress in his eyes. She didn’t blame him. Being surprised by a new agent while deep undercover would stress her out too.

The rest of the trip was quiet. Mercy rested her head on Chad’s shoulder, her hand still in his as her mind raced. She had two objectives. Find out about the big plan against the ATF and discover what weapons the camp had, where they’d gotten them, and what they planned to do with them.

And Chad had been there for a month. She needed to know why he hadn’t answered these questions yet.

The truck wound its way up into the hills and then down again. It finally stopped at a metal gate across a side road. Two men slid out of a pickup parked nearby and approached, rifles in hand. Both wore camouflage BDUs, fatigues rarely seen since the military had replaced the forest-green pattern in the mid-2000s. Mercy mentally dubbed the men Bubba 1 and Bubba 2. Both were big men with bushy beards, their jackets unable to button across their bellies. They stopped ten feet from the vehicle and pointed their weapons at the cab.

Ed raised both hands from the wheel as if in surrender, and Mercy caught her breath.

*Not friendlies?*

“Password,” ordered Bubba 1.

“Twenty, September, evening,” answered Ed.

Both men lowered their weapons. Bubba 1 took a few steps closer and eyeballed Mercy. She stared back but then looked down, deciding the action was too aggressive for rule-following Jessica Polk. The password was the date and month, but *evening* didn’t make sense. “It’s not evening,” she said lightly.

“*Evening* tells him nothing is wrong in the vehicle,” Ed answered. “If I’d said morning, he’d know someone was holding a gun on me.”

Bubba 2 dragged the gate across the packed dirt road. A thin metal pipe gate that Mercy doubted would stop a small Toyota.

Ed drove through, lifting one hand at Bubba 2. Mercy looked over her shoulder to watch the man drag the gate back into position.

“Welcome to America’s Preserve, Jessica,” said Ed.

*No going back now.*

# SIX

Britta was waiting on the front porch when Truman and Evan Bolton approached.

“She’s flighty,” Truman said in a low aside to Bolton. “Don’t push.”

“Doesn’t look flighty,” came his reply.

Truman had to agree. Britta stood at the top of the steps with her arms crossed and Zara at her side. The dog’s happily wagging tail was a contrast to Britta’s scowl. The tall woman had shed her black jacket from that morning and now wore a sleeveless black T with a Led Zeppelin logo.

“Britta, this is Detective Bolton.” Truman held her gaze, trying to communicate his confidence in Bolton. “He’s one of the good guys.”

She gave Bolton a short nod. “I’d offer coffee, but I only have tea.”

Both men declined, she gestured to the benches on her porch, and everyone sat. Truman had an impression that she’d mentally rehearsed the offer of drinks and seating, that it had taken effort to remember what a host does when visitors arrive. Even if those visitors were police.

She immediately took the lead on the conversation, again implying that she’d thought ahead. “I assume Chief Daly has told you that I found the body while walking Zara, and that she wanted out around three in the morning. I didn’t hear anything or see anything at that time or before she led me to the body.” She crossed her arms again and leaned back against the siding of her home, clearly finished. Zara sat near her feet, her attention on the men.

“He did,” answered Bolton. “Have you seen anyone unusual in the area in the last three or four days? Strange vehicles?”

“I can’t see the road from my home, and no one has ventured up my driveway—that I’m aware of.”

“How about your neighbors? Any mentions of odd occurrences from them?”

“I don’t communicate with my neighbors.”

“At all?” Bolton asked.

“There is no one near. The next property is nearly a half mile east down the road. He came by here once, but that was months ago.”

Bolton had his notebook out. “I’ll visit to ask if he noticed anything. What’s his name?” His pen hovered over the paper as he waited for her answer.

Britta was silent for a long moment, a slightly flustered look on her face. “I don’t know. I’m sure he told me when he was here, but I’ve forgotten.”

“That’s okay.”

“Wait.” She suddenly sat forward. Lines appeared on her forehead, and she visibly swallowed. “That body—I think it’s about the same age and hair . . .”

“You think it could be your neighbor?” Truman asked sharply.

Her pale eyes fastened on him. “I don’t know. But a second ago as I recalled our encounter, I had a brief feeling that there were similarities between the victim and him.” She looked back to Bolton, her hands gripping the edge of the bench, turning her knuckles white. “You’re going there next?”

“We will,” Bolton told her. “This meeting with your neighbor clearly stuck with you. What happened?”

Her face blanked, and an invisible wall formed in front of her. Zara stood and put her paws on Britta’s lap, giving a quiet whine. Britta stroked the dog’s head. “Nothing happened. He stopped by and introduced himself as my neighbor.”

“I assume you answered with a weapon ready,” said Truman. He held up a hand as Bolton turned toward him. “She knows what she’s doing. Out here with no one around, it’s smart to take precautions.” Especially as a woman living alone.

Britta grimaced. “I did. I heard him drive up and was on the porch before he got out of the car. He laughed at my rifle and said he’d heard I lived alone.”

“Jesus Christ,” mumbled Bolton. “Was he asking to be shot?”

“Then he said he was just being neighborly, introducing himself, and wanted to tell me I could call on him if I needed help with anything on the property or had an emergency.”

The encounter was perfectly normal for rural neighbors. People expected to know who lived nearby and relied on each other in a crisis. But the neighbor’s visit would have triggered every anxiety Britta carried in her brain.

“I’d seen him one other time,” Britta continued. “He was at the end of his driveway on foot and tried to flag me down as I drove by.” She shook her head emphatically. “Hell no.”

Again, typical rural behavior. Neighbors waved. Neighbors stopped to chat. Neighbors stopped to see if there was an emergency.

But to a woman who had survived two attempted murders, stopping for a stranger was a big *no*.

She picked at the frayed hem of her T-shirt with nervous fingers. “Now I see his face on that body out there. My head is messing with me.”

Bolton stood. “We’ll go check on him now. I’ll call if I have more questions.” Zara padded to him, rubbing against his leg and begging for attention.

Britta eyed her dog. “I appreciate it. And you can stop by if you come up with more,” she said.

Truman nearly tipped backward off his bench.



Bolton drove, and Truman rode along to check on Britta’s neighbor.

“You made an impression,” Truman told him, still stunned that Britta had suggested the detective stop by. He wanted to text Mercy to share his surprise.

No communication.

The silence from Mercy was already grating on him. He’d reached for his phone twice that morning to shoot her a quick text. He hadn’t realized what a habit it was to share little things with her throughout his day.

“I didn’t do anything special. Just listened. Helps that I know what she’s been through.” Bolton slowed on the narrow two-lane road. “That must be it.” He turned into the driveway next to a battered mailbox that had clearly been a victim of kids in cars with baseball bats.

They already knew the owner was Darrell Palmer, age forty-five. Both men had studied his driver's license photo and been unable to confirm he was their victim. But they hadn't been able to rule him out either.

The Palmer driveway was long and curving, with fields just like Britta's, but Britta's road was in better shape. The Palmer drive was full of deep ruts. Bolton drove slowly, cursing under his breath as he heard a scrape along the underside of his vehicle. A small green farmhouse appeared, a large pickup parked on one side. Three big dogs rushed Bolton's vehicle, barking their heads off.

Bolton turned off the vehicle, and both men sat in the Explorer as the dogs pawed the doors, their angry faces at the windows. Saliva dripped from their mouths. "Now what? A replay of *Cujo*?" asked Bolton.

A man stepped out from behind the house and called the dogs. They immediately raced to their master, and Truman noticed a tiny fluffy white dog had joined the three big ones. It barked just as much.

"That him?" Truman asked, squinting at the man, who herded the three large animals into a dog run. The white one ran in circles around his legs.

"Can't tell," replied Bolton. Once the owner threw the bolt on the run, the men opened the Explorer's doors. Bolton swore at the scratches on the paint.

"How's it going?" The man waved as he strode toward them, and Truman breathed a sigh of relief. It was Darrell Palmer.

"Not dead," Bolton said under his breath.

Britta had been right that Darrell was the same size as the dead body. But the large stomach hanging over his belt was from food or beer. Not the decay of death. His hair was the same salt-and-pepper as their dead body, but his teeth showed in a wide, welcoming smile.

"What can I do for you?" Darrell said as he shook their hands and waved off their IDs. His dark eyes were earnest and showed an eagerness to help. Now silent, the little white dog sniffed at Truman's boots.

"There's been an incident on a neighbor's property, and I'm asking people on this road if they saw or heard anything strange overnight," Bolton said. Truman took a half step back and to the side. It was Bolton's interview, so his role was watcher. To watch the interviewee's hands and reactions.

Darrell's eyes narrowed, and concern filled his face at Bolton's words. He hooked two fingers in a belt loop and tugged up his jeans. "Was anyone hurt? Which neighbor?"

"The next property west of here. She's fine."

His face cleared. "Glad to hear it. She keeps to herself. Don't know her that well. Not that I haven't tried."

"See any strange vehicles or people in the area?" Bolton pointed at the dogs. "Your dogs quiet overnight?"

"The dogs are never quiet. Always something setting them off. I swear the local wildlife hangs around here just to tease them when they're locked up."

"You kennel them at night?" Truman asked.

"Yep. Lots of critters around here that would take a bite out of them." Darrell bent over and scooped up the white dog, giving it a loving scratch under the chin. It was missing an eye. "This one stays in the house. But to answer your first question, I didn't see or hear anything overnight." He glanced from Bolton to Truman and back. "What happened?"

"A man is dead. We haven't identified him yet, but it appears he was shot."

"Holy shit!" The little dog yipped as Darrell squeezed it in surprise. "Dead?" His eyes narrowed again, and he lowered his voice. "Did she do it? She kill him? She pulled a gun on me the first—and last—time I stopped by there."

"Ms. Vale is currently not a suspect," Bolton answered. He leaned closer to the man and lowered his voice. "Just for your information, if you knew Ms. Vale's history, you'd understand why she's jumpy. She wishes to be left alone, and I'd respect that."

Darrell searched Bolton's face and slowly nodded. "Got it. Was just being neighborly. Don't like seeing a woman living alone out here, stuff happens—Well, obviously something happened last night. How are you going to identify him?"

"We have several avenues to start with."

"Well, I know a lot of people around here. I could take a look, if it's not too—you know—if the face isn't . . ." His words trailed off. Truman had glimpsed his eagerness to help, but now the man pulled back when he realized it would be morbid.

Bolton looked at Truman, a question in his eyes.



*Should we show him a photo?*

Truman shrugged. He would, but it was Bolton's call.

The detective weighed his choices, indecision in his eyes. He finally pulled out his phone and scrolled through the photos. "Are you sure, Mr. Palmer? The man has been dead for a few days. It's not pleasant." Holding his phone so Darrell couldn't see, Bolton flashed a photo of the dead man at Truman, who nodded his approval. The photo didn't show the damage to the side of the head from the gunshot.

Darrell raised his chin. "I understand, but if I can help, I'd like to."

Bolton held out his phone, and Darrell Palmer paled at the sight. He swayed slightly, looking nauseated, and Truman stepped forward in case the man was going down.

"Don't know him," Darrell forced out, his eyes wide and unable to look away from the image. "If he's been dead for a few days, why did you ask about last night?"

"Because we believe the body was moved to Ms. Vale's property last night."

"Moved?" Darrell glanced at Bolton but immediately went back to the photo. The pulse at his neck was visible. "You're saying someone dumped the body a while after he was killed." Darrell motioned for Bolton to put away his phone and started petting his dog in a way that reminded Truman of Britta and Zara.

"I can't believe this happened here." Darrell stared into the distance, his words subdued. "Usually good people in these parts." He slowly shook his head. "Can't believe it," he repeated.

"That's your truck, right?" Truman asked.

Darrell turned to see where Truman had gestured. "Yes."

"Mind if I look at it?"

Confusion crossed his face. "Should I mind?"

"Darrell, what about the last three days?" Bolton pulled Darrell's attention from Truman. "Have you seen anything unusual?"

Truman quietly strode to the truck and studied the tires. He compared them to the photo of the tire treads on his phone. They were similar. Maybe. He took a quick photo of a tire tread and went back to the other two men. Darrell had set the dog down and now stood with his hands crammed in the front pockets of his jeans. He looked defeated.

Truman sympathized. It wasn't every day you were shown a picture of a dead body. To his surprise, Darrell asked to see it again and planted his feet in preparation as Bolton obliged. This time his face didn't change, but he held his breath until he looked away.

"That's enough," Darrell said, closing his eyes for a long second. He squared himself and looked at both men. "Just wanted to make sure. I was a bit shocked the first time. Don't know the poor soul."

They shook hands and then returned to Bolton's Explorer.

"Had second thoughts about showing him the photo," Bolton said as he started the vehicle.

"Same. He did okay, though."

"Thought we might get lucky. Let's try the next property."

Truman nodded and turned his attention out the window, recalling Darrell's shock at the photo. People believed they could handle the sight of death; they saw it in movies and on TV.

Death in real life wasn't the same.

Not at all.

# SEVEN

A few minutes after Mercy had arrived in America's Preserve, she stood outside one of the larger buildings with Chad and Ed. "Why can't you go with me?" Mercy asked Chad in a soft voice, looking from him to Ed and back, playing up the girlfriend role.

"Pete does the first interview alone," Chad reassured her. He rubbed his hands up and down her upper arms as if she was cold. Which she was. It was easily ten degrees cooler in the hills than in the town. Reassurance shone in Chad's gaze, and Mercy assumed it was for her as an agent and for Jessica as a newbie.

The compound's buildings were a few hundred yards inside the gate. The roads had fresh gravel, and a few of the buildings had new coats of paint. The other buildings clearly needed their siding replaced and attention paid to their roofs. Mercy wondered if the new paint hid structural issues or if they'd been repaired first.

She reviewed the satellite map in her memory. Her perspective felt skewed. It was one thing to look at a picture and another to be standing on the grounds. Somewhere far to her left was the area with the new building and the carport. The structure she currently stood before was freshly painted and had a formal-looking placard on the door that read **COMMAND CENTER**.

*Rather pretentious.*

Ed opened the door and waited. Chad gave her an encouraging look and a long kiss on the lips and then stepped back. Mercy adjusted her duffel on her shoulder and followed Ed indoors. Inside was dark compared to the bright sunshine outdoors. The windows were small, and she suspected the faded plaid curtains had belonged to the original camp. It smelled slightly sour, as if someone had spilled milk and never cleaned it up. Ed helped her shrug off the heavy bag. "I'll take your purse too."

“Thank you.”

He took her phone out of her purse and handed it to her. “Hold on to this.” His eyes were earnest. “Remember. Impress him.”

She nodded and slipped the phone in her pants pocket.

He set the bags on a large table surrounded by mismatched chairs and then knocked on the door labeled COMMANDER.

Someone inside spoke, and Ed opened the door a few inches, waving her through.

*Ed didn't take my bags to be helpful; he's going to search them.*

Mercy entered the small office and recognized Pete Hodges from the ATF photos at her briefing. He stepped out from behind his desk and shook her hand, never breaking eye contact. His clear gray gaze was friendly, his face slightly battered by life, stating he'd earned the lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth. The ATF photos hadn't indicated the intensity Pete projected. Every ounce of his focus was on her, and she couldn't look away.

“Welcome, Jessica. You don't know how much Chad has looked forward to this day.”

“Thank you, sir. I'm happy to be here with him finally.”

Pete Hodges wasn't a big man. He was compact and trim, and she knew he was in his late forties. His gray hair was military short, and, like Ed, he was clean-shaven. He didn't wear camouflage, but his pants and shirt were a dark olive green. A gun belt lay on a filing cabinet behind him.

Mercy felt naked.

She had rarely used her agency weapon, but its presence had always been reassuring. Now she was in the middle of hostile territory, and she suspected most of the people were armed.

As he studied her from head to toe, she shuffled her feet and took a quick look around the room as any nervous person would do. An American flag stood in the corner, a gold eagle at the top of its pole. A map of the local terrain hung on one wood-paneled wall, and impressive nature photos covered another. Purple flowers, towering pines, dusky waterfalls.

*Is he the photographer?*

“Everyone has a thirty-day trial period,” Pete began. “During this time you will be evaluated to see if you're a good fit for the community we are trying to build.”

“I could be kicked out?” Mercy blinked several times to appear concerned. “Can Chad go with me if I have to leave?”

“If he wishes.” Pete’s tone was cautious.

“I get along with everyone,” Mercy said. “I’m a hard worker.”

“You have thirty days to show us that.” This time he gave a broad smile, and Mercy was shocked to realize how much she’d wanted his approval—and not buy-my-cover-story approval. Something about him made her want to work for him, stand with him. And she’d met him sixty seconds ago.

He had an unusual energy that attracted people. An X factor. It was why people had followed him to a remote camp and given up their cell phones.

“On paper you seemed like a good fit,” Pete continued. “That’s why I said you could come, but I am curious why you’d leave your old life behind.”

“I didn’t. Chad is here, so my life is here too.”

Pete sat on the edge of his desk and crossed his arms. “We have a philosophy. A way of working together. Everyone has to fulfill their role, or the entire system falls apart. We’re dependent on each other.”

“I understand. I’ve always been a team player, but what kind of role will I have?”

Pete studied her for a moment. “I don’t know just yet. We’ll try you out in a few positions. I’ve found that the best role usually exposes itself. You have a medical background, right?”

“I have an associate’s in nursing.”

“We need someone to be in charge of health care.”

“Oh!” Mercy straightened. “I’m not a doctor. You need someone more skilled than me to do that.”

“We’ll see,” Pete said noncommittally. “What else can you do?”

“Ummm . . . I was a waitress, but I’m not much of a cook.”

“Childcare?”

“I guess.” *Does living with a teenager count?*

“Things are run differently here. You won’t have any Ponzi-scheme government retirement to rely on. No FDA telling you what you can’t eat. No fake news stations telling you what to believe.”

“That’s why Chad and I are here,” Mercy said. “We wanted to start fresh, and I hate that I can’t turn around without tripping over laws and taxes.” She counted on her fingers. “Taxes on cars, taxes on property, laws to regulate absolutely everything.” She met his gaze. “I love my country,

but some things are out of hand. My paycheck gets smaller every year, and that missing money goes to rich men who are only trying to get richer.”

Pete nodded slowly.

Mercy was confident she'd said the right thing.

“You'll have to give up some liberties to live here. To have true unity, we all have to be equal. Your life won't be the same.” He leaned forward, crossing his arms and giving her a hard stare. “It won't be easy.” The understanding, friendly commander was gone.

*He's attempting to trigger my anxiety.*

Mercy recognized the interrogation technique; she'd used it many times. Heightened anxiety could make the subject reveal deceptive behaviors. Rubbing their nose, pulling an ear, twisting hair, stalling between answers.

He wanted to see if she was hiding something.

She held perfectly still and focused on his eyes.

“I know. But from what Chad has told me, I'll gain so much more.” She removed her phone from her pocket and balanced it on her palm. “I was told no phones.” Her fingers closed around the phone as she looked at it regretfully. “I don't need to see what my friends are eating for dinner or what their kids wore to school.” She extended the phone to him.

He took it while watching her with curious eyes.

She lifted her chin. “It'll take a while, but I'll get used to no phone. It's more of a habit than anything else.”

“Did Chad tell you you'll be bunking with the other women for now?”

“Yes.”

She kept her face expressionless as he studied her for a long moment, probably expecting a protest against the sleeping arrangements. She repressed an overwhelming urge to scratch her nose.

“I'll get Vera to show you where you're staying. She is your superior. All the women answer to her, and she answers to me.”

He turned his back, and her interview was over.

*I think I passed.*



In the room outside Pete's office Mercy stood motionless, her arms held out from her sides and her eyes focused on the ugly plaid curtains as Vera

Warner's hands explored below her breasts.

Vera grimaced. "I'm sorry. Everyone gets searched when they first arrive. You never know what people are trying to sneak in." Vera was alarmingly thin, and her skin was tinged with an odd yellow undertone that made her look sickly. Her dark hair was pulled tight against her head in a ponytail, enhancing her narrow face. Blue veins branched along her temples and the sides of her neck.

"I get it," Mercy murmured. At least Vera had told her there wouldn't be a cavity search. "What do people sneak in besides phones?"

"Mainly drugs."

"Pete runs a tight ship?"

"The tightest. No drugs of any kind allowed."

"What about necessary prescriptions?"

"Are they truly necessary?" Vera took on a lecturing tone. "People are put on medications to keep the pharmaceutical companies in business. Doctors get kickbacks for every medication they prescribe. The public has been brainwashed to believe they can heal with only the right pill. You'd be surprised what a few weeks of honest physical labor and clean air can do for a person. It's the cure to many ills."

Mercy bit her tongue before she argued that labor was no substitute for insulin or an emergency epinephrine dose for anaphylaxis. Vera finished her pat down. She'd been thorough, even making Mercy remove her boots for a close examination. She gestured for Mercy to grab her bags and led her out of the command center.

The zipper on Mercy's duffel was not in the position in which she'd left it.

*Not surprised.*

"How long have you lived here?" Mercy asked as she jogged to catch up with the woman. Vera's thin legs took incredibly long strides, and her jeans were slightly too short, exposing grimy socks above her hiking boots. The brown canvas coat with a sheep's-wool collar was several sizes too large and hung loosely on her.

"I've been here nine months."

"When did Pete start the camp?"

"Pete took it over. The man who had started it left after only two months." She huffed, expressing her scorn for the quitter. "That was about a year ago."

“Pete seems to be doing a good job.”

“He is.” Admiration for Pete rang in Vera’s voice. “This is a secure place, and I feel incredibly safe. No foreigners. These are all good, brave men who just want to live in America’s Preserve as the Constitution said we could.”

“Ah . . . that’s nice to hear.” *I don’t want to hear her definition of foreigner.*

“Children are being raised right. We’ve got a good teacher who doesn’t clutter their brains with useless subjects. They are taught what they need to know.”

“How many children are here?”

“Nine—including two toddlers. Sadie teaches them. She used to work in a school.”

*Work in a school* did not mean “be a teacher.”

“I’m glad Pete has made education a priority,” Mercy said. “Setting up a school can be expensive.”

“Oh, we don’t really need any supplies. Sadie uses the oral tradition—how schooling *used* to be. Memorization and recitation are their tools. The children’s minds aren’t cluttered with video games and television, so they perform better.”

Mercy couldn’t speak for a long moment. “Can they read?” Her words sounded strangled.

Vera frowned, no pause in her rapid gait. “Lotta lies printed out there. Stuff they’re better off not reading. We teach them that a man’s spoken word is his bond.”

She’d stumbled into the Stone Age.

“Honor is important.” Mercy couldn’t think of anything else agreeable to say.

“Absolutely. Lying isn’t tolerated here.” She turned and scrutinized Mercy. “The average person tells seven lies a day. It’s so ingrained in our behavior that we don’t know we’re doing it. White lies, little deceptions. Usually they’re not intentional, but I recommend you start paying attention to what you say—you will be challenged if you lie.”

“Good to know,” Mercy choked out. *What are the consequences?*

They reached one of the buildings that hadn’t been renovated. The porch sagged, and dry rot was visible around the doorframe. “Here we go,” Vera stated as she opened the door. “We have a large room at the back with



bunks, and then this is the community area in the front. Two bathrooms, but one is out of service at the moment.”

“How many women?”

“You’re number eleven.”

*Eleven women; one bathroom.*

The building was silent. Two mismatched couches were pushed against the walls of the room. A few old lamps and some chairs completed the community area. No curtains, no wall art.

It was dismal.

“Come this way.” Vera waved for Mercy to follow her down a narrow hall. They passed two closed doors, one with an OUT OF ORDER sign tacked to it. Vera pushed open a third door. “This room is for sleeping only. You’ll have a box to store your clothing that slides under the bed.”

Mercy counted six sets of bunk beds. Vera pointed at one directly in the center of the room. “The lower is yours.”

No privacy. All four sides of the bed were open to anyone in the room, and it held a two-inch-thick, heavily stained mattress. Clearly the worst location and probably the oldest mattress in the cabin.

“You start at the bottom here and work your way up,” Vera said, watching Mercy eye the mattress. “Good work will be rewarded.”

Pete had said everyone was equal.

She wondered what his sleeping conditions were like.

A cough pulled her attention to a bunk in the corner. In the shadows a woman partially sat up, her weight on one arm.

“Cindy?” Vera snapped. “You didn’t tell me you couldn’t make duty.”

“I’m on my way. Breakfast didn’t sit well in my stomach, and I had a rough morning.” Cindy sat up all the way and leaned forward, bringing her face into the light. She looked about Mercy’s age, and her hair clumped in long strands, desperately in need of a wash. She awkwardly pushed to her feet, and Mercy caught her breath.

Cindy was hugely pregnant. Bigger than Rose had been at the end of her pregnancy. Mercy tensed with worry, her mind cluttered with questions. *How far away is the hospital? What if the roads are icy? Is there a doctor nearby?*

“You must be Jessica,” Cindy said softly. “You’re a nurse, right? I’m so glad to have some medical help here now.”

Mercy froze. She knew some medical basics. The ABCs. Airway, Breathing, Circulation. How to stop bleeding, how to splint bones, how to treat infections.

Not how to handle pregnancy emergencies.

“Wh-when are you due?” Mercy’s mouth was dry.

“Soon, I think.”

“Have you seen an obstetrician?”

Cindy put a hand on her stomach. A familiar gesture Rose had made a hundred times. “No, but I can feel the baby moving, so everything is okay.” She panted, trying to catch her breath.

Mercy turned to Vera. “I don’t know anything about pregnancy. She needs to be closer to medical care. What if she goes into labor?”

“Women have been giving birth since the start of time,” Vera stated seriously. “Doctors cause complications. They only want to give drugs or cut the women open to speed up the birth, and hospitals are full of nasty bacteria.” She nodded at Cindy. “Birth is painful; it’s our legacy of being women. With some fresh air and plenty of clean water, she’ll do just fine.”

Mercy’s mother was a midwife, and Vera was right about one thing: plenty of labors went fine. The childbirths that weren’t fine were the problem. Her mother knew when a hospital and obstetrician were needed for safety.

If they called on Mercy when Cindy went into labor, her automatic answer would be, “Ambulance. Now.”

“You need to go help with lunch,” Vera instructed the pregnant woman. “Get moving now, and I won’t give you a strike.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.” Cindy dipped her head at Vera. “And welcome to your new home, Jessica.” Cindy walked gingerly as she left the room, and Rose’s complaints of aching feet echoed in Mercy’s memory.

“It’d be helpful to know when she’s due,” Mercy said tentatively. “A doctor—”

“Isn’t needed,” finished Vera. “She’s a strong, healthy woman. Now drop your stuff, and I’ll show you the rest of the camp.”

Mercy set her belongings on the mattress, refusing to look closer at the stains and wondering if other women had given birth at the camp. “Do you have a room with some medical equipment?”

“Bandages and first aid things are in the supply depot. You just ask for what you need.”

“I’d like to see what medical supplies you have. Maybe take an inventory.”

“No, you can’t do that. No one accesses the supply depot but the quartermaster. We can’t have people grabbing what they want willy-nilly. You can make a request and they’ll pull it for you. There’s no cost for the supplies. We believe in giving our people the necessities—clothes, toiletries, food.”

“That’s amazing.” Vera’s worn-out clothing indicated differently.

“But it has to be a sincere need,” Vera clarified. “You can’t requisition new boots because yours developed a hole. Patch it. Figure it out yourself before you burden others with your demands. There’s no room for selfishness here. We reuse everything until it falls apart and is beyond repair. For example, a ripped and worn-out shirt can be cut up and made into other articles of clothing.”

“That’s how I was raised,” Mercy said quietly, thinking of her prepper upbringing. “My parents lived off the land. We relied on no one for anything. It was important that we were self-sufficient.”

“You were raised right,” Vera said in a pleased tone. “Don’t see a lot of that anymore.”

“People think everything is disposable these days. What else do you supply?” Mercy asked respectfully. “There were items that even my parents had to purchase. Cooking equipment, certain spices, automotive parts, some medications.”

Vera snorted. “Spices? Totally unnecessary. I already told you our policy on medications, so of course we don’t supply those.”

“Not even Advil or Tylenol?”

“A little pain never hurt anyone.”

“What about treating fevers?”

“Fevers just need to run their course. The human body is made to battle such things.” She put her hands on her hips and cocked her head, her intense stare looking Mercy up and down. “I don’t know if you’re the right person to handle our medical issues. We do things differently here. I’ll have to talk to Pete about it.” She gestured for Mercy to follow her out of the bunk room. “I’ll show you where to get lunch.”

Anger flashed in Mercy’s vision. Stone Age medical care.

A split second before Mercy stepped out of the room, something moved in a dark corner, and a slim, blonde figure darted behind a bunk,

leaving Mercy with an impression of wide blue eyes in a young face.

*Someone avoiding duty?*

With only eleven women on-site, no doubt it'd be obvious who hadn't shown up for her work. Mercy kept her mouth shut.

Becoming a rat wasn't a good way to make a first impression.

Or maybe it was in America's Preserve.

# EIGHT

For the number of people in the mess hall, it was oddly quiet. Scents of coffee and baking bread assaulted Mercy as she stepped in the door, and her stomach growled. Most of the people sitting at the dozen long tables glanced up to see who had entered. The curious stares created a physical sensation that poked Mercy in the gut and weighed on her shoulders. She felt as if a dozen targets were spread across her body, and she fought a desire to glare down some of the stares.

*Jessica is a sweet woman.*

Instead Mercy gave tentative smiles and avoided direct eye contact. She followed Vera toward the short line of men at the rear of the hall, where residents waited for their food. Lunch was served cafeteria style. Women behind a counter scooped food onto plates as people patiently waited with trays. She spotted Chad in line and tension drained from her body, surprising her with its sudden relief.

*This morning has been rather stressful.*

Vera stopped at the end of the line, but Mercy passed her by and tapped Chad's arm. He turned, and his eyes lit up as he spotted her.

"Hey, babe." He hugged her, and her muscles relaxed at his touch. The friendly face meant more to her than she had expected. A quick kiss on her lips followed. "Getting settled in?"

"Yes. Vera—"

"Back of the line," said a gruff voice to her left. Mercy turned and was chilled by the anger in the man's icy-blue eyes.

"I will in just a second."

"Don't want to watch that lovey shit while I eat," was his reply. His knuckles whitened on the tray that rested against his large stomach. He was

big, with a thick beard. The men behind him shifted, positioning themselves to get a better view of her and Chad.

“Back off, Beckett,” ordered Chad. “We’re just saying hello. No one will keep you from getting your lunch.”

Beckett glowered.

His face was heavily lined, and his graying hair needed a trim. He was dressed like the other men. Jeans, boots, heavy coat. All faded into the same indistinct color from countless washings. And in dire need of another.

Mercy stepped away from Chad, worried she’d affected his reputation with the other men. “Sorry,” she said to Beckett. “We haven’t seen each other in a long time.”

“Don’t fuckin’ care.”

She exchanged a look with Chad. His eyes offered no solution, and she decided it was best to leave. *Don’t rock the boat.* “Save me a seat.”

Beckett scoffed.

Keeping her gaze on the floor, she rejoined Vera. “Ignore Beckett,” the other woman whispered. “He’s an asshole to everyone.”

“Pete allows it?”

“They go back a long ways.”

Mercy drew a breath through her nose, making a mental note to avoid Beckett.

“Your man knows better than to call Beckett out for being a dick or to walk away from the scene with you. Don’t take it personally. He needs to save face with the other men.”

“That’s okay.”

The line moved quickly, and Mercy set her tray on the stainless steel counter where Cindy and three other women were serving the food. Cindy was sweating heavily, strain showing on her face, but she gave Mercy a half smile and placed a plate with a piece of homemade bread on her tray. The woman next to her dumped a ladle of gravy with some sort of ground meat on top of the bread and slid Mercy’s tray to the next woman, who gave her a skimpy scoop of canned green beans. Mercy thanked them and received a few surprised glances in return.

She gripped her tray and searched the crowded tables for Chad.

“We’ll sit over there,” Vera instructed, pointing at a table near a row of garbage cans. A few women sat in a tight group.

“I was going to talk with Chad.”

“The women sit at that table,” Vera said firmly.

Mercy nearly dropped her tray. She trailed after Vera in shock.

Four women looked up as they approached.

*This feels like high school.*

She took a seat by Vera, who ran through quick introductions. Mercy nodded at each woman in turn as her mind tried to comprehend why the men and women were separated.

*Do they separate married couples?*

*Where are the children?*

Eyeing the thick, unattractive gravy that’d been dumped on her bread, Mercy took a cautious bite, and flavor exploded in her mouth. The sausage gravy was amazing. “This is incredible,” she uttered in shock as she dived in for another bite.

“Food’s usually pretty good,” said the woman sitting across from Mercy, her focus on her own tray. The rest of the women ate silently. Mercy pegged Vera as the oldest at the table, and the youngest appeared to be in her early twenties. None of them wore makeup. Hair was worn straight down or pulled back, and all of their clothing had seen better days. They looked content and ate heartily. No one moped or picked at her food.

Mercy had nearly finished her delicious gravy and bread when a piercing siren sounded outside. The mess hall exploded into action. People leaped up from their seats, and the men poured out of the mess hall, boots pounding, leaving their lunches on the table.

*What is happening?*

Mercy’s stomach churned in panic, and she stood, her right hand automatically touching her side, where she had no weapon. Vera and another woman ran to open a cabinet and yanked gas masks off the shelves.

*We’re under attack.*

Terror bombarded her as the siren continued its wail of warning. Someone shoved a gas mask in her hands, and Vera hauled her down and under one of the tables. “What is going on?” Mercy hissed as she fumbled with the mask. Her parents had never stocked gas masks, unlike some of their survivalist acquaintances.

“Drill.” Vera slipped on her own mask and tightened the straps.

Relief made Mercy’s hands go limp. Vera grabbed Mercy’s mask and shoved it on her face as the other women huddled under the tables. The

hideous black masks on the women, with their built-in respirators and eye protection, made her feel as if she were hiding with a group of huge bugs.

*This is insane.*

“Where are the men going?” she asked.

“To fortify the perimeter and gates.”

The door to the mess hall opened, and from under the table Mercy watched a pair of heavy boots and camo pants enter. The man closed the door and stood in front of it, his feet planted. Mercy leaned forward to see more of him and saw a rifle held ready.

*To keep us in or keep attackers out?*

“The drill won’t last much longer,” Vera whispered, her voice muffled through the mask.

“How did you know it was a drill?” Mercy asked as she kept an eye on the figure blocking the door.

“The siren was steady. If this had been the real thing, the sound would have pulsated.”

“Who do you expect to attack this camp?”

“Get your mask right or you’ll get a strike,” Vera told her, ignoring her question. “You’re of no use to the group if you’re dead from poisonous air.”

Mercy adjusted the straps until they fit smoothly around her head. It smelled strongly of rubber. “What’s a strike?”

“Pete didn’t tell you about strikes?”

“No.”

“Three strikes and you’re punished. Strikes are given for missing work or missing the drills. You can also get one at a lieutenant’s discretion for insubordination or just being messy.”

“Who are the lieutenants?” Carleen had briefed Mercy on the group’s simple command structure. Pete delegated to four lieutenants.

Vera jerked her head toward the door. “That’s one right there. He’s in charge of the women during drills.”

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to have you in charge of the women?” Vera seemed very competent.

Vera’s eyes widened behind her mask’s eye protection, and she slowly shook her head. “You have a lot to learn.”

“I’m trying.”

The siren abruptly stopped, and from the direction of the lieutenant Mercy heard the crackle of an inaudible question over a radio.



“Mess hall secure,” answered the man at the door. He raised his voice. “Line up!”

The women scrambled out from under the table, and Mercy joined them in a straight line before the lieutenant. He was dressed from head to toe in camo and had slung his AR-15 over his shoulder. He didn’t wear a gas mask but walked the line of women and inspected theirs. He tugged on a strap here and there but didn’t issue any strikes.

*I think he used to be a cop.*

Mercy recognized it in the way his balance was always forward and by the movement of his hands—always up front and ready—and the continuous visual assessment of his surroundings. She wondered what had happened to make him leave the world behind and join this compound. Pete’s group was firmly anti-law enforcement at all levels.

He got to Mercy and stopped, scanning her from boots to mask, and she hoped her mask was adjusted correctly. He was in his midtwenties and reminded her of a blond actor whose name was on the tip of her tongue—she could see him in her mind but couldn’t come up with the name. The lieutenant was a younger version of the actor.

He moved on. No strike.

“As you were.”

The women pulled off the masks and finger combed their hair, talking quietly among themselves. Mercy fumbled to loosen the straps she couldn’t see, taking a deep breath once she was free. The lieutenant briefly met her gaze.

“Polk!” he said loudly.

A split second passed before Mercy realized he’d called her last name.

“Yes, sir?”

“Report to the command center in five minutes.” He adjusted the strap of his rifle and left the mess hall.

The other women stopped to stare at her.

“Did I screw up? What does Pete want?” Dread filled her chest as the other women all looked away. “Vera?” she asked. “Do you know why?”

Vera shrugged and took Mercy’s mask from her hands to return it to the cabinet. “Probably nothing. Maybe Pete realized he forgot to cover something in your introduction—like strikes.” Her throat moved as she swallowed, and she didn’t meet Mercy’s eyes.

*Shit.*

Mercy sat back down at the table and considered what was left of her now-cold gravy, bread, and beans. She had five minutes to finish, but it didn't matter.

Her appetite was long gone.

# NINE

Mercy hesitated at the outer door of the command center. *Do I knock?* She squared her shoulders, turned the handle, and walked into the waiting area to find Chad and Ed. Chad was pacing the small room, his back stiff and his hands restless. Ed leaned against a table, his arms crossed on his chest. The air was thick with tension.

*Pete figured us out.*

“What’s wrong?” asked Mercy.

“Pete has some questions about some of the stuff from your bag,” Chad answered as he walked over and took both her hands. He held eye contact, and Mercy felt reassurance flow from him. She took a deep breath.

“I didn’t pack anything you told me not to.”

“That’s not quite right,” Ed stated. He hadn’t budged from his position at the table.

“What shouldn’t I have packed?” She ran through a mental list of her belongings and froze on Advil.

*Vera’s comments about analgesics.*

The commander’s door opened, and Pete appeared. “Polk. Inside.”

Mercy glanced at Chad and Ed. Both were silent. Chad’s gaze was sympathetic and Ed’s emotionless. Inside Pete’s office she spotted her plastic bag of medical supplies on his desk. She’d thrown several pieces from her vehicle’s medical kit into a large ziplock bag. Advil, a tiny bottle of epinephrine, syringes, bandages, topical antibiotic cream, a curved needle, and sterile sutures. Beside the plastic bag lay her favorite Leatherman tool and the XStat syringes.

The syringes that the ATF agent had casually tossed aside while sorting her medical supplies, and Mercy had grabbed back. Eddie’s lifesavers.

Pete moved behind his desk and stood silently watching her. Her heart pounding, Mercy surveyed the items and then met his gaze.

“I’ve learned from Vera that Advil is frowned upon,” she stated. “Is that the problem?”

Pete lowered his gaze to the items on his desk. “I see a lot of problems here.”

Mercy tilted her head. “I guess it could look that way to you. To me these are smart items to always have on hand.” She paused. “Is the Leatherman considered a weapon?”

She’d known there were strict rules about weapons, but she’d never mentally classified the tool as a weapon.

“It has two sharp blades, so yes.”

“I can see how it looks that way. I backpack a lot,” she lied. “It’s an important tool for me, but I guess I won’t have much use for it here.”

Pete picked up the sealed XStat packet. “I’ve heard of these but never seen them before. I find it odd that someone would carry them, even if you are a nurse.”

Mercy would never be without one. A small quiver shot up her spine, and she fought to calm her breathing. *Keep the lie as close to the truth as possible.*

She looked away from Pete and gnawed on her lower lip. “I came across a hunting accident while backpacking one time. I didn’t know the man—but I could have saved his life if I’d had one of those with me.” She raised her eyes to meet Pete’s gaze. “I told myself I’d never be caught without one again.” She sucked in a quivering breath.

Pete stared at her for a long moment. “Are you often in the position where the people around you are shot?”

Yes. “No—but carrying this makes me feel as if I have my bases covered. I’m a nurse, and I wasn’t adequately prepared.”

“You can’t save everyone.”

“I do my best to try.”

He studied the XStat package. “I’ll add it to our medical supplies, so it will be available. Same with your other medical items. The Leatherman will be confiscated.”

“Understood.”

He moved her collection to the top of a bookcase behind him, and a sense of loss swamped Mercy. She wanted her things. She needed to

physically touch them. She frequently inventoried her GOOD bag and medical kit, knowing full well they were completely stocked; the action of touching and seeing her supplies calmed her.

Now she felt twitchy.

“Sir, I’d like to view your medical supplies. It would help to know what the camp has on hand.”

“Only the quartermaster is allowed in the supply depot.”

Mercy tried again. “Don’t you think the medical supplies should be more readily accessible to a professional? You suggested I might oversee health care here. The first thing I would recommend is making those supplies available to the person who knows how to use them.”

Pete was silent.

“If I have a person going into anaphylaxis because he was stung by a bee, there won’t be time to requisition a dose of epi from the quartermaster before the victim’s throat closes up—and that’s assuming the epi on hand hasn’t expired.”

“Are you always this aggressive?” His voice was tight and controlled.

*A loaded question.*

She had seen how women were perceived in Pete’s camp. A smart person would duck her head and keep her mouth shut. Mercy didn’t feel accommodating.

“A man with an accidental gunshot died in front of me. I wasn’t prepared. I can help make your emergency care the best it can be. Accidents happen in rustic locations like yours. To me, being prepared for them is worth fighting for.”

The silence in the room was suffocating.

Mercy had dropped eye contact after her bold statement, waiting for his judgment. He’d either assign her to clean the toilets or he’d see the logic.

She was betting he was a logical man.

“Did you know we have a pregnant woman?”

Her gaze flew to his. “Yes. Cindy. Very pregnant.”

“Can you handle a birth?”

*I don’t want to.*

“I’ve never attended a birth, and I have absolutely no confidence in handling a delivery that develops issues. A million things can go wrong.” Mercy pictured the exhausted woman. “She needs to see a doctor. Her

blood sugar should have been tested, and her blood pressure needs to be monitored. These don't sound important, but they can reveal hidden deadly problems for the mother or baby."

His lips twisted up on one side. "You sound like you'd rather handle a gunshot wound than a birth."

Mercy thought for a long second. "I would," she admitted.

Pete rubbed his forehead. "I'll think some more on the pregnancy, and I'll have the quartermaster pull all the medical supplies, but I'll decide where they should be kept." His eyes grew stern. "I expect economy with the supplies."

"That's the only way I operate." Pride filled her. She'd gotten through to the commander on her first day here. *Maybe he's not so bad.*

"You can go." He waved a hand at the door.

Mercy turned away.

*Guns. I'm supposed to uncover missing guns and the plan to hurt the ATF.*

She had to keep the mission's goal at the forefront of her thoughts and not be distracted by hugely pregnant women or misogynists.



Chad gripped Mercy's hand as he walked her back to the women's cabin. Ed had been gone when she stepped out of Pete's office, and Chad had looked stressed. He leaned close as they strolled. "Everything okay?" he asked almost silently.

She gave him a look of adoration, wondering if anyone was watching. "Yes. I actually made some headway in convincing Pete that he should take my advice in medical situations. But I'm not here to bandage cuts. What have you found out?"

Chad stopped her in the center of the compound, many yards from any building, and cupped his hand against her cheek. "Rumors. All I hear are rumors. But I've heard more frequent references to a 'big plan.' I don't know if that means a camp barbecue or a militia action." He gave her a long kiss.

Mercy's mind raced, ignoring the lips pressing against hers. "You haven't seen the stolen guns? Or come across any explosives?" she asked after coming up for air.

He rested his forehead on hers. “No. I’ve been in the armory. There’s nothing in there to raise eyebrows, and frankly it’s a lot smaller than I expected for the number of people here. When we drill, there aren’t enough weapons for all the men, let alone the women.”

“Does Pete carefully regulate who gets to handle a gun?”

“He does. During the drills the newer recruits aren’t allowed a gun. On a regular day, the patrols and lieutenants are the only ones who are armed.”

“Do you think they were behind the ATF weapons robbery eight months ago?”

“I haven’t been able to confirm that.”

Mercy frowned. People talked. Especially this many people in close quarters. Chad should have heard something. “But you heard mentions of a plan.”

“Actually I’ve only *overheard* things,” he clarified. “No one has talked directly to me about it.”

“Don’t they trust you?”

He restarted their slow walk across the compound. “No one is trusted at first. They’ll watch every move you make for the first month—”

“Month?” The loud word slipped out. “I’m not staying here a month,” she whispered.

“You’re here as long as it takes.” Chad’s emphatic words were nearly soundless.

Images of Truman and Kaylie spun through Mercy’s head. *They don’t know where I am.*

“Do you have a family?” she whispered.

“I’m not answering that, and don’t tell me anything about yourself. We are Chad and Jessica. Nothing else.”

In case they were caught and tortured. Neither of them would have information about the other.

*He doesn’t even know I’m FBI.*

“You have a satellite phone somewhere?” She suddenly felt very vulnerable. Few people knew where she was, and she had no way to contact the outside world.

He nodded. “Buried far outside of the compound. I’ll show you where it is once they relax your surveillance.”

The surveillance that he’d said would last a month. Her hands ached to hold a phone. A lifeline to the real world.

“Pete runs this camp on fear,” Chad added. “And it works well. They’re scared.”

“But supportive.” Vera’s devotion to Pete popped into her mind.

“Absolutely. They talk about him like he’s a god.”

“What type of people are his lieutenants?”

Chad let go of her hand and put an arm around her shoulders as they walked. “From what I’ve gathered, men he’s known for years.”

“Former law enforcement?” Mercy remembered the stance of the guard in the mess hall.

“Or military. But even they don’t question Pete—not that I’ve seen, anyway. Don’t know what goes on behind closed doors. Those four lieutenants are the only men he meets with.”

“We need to get you into one of those positions,” Mercy whispered. “That would mean eliminating one of the lieutenants—an accident or maybe an injury.”

Chad shook his head. “I wouldn’t be next in line.”

“We can present you as indispensable. The mechanical skills are helpful to the group, but what could you do to show this place *needs* you?” An idea struck her. “Turn in a member for a disloyalty?”

“Everyone toes the line here,” Chad said.

“Then we set him up.”

He shuddered. “I don’t know. I don’t want someone physically punished.” He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. “You’re ruthless.”

She didn’t want to spend months in the compound waiting for something to happen.

“We might have to prod a few people to get things moving.”

Chad halted and turned her to face him, his hands on her shoulders, his eyes hard. “You need to dial it back. You’re going to get both of us killed. I’ve seen how these people operate, and when something goes wrong—or is assumed to have gone wrong—the punishment is swift and severe.”

Mercy looked from one of his eyes to the other, a small chill starting at the base of her spine. “How severe?”

His mouth flattened, his eyes bleak. “I’ve seen men whipped . . . nearly to death.”

Mercy couldn’t speak.

“One of them was transported to the hospital. He didn’t come back.”

“Dead?” Her voice cracked.



“We were told he was expelled from the group. I don’t know if I believe that.”

The chill fully encased her spine, and she shuddered.

“Do you understand now?”

She gave a short nod.

“You think you got through to Pete, but I know he will not trust you until you’ve proven yourself over time. Do not trust him. Trust *no one*.”

*Does that include you?*

An earlier thought returned: Chad’s lack of intel for the amount of time he’d lived in the camp. And he hadn’t told her where the satellite phone was yet.

The seed of doubt was sown.

*Dammit.*

She no longer trusted her partner.

# TEN

After tossing and turning all night, Mercy followed Vera through the morning chill to see the rest of the camp. She'd worn her heaviest coat and pulled on a knit pink hat in response to the temperature. The "dorm" had been freezing the entire night, and her racing thoughts wouldn't let her sleep. Her brain was occupied with Pete and Chad. And her family.

Visions of Truman, Kaylie, and even Ollie had crept in and berated her for not telling them the truth. She'd followed orders by keeping the mission silent, but now she wondered if she was in over her head. It felt as if she had started at the beginning of an investigation instead of joining Chad at the tail end. The ATF had given her the impression that it was almost ready to wrap things up.

*Or did Carleen stretch the truth?*

She shuddered to think that the agent had been dishonest in order to recruit Mercy.

*They seemed desperate.*

As Vera led her up a steep hill, Mercy shoved the thoughts into a corner of her mind to analyze later. There was no point in obsessing over something that had already happened. Her goal was to find out what Pete had planned, discover where the stolen weapons were being stored, and get the hell out. She'd established herself to Pete as someone who had a bit of spine, and she needed to find the balance between being a subordinate and being someone with ideas worth listening to. Rocking the boat would not be acceptable here.

She frowned at Vera's back, watching her put one foot in front of the other, puffs of dusty, dry dirt rising with every step. Vera was potentially Mercy's biggest source of information. The key was to ask questions that

would seem normal for a new recruit. “Do you know when I’ll be able to move in with Chad?” Mercy asked.

Vera stopped her climb, slightly winded, and gave Mercy a hard stare. “When it’s time. Our facilities aren’t ready overnight. Takes work. Elbow grease. It’s not like we have furnished apartments ready for you to move into. Currently all the construction is focused on a special project. Once that is done, the cabins will get more work.”

Mercy lowered her gaze. “Okay. We’ve been apart for a long time.”

Vera snorted. “Haven’t gotten any in a while, have you? You’re better off finding a spot against a tree trunk.” A scornful glare filled her face. “Watch out for the bark. It’s pretty rough.”

*Seriously?* “It’s more than that . . .”

“Your first commitment is to the group as a whole. Family is second.” She looked down at Mercy. “You two aren’t married, so he doesn’t qualify as family.”

“He’s all I’ve got.”

Vera resumed her walk up the slope. “You’re best off learning not to lean on one person. This is the perfect place to do that. Our community is successful because everyone pulls their weight.” She grunted. “Almost everybody.”

“I can’t see Pete tolerating laziness,” Mercy prodded.

“He doesn’t. Didn’t he tell you about the thirty-day trial period? Everyone shows their true colors within that time.”

“He told me. Has he kicked many people out?”

Vera glanced back at her, her expression unreadable. “A few. Others choose to leave. Those who prove themselves are rewarded.”

Mercy hadn’t seen anything that constituted a reward in the camp. “What do you mean?” Her stomach twinged as she wondered if women were expected to “offer” the rewards.

“Pete values dedication. Commitment.” Vera held out her hand as if to offer a fist bump. Mercy was startled at the friendly gesture and started to raise her hand in return when Vera pointed to a spot on the back of her wrist. “See that?”

A pink circle stood out against Vera’s sun-aged skin. It was about an inch and a half in diameter, slightly bumpy and raised.

*A brand.* Mercy caught her breath, the burning pain unimaginable to her.

“Did Pete do that to you?” Mercy whispered.

Pride shone in Vera’s eyes. “Yes. Only a few of us have earned it. The circle represents our group. Never ending. Continuity. One smooth movement.”

Mercy couldn’t speak.

A rapid flare of anger appeared in Vera’s eyes as she caught the force of Mercy’s shocked gaze. “You’re new. This is an honor. You’ll understand in time—or you won’t.” She spun around and continued her hike. Mercy moved her feet automatically, one after the other, her brain struggling to process what she’d just seen, her hand automatically rubbing the back of her wrist.

Pete marked his people. And they valued it.

*Like a cult?*

She couldn’t picture Chad’s wrists, but she was pretty sure she’d noticed a mark on Ed’s.

*I’d have noticed if Chad had the brand. Right?*

Nausea swamped her as she imagined being offered the “honor.” Would she accept? Had Chad already been forced into that decision?

They reached the top of the hill and descended a short way to a flattened area. Several pens with small makeshift sheds dotted the clearing. A few goats ventured out of one of the sheds to stare at the newcomers.

“The kids take care of the chickens and goats,” Vera said as she opened the gate to one pen. A large henhouse sat in a corner, and Mercy wasn’t surprised the chickens were staying inside, out of the cold. The coop door swung open, and two children stepped out. *Three children*, Mercy corrected herself as she spotted a ghost of a tiny girl behind a small boy. The taller blonde girl held a large basket full of eggs. She was a teenager, maybe sixteen, not a child. Her blue stare was direct and discerning, and felt shrewd beyond her years. In a split second, her eyes disclosed a lifetime of hard living and cynicism. Her two small sidekicks darted behind her to cautiously peer out at Mercy.

Their gazes were of pure innocence. And apprehension.

The teenager turned her head to look at the children, and Mercy recognized her profile. She was the one Mercy had spotted hiding in the dorm when Vera spoke to Cindy.

*Someone is sneaky.*

The teen immediately topped Mercy's list of people to prod for information.

"Eden. This is Jessica," Vera announced. "Behind Eden is her brother, Noah, and Olivia is Sadie's girl." In a lower voice to Mercy she said, "Eden and Noah don't have a mother."

"Good morning," Mercy said, meeting the teenager's eyes square on.

"You're the nurse?" Eden asked, her wide gaze cautious. She had a navy knit cap pulled low on her head, and her blonde hair reached past her shoulders. Her jacket was several sizes too big, and the children's coats hung sloppily, oversize for their tiny frames.

"Yes." Mercy mentally apologized to every nurse she'd ever met for the subterfuge. It'd been only two days, and she was already tired of the lie.

Eden pulled Noah out from behind her. "He's hot." The boy appeared to be five or six and completely exhausted.

Noah didn't look up at Mercy. She crouched beside him and pushed back his hood, immediately feeling an unnatural heat radiate from him. "Hi, Noah. How old are you?" His cheeks were flushed, and his forehead felt very hot to Mercy's inexperienced hand.

"He doesn't talk," piped up Olivia beside him. "He's five." She clutched the boy's hand. "I'm six," she added proudly.

"Thank you, Olivia." Mercy glanced at Eden, who nodded in agreement with Olivia. "How long has he been hot?"

"Two days," Eden said. "I told Sadie, but she said he would be fine."

"Does your throat hurt, Noah?" Mercy asked. The boy finally raised his eyes but shook his head. "Do you mind if I look at your stomach?"

"Why?" Eden asked sharply.

"To check for a rash." *Is there something she doesn't want me to see?*

Worries about child abuse flooded Mercy. *If they brand the adults . . .*

Noah looked up at his sister, who nodded her permission. Mercy gently unzipped his jacket and lifted his thin T-shirt to examine his stomach and back. No bruises, no rash. But he needed a bath. "Any other symptoms?" Mercy asked. "Vomiting, diarrhea?"

Both Noah and Eden shook their heads.

Mercy studied the boy for a moment. "Noah, do your ears hurt?" His wide gaze flew to hers, and he touched his right ear.

*Aha.* Listening to Rose talk about the fevers and illnesses of her preschool kids had paid off.

Mercy stood. “He doesn’t talk, but does he hear okay?” she asked Eden.

“Oh yes. He can hear the chipmunks and mice before I do.” She ran a hand through her brother’s shaggy hair. “The talking thing is new,” she said softly. “He spoke before.”

“Before what?” Mercy questioned.

“Kids get fevers,” Vera cut in. “It’s normal.”

Fury rocked Mercy. “He probably has an ear infection. He needs something for the fever and pain,” she said directly to Vera. “Just because adults can handle pain . . .” She dropped her gaze to Vera’s wrist. “It doesn’t mean children need to suffer. Especially when their pain is so simple to treat.”

“You’ll have to ask Pete.” Vera sniffed.

“You want me to interrupt Pete’s work with a question about a boy’s fever? Surely he has more important things on his plate. I think this is the kind of decision he wanted to delegate to someone in charge of medical. He said yesterday he’d have the quartermaster section out the medical supplies. I’ll get something for Noah from him.”

Eden’s eyes were sharp as she followed the exchange.

Mercy knew she’d overstepped. “I’m not challenging you, Vera,” she said in an earnest voice. “I’ve got a soft spot for kids, and when you combine that with an illness, it will make me jump into action.”

Vera’s stubborn expression didn’t falter.

Mercy tried again. “Every successful group needs to be healthy. I’m here to help keep everyone performing at their peak. We don’t want to be known as that group that *denied* health care to children,” she emphasized.

The older woman’s cheek twitched.

Over the past decade, several notorious cases had rattled the Northwest in which parents had denied basic health care to their children, leading to their deaths. The public uproar and subsequent legal battles had filled news headlines for months.

“Leave this one to me,” Mercy said. “If someone gets in trouble for medicating Noah, it falls on me. Not you. It’s a chance I’m willing to take. My commitment is to the group as a whole.” She deliberately repeated Vera’s words from earlier.

A small measure of respect flickered in the woman’s eyes. “As you wish.” She turned to Eden and inspected the basket of eggs. “Now. That

looks like a good haul. Are the counts still going up?"

Mercy took a deep breath as Eden and Vera discussed the eggs. *Is this how it's going to be? I have to argue for basic needs?* She gave a half smile to Olivia as the child openly studied her.

"I like your hair," Olivia said in all seriousness. "I've always wanted long, dark hair. Like Princess Jasmine. I like your pink hat too."

"Thank you." Mercy smiled, wondering how long ago the child had watched Princess Jasmine on TV. "Would you believe I always wanted blonde hair? Like Cinderella? It seems like we always want what we don't have."

The child's forehead wrinkled as she pondered Mercy's words. "I guess that's why I want so much."

Mercy's heart shattered. She pulled off the knit cap and exchanged it for Olivia's brown one. The girl's face lit up, and she dropped Noah's hand to touch the cap with both of her own.

"It's mine?"

"Yes. I have another hat."

Olivia immediately spun to Noah and started chattering to him about the hat. The boy listlessly nodded, and Mercy knew he needed medication sooner than later.

*What he needs is a doctor.*

*One fight at a time.*

Mercy looked around at the animal pens, taking in the patched fencing and poor shed construction. Now a dozen goats watched her group with great interest. There was a peace to being near the livestock. One that reminded her of her family's farm. She moved her gaze to the woods around them and froze as a movement caught her eye.

She was being watched. The lieutenant from the drill.

He met Mercy's gaze and stepped out into the open, not caring that she'd spotted him. He leaned against the trunk of a tree, his rifle on his shoulder.

*They'll watch every move you make for the first month.*

Chad's words ricocheted in her head.

She'd assumed Vera had been assigned to watch her. Apparently Pete felt she deserved another set of eyes.

*I've got to watch my step.*

# ELEVEN

Truman appreciated the invitation from Detective Bolton to attend the medical examiner's review of the body found on Britta's property. As a thank-you, Truman had grabbed a cup of coffee from Kaylie's Coffee Café for the detective. Surprise filled Bolton's eyes as he accepted the cup. "Your niece brews the best coffee. Beats any coffeehouse here in Bend."

*Your niece.* Officially Kaylie wasn't his niece—yet. But it sounded nice.

"I agree."

The men drank in awkward silence as they waited for Dr. Lockhart in her office. Her messy office. Truman had visited enough times in the past to no longer be surprised by the disorganization. The doctor piled files and books and boxes on the shelves, floor, and chairs, while her huge desk with its two computer monitors was crowded with dozens of cat figurines. Various diplomas and accolades hung on the wall. Several of them crooked.

Truman had no doubt the examiner could find whatever she wanted in the office within a split second.

"Nothing in the missing person searches?" Truman asked to break the silence. He knew the answer. He'd done his own searching last night, and he knew Bolton would have told him first thing if he'd found a possible match. At the scene yesterday, Dr. Lockhart had given them a height and approximate weight to search with. She'd been vague on the age, suggesting between thirty and fifty as a place to start. Truman hoped she had more precise numbers today.

"Not yet. I started local and kept expanding until I covered the western half of the United States." Bolton grimaced. "Not looking forward to sifting through the rest of the US."

Truman had done the same. "Plenty of missing men."



“Exactly. But none that resembled our John Doe.”

“Sorry Britta wasn’t a lot of help during her interview yesterday,” Truman said.

“No need to apologize for her. She did fine. She didn’t have much information to supply anyway. All she did was come across the body and hear some barking in the middle of the night.” His mouth lifted on one side. “She’s an interesting one. I don’t know if I’d function as well as she does if my family had been murdered when I was a child.”

Dr. Natasha Lockhart bustled in, and the room lit up with her energy. The men automatically stood. The small woman was a dynamo, her long, black hair pulled back in her usual ponytail, making her resemble a perky yoga instructor. In scrubs. She grabbed a white lab coat from a hook on the back of her door and slipped it on as she approached.

“Truman. Evan.” She shook both their hands and gestured for them to sit as she rounded her desk to her own chair. A slightly unpleasant odor of chemicals followed in her wake. “Thanks for coming in.” She sighed as she sank into her chair. “It’s been a long morning already.”

“What do you have on our John Doe?” Bolton got straight to the point, leaning forward in his seat, his hands clasped between his knees.

Dr. Lockhart raised a brow. “To start with, I have fingerprints for you. Do you have some possible candidates to compare them to?”

“No. I’ll start with a database search.”

“Bummer.” The examiner started to tap her keyboard, typing rapidly with only her first fingers. “I will send you my report when I finish writing it. The height I gave you yesterday was accurate, but the weight was light by two pounds.”

“Impressive,” mumbled Truman.

Dr. Lockhart grinned. “I like to see how close I can guess the weight. It’s hard to narrow the age range, but I’ve adjusted it to between forty and fifty-five. It’s very subjective. He has gum disease, which has led to minor bone loss in his jaw, half of his hair is gray, and there’s a loss of elasticity in his skin in a few places. But all those things can happen early or late in life. I took into account that he exhibits all three when I made my age estimate.” She squinted at her screen. “As you probably noticed, he’s Caucasian. And even though his belly was very bloated from decomp, he’s actually quite thin.”

“Was he . . .” Bolton paused. “Assaulted?”

“You mean sexually? No.”

“Why remove his clothing?”

Dr. Lockhart shrugged. “That’s your part of the investigation.” Her eyes moved back and forth as she read her screen. “Nothing in his stomach.”

“He hadn’t eaten?” Bolton asked. “You said he was thin. Was he being starved?”

The doctor tapped her chin as she thought. “I need lab results. His serum proteins will be off if he’s suffering from malnutrition. The labs aren’t definitive on their own. I have to consider the physical signs, and I’d say he wasn’t getting enough to eat. Or chose not to eat enough.”

“He was being held captive and not fed?” Bolton wondered out loud.

“No abrasions on his wrists or ankles to indicate he was restrained,” the doctor said. “We removed the dirt from under his nails for evidence, but his hands didn’t show signs of defensive wounds or have the broken nails that I’ve seen when someone is trying to escape out of something.”

“Did the evidence techs find fingerprints anywhere on the body?” Truman asked. Human skin was tough to print, but he knew it could be done.

“No,” replied Dr. Lockhart. “They tried several different ways but only found smears. I suspect whoever moved him wore gloves. I did recover the bullet. As you saw at the scene, there was only an entry wound, no exit. I sent the bullet to ballistics—it was mangled, but it was definitely from a smaller-caliber weapon. They should have a report for you soon. I hope it’s helpful.”

Bolton nodded and made a notation in his notebook.

“The shot was made very close to the head,” she continued. “I found stippling from the gunpowder in his scalp. I followed the path of the bullet through his brain and around inside his skull.”

Truman winced at the mental image.

“The angle of the path puts the gun at a steep angle, shooting downward.” She met Bolton’s and Truman’s eyes, her face solemn.

“You mean the victim was below the shooter?” Truman asked. “Like on his knees?”

“Shit.” Bolton tapped his notebook, scowling. “You’re saying—”

“Yes, like you’d imagine for an execution.” Dr. Lockhart turned back to her screen. “And as you’ll remember—”

“You made the same suggestion with the John Doe from a month ago,” Bolton finished. “His injury had an exit wound, but the angle was similar—from above. I recall you mentioned the stippling on that victim’s scalp too.”

Truman exhaled. *Men are being executed?*

“Do you see any other similarities to this case from the first John Doe?” Bolton asked.

Dr. Lockhart nodded as she typed. “I knew you’d ask about that.” She rested her chin on a fist as she studied her screen. “The first John Doe was younger. Late twenties or early thirties. He was also naked except for underwear. I couldn’t make as many exterior physical observations because he was in an advanced state of decomposition. Cause of death was the gunshot wound.”

“Same caliber?” Bolton asked hopefully.

She grimaced. “I will say it’s not impossible—gunshot wounds from the first victim indicate it was also a smaller-caliber weapon, but I can’t state more than that.”

“You have to consider they’re related,” Truman told Bolton. “Especially with the angle of the gunshots.”

“I do,” said Bolton. He sighed and rubbed his forehead. “Shit.”

*Do we have a serial killer?*

# TWELVE

Mercy tried the doorknob to the supply depot. Locked. She pounded on the door and stepped back to wait. Her thumb tried to spin her engagement ring, a new habit, but found nothing on her left ring finger. Her subconscious had forgotten she'd left it behind.

*Dammit.*

She settled for pacing with her arms crossed. Vera had pointed out the supply depot as they returned to the main portion of the compound. "Good luck," the sour woman had commented. "I'd stick around to watch, but I have work to do." Vera sniffed and walked away.

*Watch what?*

Mercy was determined to get some acetaminophen for Noah and then get a look at the camp's medical supplies. Slow, heavy footsteps sounded inside, and the door opened.

*Shit.*

It was the overweight man from yesterday's lunch line. The one who'd complained when she kissed Chad.

His current scowl matched the one from the day before.

No. It was worse.

"What do you want?" he asked gruffly, his bearded face clearly unhappy with her presence.

She searched her memory for his name but came up empty. "I'm Jessica—"

"I know who you are. Why are you banging on my door?"

"Are you in charge of supplies?" she asked, praying he was not.

"I'm the quartermaster." He emphasized his title as he crossed his arms, and she spotted a round scar on his wrist.

*Great. He's a trusted member of Pete's posse and hated me on sight.*

“I’m sorry. I didn’t catch your name yesterday.” She gave a nervous, small smile, hoping to thaw the ice in his pale-blue eyes.

“Beckett.” No thaw.

“Pete told me you’d separate out the medical supplies for me.”

The scowl deepened. “He told me to do that but didn’t say anything about you.”

“He’s put me in charge of medical care for the group,” she told him. “I need to know what we have on hand.”

“You’re supposed to requisition something when you need it.”

Mercy drew a breath and silently asked for patience. “Pete and I talked about me having quick access to the medical supplies.”

“I heard nothing about that.”

Mercy doubted that. “So I need to go find Pete right now?”

The scowl faltered, and she knew she’d touched a sensitive spot. Like Vera, Beckett was protective of—or fearful about—his leader’s time. He knew what duties Pete would concern himself with and which would be delegated.

The large man shifted his weight, his boots scuffing the dusty flooring. “I pulled the supplies together. You can take a look for now,” he said reluctantly.

Mercy considered that a win. “Thank you.”

“Wait here.”

He closed the door in her face just as she caught a glimpse of a dozen shelving units packed with cartons and sacks.

*They wouldn’t store weapons here.*

Although Beckett was as protective of his supplies as if he were guarding stolen weapons. She tried to imagine him taking part in the heist that had intercepted the ATF’s transportation of weapons. The agent who survived the attack had described fast-moving, prepared, and precise men who overpowered him. Beckett didn’t move swiftly. His steps were ponderous and heavy. In the brief moment she’d watched him move, he’d clearly favored one leg.

Pete could move fast. Small, wiry, explosive.

The group of men she’d seen rush out of the mess hall yesterday hadn’t moved with trained precision. They’d been an awkward group, some moving much slower than others. If she sorted through the men, she could probably pick out an efficient crew, but she hadn’t spent enough time with

them. Ed was older and slow. No military exactness there. So far Pete topped her list.

Chad was fit.

The theft was eight months ago. Chad had been on the outside.

*Doesn't mean he couldn't have been involved.*

Dirty agents weren't a new concept. Stuff happened. Agents were pushed over the edge and sometimes sympathized with the people they were supposed to investigate. She hadn't seen sympathy from Chad, but she still questioned his lack of information for the amount of time he'd spent in the compound.

Guilt pierced her chest.

*I need facts before I can suspect him.*

But she believed in keeping all options available.

The door opened, and Beckett appeared with a small, dingy cardboard box under one arm. He handed it to her. "You can look in it right here."

Mercy stared into the box. It was a jumbled mess of crushed Band-Aid boxes and old pill bottles. It looked like an ancient bunch of supplies found under a bathroom sink. Horror twisted through her brain.

*I'm supposed to treat injuries with this?*

She dug with one hand, looking for her supplies, which Pete had said would be added to the stock. They weren't there. No XStat syringes or sutures. Possibly they were still in Pete's office.

*Would he keep them for himself?*

"This is ridiculous," she muttered as she dug. Dirty spools of medical tape, loose bandages, and empty syringes. "Is this all of it?" she asked Beckett.

"Yep."

"There isn't even a blood-pressure cuff or stethoscope or thermometer in here. This isn't a medical kit. It's someone's medicine cabinet rejects."

He shrugged and leaned against the doorjamb.

*You'll be sorry when you're in need.*

She dug a little more. *Yes!* A grimy bottle of eighty-milligram Children's Tylenol. She shook it and exhaled as several pills rattled inside. It'd expired a month ago, but right now she didn't care.

Mercy handed the cardboard box back to Beckett, keeping the bottle as she read the label. Compound members had probably not bothered with the medication, because an adult dose was at least a half dozen tablets.

“Nope.” Beckett held his hand out for the bottle.

Mercy was confused. “I need a few.”

“Then why are you taking the whole bottle?”

She gritted her teeth, removed the lid, and shook out three purple pills. She handed him the bottle and held the pills on her palm for him to see. “I’d like to requisition these pills,” she forced out through a clenched jaw, holding his gaze.

*Ridiculous.*

“Who is it for?”

“Do you really need to know?”

“Yep. You’ve got a lot of pills there.”

She held the bottle up so he could see the label. “This is a single dose for a five-year-old. It will only last four to six hours.”

“That stuff can be addicting.”

Mercy raised a brow. “Uh . . . no, it can’t. It’s fucking Tylenol . . . not an opioid.”

“Watch your mouth. You don’t know what the government puts in that bottle.” His expression was completely serious.

Mercy stared and bit her tongue. *It’s not my place to educate him—as if he’d listen anyway.*

“It’s for Noah,” she told him.

“The kid?” Surprise lit Beckett’s eyes.

“Yes. He has a high fever and probably an ear infection.”

The scowl was back. “His father was fine with this?”

“Yes,” she lied, knowing that giving medication to other people’s kids was extremely wrong on many levels. She’d talk to the father before she gave it to him, but first she wanted the pain medication approved and in her hand.

He handed her a clipboard. “Log it.”

*Insane.*

She nearly wrote her real name, catching herself at the last second. *Three Children’s Tylenol*, she wrote, along with the date. She gave back the clipboard. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.” He smiled, showing a mouthful of yellowed teeth.

She spun away on one foot, fuming.

*At least I got it.*



On her way to find Noah, Mercy wound past the chickens and goats. Earlier, when Vera had mentioned that Sadie watched the children, she'd gestured to the east of the pens. Mercy found a rough path beyond the livestock and followed it, hoping to find the children's cabin.

The morning chill was gone, and the sun shone from the clear sky, but Mercy avoided the shade offered by the ponderosa and skinnier lodgepole pines, wanting the sunlight on her face. Her dirt path was clear of pine needles, unlike every other square foot of space near the trees.

"Are you the nurse?"

Looking up from her boots, Mercy froze at the sight of an unfamiliar male and instinctively stepped into a defensive stance. He was tall and lean. His shirt was stained with sweat and had ripped at the neck. Under the brim of his battered cap, his blue eyes seemed familiar, and she wondered if she'd seen him in the mess hall.

"Yes."

"My boy is sick. I was just checking on him."

"Are you Noah's father?"

Surprise widened the blue eyes. "I am. I'm Jason."

*Aha.* His eyes were exactly like Eden's. Wide and a vibrant blue.

"You already knew he was sick?" Jason asked.

"I saw him earlier, and I have something that should help with the fever," Mercy said tentatively. "I suspect he has an ear infection. Ideally he should see a doctor. I don't have the right equipment to properly diagnose an infection." She purposefully didn't name the Tylenol, hoping he'd simply give her general permission to treat his son.

His shoulders sagged. "Do what you can. My request to take him to a doctor has already been turned down."

"Why?"

"Everyone says childhood sicknesses are normal. We shouldn't be running to the doctor for drugs every time someone skins a knee." His gaze was flat, the words recited as if by rote.

*I'm getting tired of the same excuse.*

"This isn't a skinned knee. It's possible his hearing could be permanently affected—and what if I'm wrong? What if something else is causing the fever?"



“Fever is normal,” he stated.

“It’s okay if I try to lower his fever with what I have?”

“Yeah.” He looked away, and Mercy remembered Vera had said Eden and Noah didn’t have a mother, making her wonder what had happened. “I need to get back to work.” He passed her on the path without another word.

Mercy silently seethed as she watched him walk away. Children’s fevers could rapidly rise from mild to alarming. Why did no one care?

She continued her trek. Hearing chatter ahead, she spotted a cabin under one of the towering pines. A few children were playing tag and the others hopscotch. The game’s outline had been scratched in the dusty dirt, and several rocks dotted the boxes. She counted six kids. Olivia had shed her coat, but she still wore Mercy’s pink hat.

Mercy paused before the children spotted her, watching for a long moment. The children seemed happy, but something about the environment seemed off. It took a moment before she registered that there were no toys. The kids were playing games with what they could find in nature.

As Mercy and her siblings had done.

It wasn’t a bad way to grow up, but she had longed for the toys that other kids had.

*These kids don’t have anyone to be envious of.*

But the camp had been active for only about a year. Surely these children had had toys before that. They had to miss those.

She didn’t see Noah or Eden. Since Jason had said he’d been visiting, she assumed the two children were inside. Mercy stepped out from behind a tree and was immediately spotted by Olivia, who alerted the others. The kids stopped their play and stared at her in silence.

It was slightly creepy to approach the group of soundless kids. It was as if someone had flipped off a switch. The children were young; Mercy doubted anyone was older than ten. Their faces were dirty, and a few were barefoot, their toes brown with dirt. Mercy hoped they had shoes for the cold.

“Hi, Olivia,” she said to the one child she knew.

Olivia smiled. She touched her pink hat and nodded but didn’t say anything this time. Mercy wondered if the kids had been taught not to speak when adults were present.

“Is Noah around?”

Olivia pointed at the cabin, and the other children resumed their game as Mercy passed by. She glanced at the hopscotch squares. Something was wrong about the squares, but she couldn't put a finger on it.

The door to the cabin was open, and it took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dim light. Noah was curled up on a thin mat in the corner, his body looking bony under his thin shirt and pants. The sight stirred a long-hidden memory in Mercy's mind.

*My mother checking on a sick child. I was with her.*

Mercy couldn't have been more than ten.

The thin little boy had been sleeping on the floor like Noah.

The home had smelled like pork. And cabbage. Four other children had spied on Mercy and her mother from a loft above the main room. Her mother had been very worried about the boy. Mercy could tell from her tone as she talked to the child's mother.

Eden sat beside Noah, leaning against the wall, a toddler asleep against her shoulder. Her sharp eyes immediately locked on Mercy's. A woman held another child as she slowly swayed back and forth in a creaking rocking chair.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked quietly as she gestured that the child was sleeping. Her face was narrow, and her dark hair hung limply around her face. She looked very young.

"Are you Sadie?" Mercy whispered.

"I am. Are you here for Noah?"

Word got around fast.

"Yes. I've got something for his fever. I ran into his father on the path just now, and he said to do whatever I could to help his son."

The young woman nodded. "What do you have?"

"Children's Tylenol."

The rocking stopped. "That's okay?"

"Jason said to do whatever. Why? Has Noah experienced a bad reaction to it?"

"He's had it before." Eden spoke up. "My mom gave it to him." She fastened a stare on Mercy. "It will make him feel better?"

"I've told them we should have medicine on hand for the little ones," Sadie said quietly. "No one listens to me." She stood and took the sleeping toddler to a small crib in the back of the cabin, where she gently laid her down.

Mercy knelt next to Noah, who opened his eyes, and she offered him the pills. “Chew them up. They’ll help with your ear pain,” she told him.

He chewed, and his eyes lit up at the grape flavor.

“Good boy.” Mercy ruffled his hair. She caught Eden watching her carefully. “Hopefully he’ll perk up within a half hour.”

“I’ll take Jenny now.” Sadie held her arms out for the toddler snuggled against Eden’s shoulder. Eden handed off the tiny one with practiced ease, making Mercy miss her new nephew. Rose’s son, Henry, was a happy, bubbly baby, and Mercy couldn’t get enough of the smell of his baby head. There was nothing else like it. Warmth, innocence, and sunshine all wrapped up in a perfect scent.

“Eden, can you introduce me to the other children?” Mercy asked. “They didn’t talk to me as I walked by.”

Sadie had settled back in the rocking chair with the second toddler, and Mercy wanted to talk to Eden alone. The teenager nodded, and Mercy followed her back out into the sunshine. According to nearby shouts, the children were playing hide-and-seek in the forest.

That ill boy Mercy had visited with her mother had been sicker than Noah. Mercy had felt his body heat from several feet away. He wouldn’t open his eyes. He couldn’t lift his head.

Her mother had been angry with the boy’s mother. Why?

Mercy set the memory aside.

“Eden, can you tell me more about Noah not speaking? You mentioned he spoke ‘before.’ When was ‘before?’” They stopped next to the abandoned hopscotch.

“Before my mother left,” Eden stated.

“She left,” Mercy repeated. “Like moved away?” *Please don’t tell me she died.*

“Yes.” Eden kept her gaze straight ahead. “It was right before we moved here. Noah hasn’t spoken since.”

“I’m very sorry about that. Where did you live before here?”

“John Day,” the girl stated, naming a town about an hour south.

“Sometimes traumatic events like a move or a parent leaving will make a young child’s behavior change.”

“I know,” said Eden. “Dad says we’re not to worry about it. He’ll come around. Noah just needs time to get over her being gone.” She glanced at Mercy and raised her chin. “I got over it.”

Sorrow briefly flashed in her blue eyes.

*No, you're not over it.*

"What made your dad move to the compound?" Mercy redirected the conversation.

"He wanted to live here," Eden answered simply. "It's a good place."

Mercy tilted her head. The last sentence sounded like a politician's talking point. Easy to repeat. Full of vague meaning.

"It's very beautiful," Mercy agreed. "I grew up on a ranch and loved it. I was always jealous of the town kids, though. Seemed like they didn't have a quarter of the chores that I did."

"Everyone here has chores," Eden muttered, kicking at a rock. "Or a job. I miss my friends and school. This place is boring."

"But you have school classes here, right?"

Eden rolled her eyes just as Mercy had seen Kaylie do a hundred times. "They're for little kids. I'm the oldest one here. I don't want to learn stupid songs."

"I bet it's hard being the oldest. My brother Owen always complained that he had to do more work than the rest of us simply because he was the oldest."

"He's right. I watch the kids more than Sadie does. She's always running off to do other things."

"What does your dad do here at the camp?"

"Whatever is needed."

*That's not helpful.*

"What did he do before you moved?"

"Worked with cattle. He hadn't worked for a while in John Day. Not many jobs were available. Times were tough for everyone."

More talking points.

"Pete offered him a job?" Mercy asked carefully.

Eden wrinkled her nose. "No, Dad hadn't met Pete before he came here. At least that's what he says."

Mercy's ears perked up. "You think your father knew Pete before you moved?"

She lifted one shoulder. "I think so. Who packs up their family and moves without a job lined up? But it doesn't matter. We're here to stay." She exhaled noisily and crossed her arms.

"Sounds like you're making the best of a dull situation."

“You have no idea how bored I am.” More eye rolling. She dabbed at a box of the hopscotch with her toe. “My mom and dad had a huge fight before she left.”

Mercy wondered if Eden had no one to talk to about her mom. “I’m sorry. What happened?”

“Mom had planned a trip to visit her sister in Pendleton, and Noah and I were going with her, but then Dad said we couldn’t.” She sniffed and wiped her nose with her forearm.

So much for claiming she was past her mom’s abandonment.

“Did she go?”

She appeared to not hear Mercy’s question. “They yelled and yelled at each other. They had to know that Noah and I heard every word.”

“I’m sorry,” Mercy repeated, realizing the girl just needed someone to listen.

“The next morning, she kissed us goodbye and said she’d be back in a week. She hated to leave us behind, but Dad was being stubborn. She needed to go,” Eden told Mercy earnestly. “She only got to see her sister once a year. They were really close.”

*Eden doesn’t want me to be angry with her mother for leaving.*

*Even though she is.*

“I can understand,” Mercy told her. “I went a long time without seeing either of my sisters, and it was awful.” *I missed so much over those fifteen years.*

“After a few days, Dad packed up the house. He said Mom had decided to live with her sister and wasn’t coming back.” She blew out a breath. The last sentence had tumbled out in a rush.

Mercy battled back her shock.

Eden’s father had moved the children while their mother was gone and made them believe they had been abandoned. Mercy doubted that was the entire story. Jason hadn’t seemed evil when she met him. He’d been a dad concerned for his son’s health.

*How concerned can he be if he moved them to this backwoods camp?*

She wondered if Eden’s mother was searching for her children. Had she notified the police? Had Jason not told anyone where they were going? Surely the police would have tracked down this family by now.

“Eden, did you get to say goodbye to your friends before you left?”

“No.” She took a quick look around them and leaned closer to Mercy. “I don’t think my dad told anyone where we went. I know he owed some bills. I don’t think he wants to be found.”

“I don’t think anyone who lives here wants to be found,” Mercy stated. “Eden . . . does your mother know where you moved?”

“Of course.”

“You’ve talked to her?”

“Well, no. Dad says she doesn’t want to talk to us, because it hurts too much. It wasn’t easy for her to leave.”

“Why do you think she left?”

“Because they fought all the time. There was never enough money. Dad did the best he could.” She wiped her eyes again.

*How lonely is this girl that she’s telling a complete stranger her story?*

“Eden.” Mercy waited until the girl looked up at her. “Nothing is harder for a mother than to leave her children, and usually there is a much deeper reason for leaving than fighting with a spouse.”

*Do I tell her I suspect her mother is looking for her?*

*No. I can’t stir up trouble.*

“I hate her.” Tears leaked from the blue eyes.

“There’s nothing wrong with being angry in this situation. And there is nothing wrong with loving your mother even though you’re bitter. You can do both.”

Eden nodded, but Mercy doubted her words had penetrated the girl’s grief. Her wounded gaze had ripped something apart inside of Mercy. She set a comforting hand on the girl’s shoulder and then was stunned when the teen immediately stepped close and wrapped her arms around Mercy’s middle, burying her face in Mercy’s shirt.

*She has no one.*

Guilt touched Mercy as she remembered her idea to get the girl alone to question her about the camp. That could wait for another day. Right now she had a broken teenage heart to console. She patted Eden on her back and let her cry. As Mercy waited, her gaze fell on the odd hopscotch drawn in the dirt. Then she saw it.

*It doesn’t have numbers.*

Hopscotch had boxes numbered one through ten. These squares were blank.

Cold fear wrapped around her lungs. *Do the children not remember their numbers?*

No books. Oral lessons.

An uneducated society was a malleable society.

That day they visited the sick boy, Mercy's mother had been angry because that family wouldn't help their son. No medicine, no doctors. "If he's meant to be healed, God will heal him," the boy's mother had stated, ignoring Mercy's mother's pleas.

He died that night.

Mercy shivered and wondered how the woman's other children had fared.

Kids would not be left to die as long as Mercy breathed.

Heavy boot steps made her and Eden look up. The lieutenant who had watched Mercy earlier that morning was marching toward them. Eden stiffened, and Mercy tightened her arms around the girl. He didn't meet their gaze as he passed and strode into Sadie's cabin, his AR-15 still slung over a shoulder.

Mercy and Eden exchanged a glance.

"Who—" Mercy started.

"Polk!" The lieutenant stepped out of the doorway. "You're with me."

Eden let go of Mercy and stepped away, an alarming fear in her eyes.

"Where are we going?" Mercy asked.

"Pete needs to see you."

"Can it wait for—"

"No. Now."

"I need to—"

"Hell, woman! Get moving!"

Mercy clamped her mouth shut. *Don't rock the boat.*

"My dad said she could give Noah the medicine." Eden put her hands on her hips, glaring at the man.

Surprise filled Mercy. *Is that what this is about? Tylenol?*

"She can tell it to Pete."

*He can't be serious.* Mercy considered the uptight lieutenant. She suddenly remembered the name of the actor he'd reminded her of. "Has anyone ever said you look like a younger Kiefer Sutherland?"

Amusement flashed. "Walk," he ordered.

She walked.

# THIRTEEN

That afternoon after the autopsy, Truman rested his chin in one propped-up hand as he studied the bullet hole images from both John Does on his computer screen.

*Executions?*

Dr. Lockhart's word echoed in his head. His mind was fixated on the image of these men kneeling as they took a bullet to the head. Had the killer looked them in the eye before he shot? Had the same man murdered both victims?

Truman worried this train of thought was keeping him from considering other possibilities. It was too early to jump to the conclusion of a serial killer in Deschutes County. They could have nothing to do with each other.

*Then why does my gut say they do?*

He closed the images, rubbing his eyes with both hands. He needed to focus on Eagle's Nest issues. Speeders. Loose livestock. Minors with alcohol. His priority was the safety of his residents, not looking over Evan Bolton's shoulder.

Although he appreciated the courtesies Bolton had extended him.

A soft knock on his closed door made him frown. No one in the office knocked like that.

"Come in," he said loudly, quickly straightening some papers on his desk.

Karl Kilpatrick opened the door. Surprise raced through Truman at the sight of Mercy's father. He stood and gestured at a chair. "Karl, come in. What can I do for you?"

Mercy's father sat, his cowboy hat in his hand. "Keeping yourself busy?" he asked conversationally. He was a tall man with salt-and-pepper



hair that showed much more salt these days. His eyes were an intense green like Mercy's. Over the last few months, Truman had noticed he moved slower than usual. And had lost weight.

"There's always something," Truman said. "Some days more than others."

"Good. Good, that's good." Karl paused for a long second, contemplating Truman. "How's Ollie doing?"

"He's still going to the community college in Bend. Works at the sports shop on the weekends."

"He's a sharp kid."

"He is." Truman studied the older man. Karl wasn't one for small talk, so Truman knew he hadn't come to shoot the breeze. *Something's up.*

He trusted Karl would get to it in due time.

"Haven't seen my granddaughter in a while." Karl set his hat on the adjacent chair.

"Kaylie? School started. Since it's her senior year, she's working less at the coffee shop." Truman drummed his desktop with his fingers.

"She figured out what she'll do after she graduates?" Karl asked.

Clearly the man was struggling to voice the real reason he had come. Truman would have to help him out.

"Last I heard, she was considering the state schools over in the valley. Mercy insists she get a degree before attending culinary school." Truman took a breath and narrowed his eyes at the man on the other side of his desk. "Karl, you've asked me about everyone but your daughter. What are you really here for?"

Mercy's father looked away, shifting for a more comfortable spot in his chair. "Deborah tried to call her cell phone the other day. Got transferred to her office and was told she's out of town, but they wouldn't say when she'd be back."

"That's correct. She might be gone for two weeks."

Karl focused on Truman. "They wouldn't give her mother a number to reach her. Deborah emailed her, but no response."

Truman was surprised by the concern in Karl's eyes.

"She can't be contacted on this assignment."

He frowned. "That include talking to you too?"

"It does." He wasn't about to share with Mercy's father how out of whack his routine had been since she'd left.

The lines on Karl's forehead deepened, and he cracked two knuckles, gazing out the window.

"I take it you—or Deborah—needs to contact her?"

"It's nothing."

Truman leaned back in his chair and grinned. "Karl, in the entire time I've been chief here, you have never come to my office and made small talk. It's plain as day that something is bugging you, so you might as well tell me."

Karl moved to the edge of his seat, his body forward, his hands clenched in his lap. "Doc's diagnosed me with Parkinson's disease." He held up a hand as Truman started to speak. "Let me finish."

*Mercy should be hearing this.*

"It's early and things are under control. It's not curable—and we can't predict how it will proceed—but it's manageable." Karl took a deep breath. "I've known about it for a while, and it's made me evaluate a few things." He paused and looked hard at Truman. "Things I might not have handled the right way during my life. I did what I thought was correct at the time, but this illness has changed a few of my views." He raised both eyebrows. "Would you believe I even voted for a few Democrats?" He shook his head, disbelief in his eyes.

"I didn't think you voted." Truman had assumed Karl would have nothing to do with any aspect of the government. He studied Mercy's father. Karl had been a strong, independent man all his life. No doubt the diagnosis had rocked him to his core.

"I pay my taxes too. I'm not stupid enough to get flagged in their system. Sometimes the best way to be left alone is to not rock the boat. I've always voted. It's American. But that's not my point." He looked down at his clasped hands and cracked more knuckles. "I mighta done wrong by Mercy."

"Mighta?" Truman was outwardly calm as he raged inside. Karl had essentially banished Mercy from the family when she was eighteen over her refusal to obey his authoritarian ways. Fifteen years had gone by before Mercy spoke with any of her relatives. She still wouldn't be speaking with them if she hadn't been assigned an investigation in Eagle's Nest that involved her brother Levi, Kaylie's father. Levi had been murdered during the assignment.

"I did." Karl raised his chin and met Truman's gaze.

“It’s taken you fucking long enough to admit.” The words spilled off Truman’s tongue as heat radiated through him. “You have no idea the amount of guilt she carries over her relationship with you. And she’s tried to mend the fences; you’ve shut her down every time.”

Karl looked away. He was a proud man. Truman knew he should respect the amount of effort it had taken for Mercy’s father to say what he had, but right now Truman felt his anger pulsate, furious with Karl. Parkinson’s or no Parkinson’s.

Karl should be talking to Mercy, not him.

“It took a life-threatening disease to make you reevaluate your past decisions,” Truman said bitterly. His earlier sympathy for Karl’s health had greatly diminished. “I don’t know what that says about you.”

“I need to talk to her,” Karl said quietly, accepting Truman’s anger.

“Yeah, you do. But you’ll have to wait. I’m sure you can handle two weeks if she lived through fifteen years of silence from you.” Truman exhaled, wanting to punch something. Anything. Mercy had been waiting and wishing for this moment since Truman had met her, and now she wasn’t here.

“Do you think she’ll let me give her away?” Karl asked in a low tone.

Shock and surprise made Truman’s jaw drop. He couldn’t speak.

“How much does she hate me?” he continued.

“She doesn’t hate you,” Truman managed to say. “She hates what you did. She hates your pride that kept you from accepting who she is. And she made something amazing out of herself. You show me another eighteen-year-old girl who knew *nothing* of the real world and became a top-notch FBI agent under her own power, all alone—with the support of *no one*.”

“I’m proud of her,” he admitted. “I don’t like that she works for—”

“Stop right there, Karl. You’re about to negate all the progress you’ve made while sitting in that chair.” Truman ran a hand through his hair, praying he wasn’t ruining Karl’s sudden urge to do the right thing. It wouldn’t surprise him one bit if Karl went back to his old ways before Mercy returned.

“She wants a relationship with you,” Truman began. “She wants her father back in her life. We’ve had several discussions of whether or not she should ask you to walk her down the aisle.”

Karl looked up, hope in his eyes.

“But you know why she hasn’t? She’s terrified you’ll reject her again. *Don’t talk,*” he ordered as Karl opened his mouth. “It tears her apart. Your relationship is the one thing in her life that she hasn’t been able to repair. And she’s tried. I’m sorry I’m pissed right now, but why the hell didn’t you do this a year ago when she came back to town?”

He didn’t answer.

“I won’t let Mercy ask you to give her away,” Truman stated. “You have to come to her. And you will do it *the day* she gets back from this assignment.”

“Understood. And I will,” he promised.

To his surprise, Truman believed him.

“You’ll be a good husband for her,” Karl continued. “I admire you and respect how you support her.”

*Is the world about to end?*

Karl wasn’t done. “I couldn’t have chosen a better hus—”

“I recommend not mentioning you choosing a husband in front of Mercy,” Truman said dryly. Karl’s clumsy attempts to marry off Rose had lit both sisters on fire.

He closed his mouth and nodded. “Noted.”

Karl stood and solemnly held out his hand. Truman rose and shook it firmly, holding Karl’s gaze. “Take care of yourself, Karl.”

“Let me know the minute she’s back.”

“I will.”

Mercy’s father left. Truman dropped into his chair and tipped it back as far as it could go, rubbing his face with both his hands.

*What other miracles will happen today?*



That evening Truman stopped by Mercy’s apartment to check on Kaylie. He’d told her he needed to grab a jacket that he’d left behind, but his real goal was to make certain the teenager wasn’t lonely. He’d asked her if she wanted to stay at his house with him and Ollie, but she’d declined, claiming her cat kept her company.

He knocked on the door, wondering if Mercy’s boss had heard anything from her on assignment. Time was crawling, and he didn’t know how he’d last for twelve more days. Or even longer. At the station this

morning, both Lucas and Samuel had given him hard stares after Truman snapped at Royce. The young officer had returned a patrol vehicle with another dent in the front fender. The third in four months.

Truman didn't think the hard words had been unwarranted.

But his world felt knocked several degrees off its axis.

Had his life changed that much in one year?

It had.

At some point Mercy had become essential to him. To his happiness and peace of mind.

Kaylie opened the door and grinned, her hair in a messy ponytail on top of her head and Dulce in one arm. "You must be really lonely if you're checking up on me," she said with a wink.

"I told you I need a jacket I left here."

"Uh-huh." She stepped back to let him in, and an amazing odor made every one of his receptor cells turn toward the kitchen. "I made stew," she said. "Hungry?"

"Always."

"Good." She set the cat on a chair, picked up a large spoon, and stirred the pot of thick, meaty goodness on the stove, making Truman's mouth water. "Hear anything from Mercy?"

"No. And I don't expect to until she's finished," he told her.

"I know. Just thought I'd check."

"You'd be the first to know."

She gave him a smile that was a mirror image of Mercy's, and his chest tightened. "I'll get that coat." He strode down the hall to the bedroom, hoping he had a jacket in Mercy's closet that he could take.

He found two and grabbed the heaviest off a hanger. Mercy's scent drifted from her clothing, teasing him. A faint smell of lemon and shortbread and vanilla. His stomach tied itself in a knot, and he stood still, staring blankly at her clothing.

*"Is it dangerous?" he asked.*

*She shrugged. "It could be. No more than usual."*

Dammit. He hated being in the dark. He closed the closet and stepped in her bathroom to wash his hands before he ate with Kaylie. As he dried them, his gaze fell on a small tray of cosmetics Mercy kept on her counter, and he caught his breath.

Her engagement ring sat with her makeup.

His fingers shook as he picked up the band of diamonds. She'd complained about having to leave behind all her skin-care products and her expensive conditioner for the assignment. But she hadn't mentioned her ring.

She had worn it the night before she left. He'd felt it as his hand had tightly gripped hers. She'd been astride him, her back arched, light from the moon illuminating her skin as she'd moved with him. His fingertips had explored the metal around her finger, a symbol of the link between them, as they both sought their release.

Then she left it behind.

He exhaled and set the ring back on the tray.

If she couldn't take expensive conditioner, it made sense she couldn't take diamonds. She could have been ordered not to wear jewelry. There were a million rational reasons she would not wear it during an assignment.

The sight of the lonely ring made him feel empty. Abandoned.

*Get over yourself.*

He picked up the ring again and put it in his pocket. There was no reason he couldn't carry around a piece of her. It was romantic, right?

He put on an upbeat face for Kaylie and went to enjoy her stew.

# FOURTEEN

The lieutenant directed Mercy toward an area of the camp she hadn't explored yet, following yet another dry path. She heard the sound of a river up ahead, and the air took on a different scent. No longer dry and dusty, it teased with a hint of fresh water.

"Thought we were going to the command center," she said over her shoulder to the grim man behind her. He'd insisted she walk ahead. Having him out of her sight made her uncomfortable.

"Pete is over here this afternoon."

"What's your name?"

The lieutenant was silent for a long moment. "Sean."

She looked back at him. "You had to decide whether or not to tell me your name? Is it a secret?"

"No more questions."

"Where are you from originally?"

"You don't take orders well, do you?"

"Usually I do, but besides the gun over your shoulder, I haven't been given reason to take orders from you."

"I speak for Pete."

"Then you must have worked for him for a long time. Did you know him before coming here?"

Sean made an exasperated noise and didn't answer.

Mercy mentally shook herself. *I will not make waves.*

After a few minutes, they entered a clearing full of activity. Hammers pounded, and male workers swarmed around a large new building next to a sagging carport that protected several large trucks. A few women worked on the outskirts of the clearing, using shovels and big knives to clear brush back to the tall rocky ridge that loomed behind the buildings. A gravel road

led from the line of parked vehicles in the direction of the central part of the camp.

New boards gleamed on the structure, which had been erected on a fresh slab of concrete. Four huge roll-up doors for vehicles filled the front of the building. Clearly it was new, and it was the nicest complex she'd seen in the compound.

Pete stood about ten yards from the new garage, his arms crossed on his chest as he watched her approach. Jason, Noah's dad; Beckett, the quartermaster; and Chad were with him. Mercy's steps slowed at the anger in Jason's eyes. Beckett looked smug, and Pete's expression was stone.

*Uh-oh.*

She finally looked to Chad, whose gaze pleaded with her to cooperate.

*Fuck.*

This had to be about Noah.

Mercy stopped a few feet from the line of men and looked each one in the eye, keeping her gaze soft. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes, something is the fuck wrong," started Beckett. His shaggy beard quivered with his words. "You told me you had approval to medicate a child. You didn't."

"Yes, I did." She looked at Jason. "You told me to do what I could for Noah."

"I thought you meant through natural means—"

"You didn't specify that," Mercy pointed out. "Your son is sick. I'm not going to brew him a tea of pine needles. God wouldn't have given us Tylenol if he didn't want us to use it."

"Watch your fucking mouth," muttered Beckett.

The construction workers slowed, watching the small group, but they were too far away to hear the words. Curiosity and apprehension lined their faces. A few men stopped completely and stared.

"Jason says he met you on the way to the children's cabin," Pete said quietly, ignoring Beckett.

Mercy said nothing but gave Pete her attention.

"That would have been *after* you left the supply depot," Beckett snapped. "*After* you told me you already had permission. She got real mouthy with me too." His demeanor grew sulky.

To Beckett, her biggest sin had been her assertiveness at the supply depot.



She kept her gaze on Pete. Out of the corner of her eye, she noted Chad constantly rubbing the back of his neck, his gaze darting from her to Sean, who stood behind her.

“I don’t tolerate liars.” Pete’s voice was calm. “There’s no room for that here.”

“Pete—” said Chad.

Pete held up a hand to stop Chad’s words. “Jessica can speak for herself.”

“Do you have kids?” Mercy asked Pete.

An odd expression flickered across his face and vanished. “No.”

She took in a deep breath. “Neither do I, but I want to one day.” She glanced at Chad. “Chad knows how I am about kids. Sick kids push my buttons. Noah is an exhausted shell of a little boy.” She lifted a brow at Jason. “He’s not usually like that, is he?”

He gave a short shake of his head.

“Simple medication like acetaminophen can make a world of difference. Why would I watch him suffer? We should have Tylenol drops on hand for the babies too. They can go downhill at the speed of light when they’re ill. I’ve seen it.” She looked back at Pete and softened her tone. “I’m sorry for crossing your line, but I’m not sorry for helping a five-year-old.” She lowered her gaze after spotting a hint of appreciation in Jason’s eyes. “There’s nothing wrong with helping a child be comfortable.”

*I’d do the same again.*

“The problem is your methods. This is your second day, and you’re already pushing the boundaries,” Pete stated. “You need to reevaluate if you want to be here. You are this close to going home.” He held up his thumb and finger an inch apart.

“Give her a break, Pete.” Chad turned to him. “She comes from a job where she told people what to do all day long. Doesn’t mean she doesn’t believe as we do.”

Judging by Pete’s face, Mercy didn’t think Chad was helping her case.

“Forty-eight hours,” announced Pete.

Beckett’s icy-blue eyes narrowed on Mercy as he grinned. Did that mean she had forty-eight hours to decide to stay? Confused, Mercy glanced at Chad. He looked stunned.

“Pete.” Chad took a few steps to place himself in front of Mercy. “I’ll take the punishment for her.”

*Punishment?* Mercy's heart contracted. *Swift and severe.* Chad's words from yesterday rang in her head, and she grew more conscious of Sean and his rifle behind her.

"You can't do that," Beckett burst out as he lumbered forward.

"I can," Chad told him. "Right, Pete?"

*What is going on?*

Pete was silent, his gaze moving between Chad and Mercy. "He can." Pete rubbed his chin. "But I'll only let you take a quarter. Thirty-six hours for her. Twelve for you."

"Thirty-six hours of what?" Her words were steady, but her heartbeat thundered in her chest.

"No rations. It's level one." He narrowed his eyes at her. "Don't go to level two."

"Thank you, Pete," answered Chad, ducking his head.

*He's thanking him for denying us food?* She could handle a day and a half of no food. That was no big deal. Forty-eight hours without food would have sucked, but it wasn't impossible. Annoyance shot through her. Pete doled out punishment like a dictator.

He was a dictator; they were standing in his country.

"I'll see that we get medication for the infants on the next supply trip," Pete stated.

Relief swamped her. "Thank you."

*Now I'm thanking him.*

Pete was smooth. He knew how to take away and then give a fraction back, so his people were grateful.

Beckett's burning gaze caught hers, rattling her with its intensity.

She had an enemy.



"You've got to cool it down." Chad's words were harsh. "You're gonna get kicked out—or worse—before we figure out what's going on."

Mercy spun to face him. "I get it. We've already been over this. You don't need to tell me again."

He grabbed her arm. "Apparently I do. You don't understand these guys."

Some of her anger faded. “I do understand them. That’s part of the problem. I grew up around people like them, and sometimes it makes me defensive.”

“And you can’t resist poking at them,” Chad added, a bit of humor in his gaze. “You’ve gotten under Beckett’s skin in a bad way. You need to step carefully around him.”

“The fact that I simply exist bothers him,” Mercy muttered. “I could wear a handmaid’s cloak, and I’d still annoy him.”

They held hands as they moved on, walking one of the paths under the pines, stealing a few minutes of lovers’ time away from the rest. Chad had said he’d planned to show her where he’d buried the satellite phone but changed his plans after her punishment session. He told her she’d have more eyes on her than before. Eyes she couldn’t see.

Mercy didn’t agree with that. She was perfectly aware of Sean’s presence several yards away. He was currently out of earshot, but his gaze burned a hole in her back. She glanced down at their clasped hands. Chad didn’t have a brand.

A tension she hadn’t realized she harbored evaporated.

“Several people have those brands on their wrists,” she said.

“It’s crazy,” Chad told her. “I swear they would die for Pete. He manages to pull extreme loyalty out of people. It’s a gift of some sort.”

Mercy pictured the calm leader. Pete made cold, calculated decisions and followed through on them. She had no doubt he’d clean up a mess by disposing of his men. Like the man Chad doubted had been taken to the hospital.

Where would Pete put a body?

She looked up at the distant hills covered in forests. Plenty of places to bury a body.

Chad’s hand tightened on hers, and she instantly missed Truman. That morning she’d woken confused, reaching out for him and fighting back the empty feeling that swamped her heart when she realized she wouldn’t see him for days—or weeks.

*We’ve got to get this done. I want my life back, and I want out of this crazy place.*

“What is the new building for? Vera said something about a special project that was taking all the construction hands.”

Chad's gaze was on his boots as they walked. "It's for the vehicles. Pete wants them protected from the winter elements. You'd think something simple would be sufficient—like just roof coverage—but this one is really well built and even partially insulated. They won't let me see the inside even though I handle the vehicle maintenance, and Pete says I have to wait until it's completely done."

"It sounds like they're hiding something. We need to take a closer look," she stated. "How heavy are the night patrols?"

Chad halted and spun toward her. "Did you not hear me a minute ago? *Slow down.*"

She leaned closer. "You've been here for a month and hardly know anything. I think you need to *speed up*. I can't wait around for information to fall into my lap. We need to be proactive."

"Like you were by medicating that kid without his father's permission? Stepping all over Beckett's toes? That's not how it works." A banked fury simmered in his eyes. "This isn't a race."

"If they have the stolen weapons from the ATF raid, they could be selling them to finance this big plan you keep hearing rumors about."

Hesitation wavered in his eyes.

Mercy felt it in her gut. "What is it?" she hissed. "You've heard something."

His throat moved as he swallowed and took a quick check of their surroundings, his gaze pausing on Sean several yards away. "It could be nothing."

"You don't believe that." She heard it in his voice and saw it in the tension of his jaw.

"I've heard the new garage has some smaller rooms inside. Rooms with heavy locks."

"For what?"

"Don't know. Everyone is hush-hush about specifics, but their voices change when they whisper about it." He pressed his lips together.

"Why didn't you say that a minute ago when you were talking about the building?"

"I forgot."

Tension rose in Mercy's throat. They were partners. Why did he seem so determined to hold back?

"That's where the weapons could be."

“Could be,” Chad agreed. “But it feels too obvious. I would think someone as sharp as Pete would have a better storage location than smack in the middle of his compound. He believes the government will try to clear out America’s Preserve at some point. That’s why we have the drills.”

“I’m not surprised,” said Mercy. “He’s suspicious of everyone.” She moved closer and rested her head against Chad’s shoulder. “Which direction is the satellite phone?”

“East,” he said almost soundlessly. “It’s marked with rocks near the ridge of the gulch. The sentries would have to veer off their usual patrols to see someone dig it up.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’ve watched them.”

“Recently?”

“No, during the first week or two I was here.”

“They must occasionally change their routes. I don’t see Pete allowing the same patrol routes week after week.”

Chad said nothing, but she felt his muscles tense under her touch.

“You’ve checked all the buildings and never came across any of the stolen weapons?” she asked.

“Correct.”

“I can’t ask any residents about weapons,” Mercy mused. “But I think my curiosity and some questions about the new garage might be normal. Especially since I want to know when they’ll build quarters for couples.”

“You’ve got to be subtler around everyone. Especially Pete and Beckett,” Chad said, his lips close to her ear.

“I’ll work on it.” She believed she had more leeway as the newcomer. But she didn’t share that thought with Chad.

“There’s an all-company meeting at seven tonight,” said Chad.

“What for?”

He gave a half shrug. “Pete schedules them when he has something to say. Announcements. Propaganda. Attendance is always mandatory,” he added, meeting her gaze. “Don’t be late.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“It’s best not to ask questions during them.”

“Is that a recommendation for me or everyone?”

“Everyone. But especially for you. You’ve made enough waves lately.”

“I’ll be there with my mouth shut,” she promised.

# FIFTEEN

The whipping was over, but Ed's screams from the lash ripping open his skin echoed in Mercy's head and would haunt her dreams tonight.

Forcing his people to watch a man be tortured and shriek had been Pete's definition of a meeting.

The whipping had been a level-two punishment for possession of a cell phone. Mercy's ration withholding was a level-one penalty. She'd stupidly assumed level two would be confinement or something similar. Not disfigurement and pain.

*Now she understood Chad's warnings.*

Pete had ordered Chad to control her during the whipping. It'd taken all her effort not to rush Pete to stop the abuse.

*Would she and Chad have been next if she had?*

Mercy leaned against a tree and fought to keep her stomach contents down. Chad stood beside her, gently rubbing her shoulder. She wanted to push his hand away. The physical touch of his comforting gesture was nearly unbearable.

Two men had dragged the unconscious Ed away. Mercy had expected to be ordered to treat his wounds, but Pete had shaken his head as she met his gaze.

*Does Ed need stitches? Will he develop an infection?*

*Forget any pain control.*

Another dizzying rush narrowed her vision, and she finally shoved Chad's hand off her shoulder. "I can't be touched right now," she forced out from between clenched teeth.

*"I know it was hard to watch."*

*"How many times have you stood back and watched that happen?"*

*He was quiet for a long moment. "That was the second."*

“*Twice?*” Mercy ground her forehead into the rough bark, embracing the physical distraction. “How can these people stay with him? I can’t believe there hasn’t been some sort of mutiny. Don’t they realize they could be next?”

“Pete does a good job making it seem like the victim deserves it. You saw their faces—everyone was on board.”

“Why would he make the children come?” *Fucking bastard.*

“I’d say that’s a powerful lesson about toeing the line.”

“We’ve got to stop him. He can’t do that again.”

“That’s not our mission. We’re to find the weapons and their plan.”

“Jessica?” asked Vera from a dozen feet away.

Mercy flinched at Vera’s voice. She’d spotted the older woman during the whipping. Vera had barely blinked as she stood ramrod straight, watching the beating, one thumb casually running back and forth over the scar on her wrist. An air of justification swirling around her.

“Pete suggested I take you back to the women’s quarters.” Vera’s tone stated that refusal wasn’t an option.

Mercy pushed away from the tree and awkwardly patted Chad on the arm, unable to bring herself to hug him, let alone kiss him. Her skin was hypersensitive, her nerves jumpy and painful. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

His face closed off and he gave a short, jerky nod. “Good night.” His words were strained.

Without another word, Vera walked away, and Mercy stumbled as she followed. The sun had long set, and Vera’s flashlight did little to illuminate the path behind her for Mercy.

*I’ve got to find the guns, so I can get out of here.*

America’s Preserve had become Mercy’s Hell.

Vera led her into a clearing, and Mercy could finally see where to put her feet. She looked up at the moon.

*No better time than tonight to check out the new construction.*

Chad didn’t need to know.



Mercy carried her boots as she slipped out of the cabin in the dark. Her roommates were up and down throughout the night using the bathroom, so she’d created a lump with her sleeping bag and blankets, but anyone who



took a decent look would know she wasn't in bed. All she could do was cross her fingers and hope everyone stumbled to the bathroom with their eyes barely open.

She silently closed the front door and balanced in the shadows on the tiny porch, slipping into the boots. The compound was silent as she waited for her eyes to adjust in the fading light. The moon had moved far across the sky in the hours since she'd decided to snoop and was about to set behind a grove of firs. She shuddered. It wasn't from the chill.

*What am I doing?*

A man had been beaten last night. For possessing a cell phone. What would be the punishment for snooping?

She paused, breathing deep and doubting her decision. There was no excuse that would get her off the hook if she was caught. Stating she was meeting Chad for a sexy rendezvous would only get him in trouble too. Wandering because she couldn't sleep was a weak reason.

Getting caught was not an option.

*I can be back in fifteen minutes.*

Or less if she moved fast enough. Decision made, she darted for the darkness of the trees. Her breath hung in the cold night air. She couldn't see a single cloud in the dimly illuminated sky, but snow was coming. She could smell it.

Right now it wasn't consistently cold enough for accumulation back home, but she had no doubt that here in the higher hills, snow would fall fast and thick and then stick. Mercy prided herself on being prepared to live in all conditions, but that was back in the Cascade foothills, where she had her years of hard work stored and ready for the first sign of disaster.

Out here she had nothing. No GOOD bag from her vehicle. Not even a fucking knife.

Her safety net was gone. She was dependent on the nutty people around her, and her skin crawled at the realization.

*Chad must show me where the satellite phone is hidden.*

It was her only thread to safety. Right this second she had no connection to the outside world. She was floating without a tether and fighting to control an escalating level of anxiety. There was nothing she could do to save herself. If her situation went FUBAR, she had to rely on Chad.

She hated relying on other people. Especially people she didn't truly know.

An ache for Truman touched her heart. Her fingers wanted to feel the scrape of his evening beard. She inhaled deeply, wishing she could smell the scent of his skin and see the smile that was always in his eyes.

*Stay focused.*

Below the trees, pine needles crackled under her feet, and she silently swore, slowing her pace. She continued along an arc of trees toward the path where Sean had led her earlier that day.

Cigarette smoke reached her through the night air and she froze, her gaze rapidly darting in every direction. She dropped to a crouch and moved backward under a pine, her hands in the dirt to keep her balance. She huddled against the trunk and waited, making herself as small as possible, thankful she was in her usual black clothing. Perfect for snooping in the dead of night.

*There.*

The red tip of a cigarette flared as someone strolled beside one of the men's cabins. His dark silhouette had a rifle over one shoulder, and he ambled between the other cabins, circling each one. Mercy stayed motionless until he headed in the direction she'd come from, no doubt to circle the women's cabin. She studied the figure but didn't recognize his profile.

When he'd been out of sight for a full sixty seconds, she continued her trek. It felt like hours before the big new garage came into sight. Holding her position behind the protection of the last trees, she scanned the area, looking for more guards, knowing she'd be fully exposed as she crossed the clearing.

Low gasps sounded from somewhere ahead of her. Mercy shuffled back deeper into the trees and listened.

More gasps. Then a moan reached her ears.

*Someone is hurt. Maybe Ed?*

After the whipping, he'd vanished.

A movement near the garage caught her attention, and she squinted in the poor light. It moved again, and she slapped a hand over her mouth, containing her exclamation.

Two people were having sex outside the structure.

Laughter welled up her throat, and she fought to hold it in, leaning against a trunk for support. For the last ten minutes, her every nerve had been on high alert, and the abrupt shift to absurdity had turned her muscles to mush.

The couple lay along one wall, their movements and coordinating moans now unmistakable to Mercy.

*If they couldn't get inside the building, I doubt I can.*

Assuming the couple had tried to enter it to have sex. She doubted anyone would have chosen the outdoors over the privacy of the empty building.

*Unless they like the thrill. The chance of being discovered.*

Her plan to investigate evaporated into the night air. She exhaled, wondering if she'd have the guts to try again tomorrow.

"Enjoying that?" said a low male voice.

Her lungs stopped, and the question ricocheted inside her skull. She slowly turned toward the speaker.

"Lieutenant," she whispered. Sean was three feet away, his rifle casually on his shoulder. The side of his face was lit by the lowering moon, and amusement quirked his mouth.

He jerked his head at the copulating couple. "They're out here a few times a week."

"Who are they?" Her voice didn't give away the panic shooting through her veins. So far Sean didn't seem angry or curious about her wandering at night.

"Hate to reveal their secret," he answered.

"If they wanted to keep it a secret, they should have found a different place. Inside."

He shrugged. No odor of smoke hovered around him, so he hadn't been the guard she saw earlier.

"He told you to stay away, didn't he?" Mercy guessed. "You knew full well they'd be out here. They didn't even try to hide."

"She thinks they're a big secret," Sean said. "If she found out we know about them, she'd put an end to it. So we stay away to let him have his fun."

"Of course you do."

"It's consensual."

Mercy could see and hear that for herself.

“But you aren’t to be out here at night,” he said in a hard tone. He straightened his back, appearing to grow four inches, and fingered the strap of his rifle.

“I couldn’t sleep. People snore, and it stinks in there,” she said calmly as her heart tried to pound through her ribs.

“Sounds like the men’s barracks.”

Mercy was silent, and the couple’s moans increased.

“They’re almost done,” Sean said casually.

“You watch often?”

“There’s not a lot of other entertainment here.”

The male made a sound as if he were being strangled, and the woman let out a series of high-pitched squeals.

*She’s faking it.*

“I’m always looking for entertainment.” Sean took a step closer to her, his face now completely in the dark, but she saw his intention as clear as if the sun were shining.

“Fuck off.” She held her ground.

*Heel of my hand to his throat. Knee to his balls. Fingers into his eyes.*

“I don’t mean now.” His bearing relaxed. “Later maybe. I should turn you in, but I don’t feel like it tonight. Consider it a favor you can repay in the future.”

“What kind of favor?” Mercy stayed on high alert. Every muscle ready to defend herself.

He didn’t answer.

“I’m with Chad,” she answered, hoping there was a sliver of integrity among the men.

“Chad’s not the type to stay with Pete’s organization. He’s always cracking jokes and grinning like he’s your best friend, but he’s actually hiding that he’s uncomfortable. I can always tell who will stick it out, and he’s not one of them. You, on the other hand, have the spine and mettle to make it work.”

“If he leaves, I’ll leave.”

“I think you’ll change your mind.” His answer was confident. Too confident.

“Like hell I will.”

“We’ll see.”

Unintelligible whispers from the couple floated across the clearing. They straightened their clothes and stood, their heads close as they talked. After a moment they left together, headed toward the barracks. Mercy noted they didn't try to hide.

Mercy no longer cared about the couple. She had other concerns. Like whether Sean would turn her in and when he expected repayment for his favor.

"You need to go back now," he told her. "If I catch you wandering at night again, I'll report you."

"There's another guard on patrol."

"I'll keep watch until you make it."

She stared at him for a long moment through the dark.

He expected her to be grateful for his protection.

Instead she left without another word.

The man who was blackmailing her for a future favor didn't deserve thanks.

# SIXTEEN

Outside in the cold morning air, Mercy huddled next to Chad after last night's unsuccessful trip to investigate the new building. The two of them stood in the center of the compound with the rest of the group, stamping their feet against the icy breeze. The exact same place Ed had been whipped yesterday. The memories nauseated her, and she couldn't stop shivering.

"If someone is getting tortured again, I'll vomit," Mercy muttered, trying to ignore her empty stomach. It'd been growling since she woke. Thirty-six hours with no food was going to suck.

Everyone in the crowd continued to exchange glances, the same question on each worried face: Is this another punishment?

Bile rose in her throat as she wondered if Sean had reported her. *Will I be on the receiving end of the whip today?* Her vision started to narrow, and she couldn't tell Chad what she'd done.

"I don't think that's what we're here for. Look at them," Chad whispered back, indicating Pete and his lieutenants as they warmed themselves around the common's campfire. "They look pleased and excited—they're smiling. Yesterday they were silent and intense."

Mercy took a deep breath, studied the men before the group, and agreed with Chad's assessment. Her vision cleared slightly, and she swallowed hard, attempting to force her stomach into submission.

Two hours of sleep were all she had achieved overnight, worrying about Sean's threat. Thoughts of Truman had also kept her awake. She missed his physical presence in her bed and his calm, rational mind, which helped her think clearly when she was frustrated.

*I'd kill to have him here right now.*

Pete raised his hands to get everyone's attention, and the low muttering of the crowd ceased. "This morning is a celebration."

Pure relief swept through Mercy, causing her legs to wobble. Chad tightened his arm around her waist.

“We have another person joining our elevated rank.”

A ripple of applause and happy voices rose from the audience. Chad swore under his breath.

“What does that mean?” Mercy whispered.

“It’s a branding.”

Mercy echoed Chad’s curse, her gut churning again. Surely the branding would be easier to witness than the whipping. At least it was voluntary.

*Or is it?*

No one would dare turn it down if Pete offered the honor.

“He needs to send the children away.”

“I know,” Chad said. “It’s wrong to make them watch this, and I’ve asked him about it. He says it gives them something to aspire to.”

*Are you fucking kidding me?*

“Jason Trotter,” Pete announced in a respectful voice. “Get up here.” He gestured for the young father to join him.

*Oh no.*

Jason lifted his hand in acknowledgment, and the crowd parted to let him move forward. He tugged on Eden’s arm, but the teenager shook her head and pulled away. She shoved both hands in the pockets of her heavy coat and burrowed her chin down into the thick collar. Mercy was thankful Noah wasn’t present. Pete had agreed the boy could have regular doses of acetaminophen, and the child had definitely seemed improved when she’d checked on him last evening.

Eden stood alone, looking lost, her wide eyes locked on her father. Mercy tried to pull away from Chad to stand with the girl, but he wouldn’t release her. “Don’t,” he whispered. “Let someone else support her. Not you.”

“They’re ignoring her.”

“It’s not a big deal. The brand will be fast.”

Pete was giving a speech, something about Jason’s history and what he’d brought to the group, but Mercy tuned him out, her focus still on Eden.

“. . . reported Ed’s cell phone.”

Mercy’s entire body jerked as she looked at Pete. *What?*

More light applause and nods of approval. Pete shook Jason's hand as he slapped him on the back. Both men wore big grins.

Jason had turned in Ed. And would now be rewarded.

Looking around, she spotted desire and admiration in the faces of the group. Every one of them wished they were standing next to Pete, waiting to be permanently scarred. Among the men up front, Sean caught her eye and winked. She responded with her bitchiest stare.

Pete pulled the branding iron out of the fire, its tip glowing. Jason stretched out his arm and grasped Sean's hand in a handshake but didn't release. They lifted and turned their clasped hands, Jason's wrist exposed.

Pete maneuvered the iron within a few inches of Jason's wrist and paused as he met the man's gaze. "Thank you, Jason." His words were simple and the tone heartfelt.

People wanted Pete's attention and praise.

Mercy closed her eyes.

Skin hissed, Jason moaned, and as one the audience sucked in their breaths.

It was done.

Mercy opened her eyes. The growing odor of burning flesh and hair made her cover her mouth and nose. Several other observers did the same. Eden was still frozen in place, and Mercy wondered if she'd closed her eyes.

Men pushed forward to congratulate Jason. More back slapping and handshakes. The women stayed back, occasionally glancing at the men and shuffling their feet. Three of the women drew together in a small huddle, their heads together as they spoke, their breath rising in the cold air.

"That was sick," Mercy stated softly.

"It's a big honor."

"Only inside this compound. Outside, the burn means nothing—no, it means you're a militant radical."

"Keep your voice down," Chad whispered. "And try to look impressed instead of looking like you're observing a fraternity rite."

"Apt description."

"Pete's sending me to Portland this afternoon," he said with a grimace. "Jason's going with me, and we won't be back until tomorrow. He has some orders that need to be picked up."



“All the way to Portland? Do you know what you’ll be bringing back?”

Chad frowned. “He says it’s machinery. He wouldn’t go into more detail than that.”

“It could be anything. Is it normal to send you?”

“This is the first overnight. I’ve only done short trips during the day.”

Mercy studied his face. “You’re worried.”

“Feels a bit off. But everything has felt off for the past week. There’s a sense of urgency that’s permeating the compound, and I don’t know why it’s happening.” His brows came together as he held her gaze. “I won’t be able to show you where the phone is before I leave, and that bothers me.”

*That makes two of us.*

“Maybe you can convince Jason to ask Pete again for Noah to see a doctor. Perhaps his new status will help him get care for his son.”

“I doubt it. And I expect Jason will be more fervent in following Pete’s belief of no medications.”

Mercy knew he was right.

“I need to go congratulate Jason,” Chad whispered. “I’ll see you before we take off. I’ll try to make a sketch of where I buried the phone, but I don’t know if it will be detailed enough in case of an emergency.”

“We better hope there’s no emergency while you’re gone.” She glanced past him and saw Sean watching them closely.

“I don’t care for the way Sean looks at me,” she said softly, sharing a fraction of her concern about the lieutenant.

“Sean’s okay.” Chad absently patted her shoulder and strode to the group around Jason.

Sean watched Chad walk away and then moved his gaze back to Mercy. He smiled, all of his teeth showing.

*Did he request Chad be sent out of town?*

If Sean thought she was vulnerable without Chad around, he was in for a surprise.

*Bring it on.*



Mercy had been assigned to wash the pots and pans from lunch. She suspected she’d been given the duty to enhance the misery of her no-rations

punishment. Nothing like being around food and unable to eat it. Two other women helped to dry the dishes and clean up the mess hall.

Mercy plunged a sticky pot into the tepid water. Her drying partner had criticized her for using too much soap and demonstrated how a single drop of liquid detergent was to be used for a huge pot. Clearly the bottle of detergent had already been watered down.

Mercy was almost glad for her punishment. The level of kitchen cleanliness did not meet her standards, and the duty gave her a chance to tackle it. But she was hungry. Lunch had been peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with lentil soup. Her mouth still watered from the smell of the soup. She'd be grateful when she could eat breakfast tomorrow morning.

Chad and Jason had left for their trip. He'd hugged her goodbye. "Stay out of trouble," he'd whispered. Now that he was gone, she felt at sea, abandoned. All too aware that she couldn't contact anyone.

She handed her partner the last pot to dry and let the water drain from the huge sink.

"Jessica!"

Eden appeared in the kitchen doorway, panic on her face. "It's Noah. He's bad off."

Mercy hung her washrag on the edge of the sink. "What happened?"

Eden grabbed her hand and towed her out of the kitchen. "His fever's back. He won't open his eyes."

*Shit.*

She followed the girl, who ran off at full speed, and she was besieged by memories of that sick little boy long ago whom her mother couldn't help.

*Not on my watch.*

"When was his last dose?" she huffed as she pursued the teen.

"Last night."

"You didn't give him more?"

"Beckett wouldn't give me any. He said Pete said no more."

*I'm going to kill both of them.*

They reached the children's cabin. Mercy took the stairs in one leap and pulled open the door. Her heart stopped. It smelled like her memories.

*Pork. Cabbage.*

Noah was motionless on the floor. Sadie looked up as she dabbed Noah's forehead with a wet rag. "I don't know what to do," she choked out.

“He’s so hot.”

Mercy knelt beside the pallet on the floor, her heart in her throat. *I will not be too late.* “Noah.” She gently shook his shoulder as she felt his forehead and temples. “Noah. Look at me.” His hairline was wet, but she didn’t know if it was sweat or water from Sadie’s cloth. She repeated her command, and the boy’s eyes opened into slits.

“There you are.” Relief swamped her. “Does your ear still hurt?”

He closed his eyes, but he seemed to nod the tiniest bit.

Sadie twisted the cloth in her hands. “What can we do?” Her eyes pleaded with Mercy.

*Not sit here and do nothing.*

“I’ll be back. I’m going to talk to Pete.” She got to her feet, strode to the cabin door, and then stopped, an idea percolating. Returning to Noah, she bent and scooped up the boy in her arms. “Wrap that blanket around him,” she ordered Sadie, who jumped to obey. They struggled with the limp boy, but finally he was tightly bundled. The heat from his head burned through the shoulder of her jacket.

“Now I’ll talk to Pete.”



With Eden trailing behind her, Mercy took a slight detour to the supply building. Medicine first. She told Eden to knock. No answer. She had her try the handle. Locked.

“Beat harder on the door,” Mercy suggested, wondering if Beckett had chosen to be away from the building, suspecting she might come. Or maybe he was inside, listening and laughing.

No answer.

Mercy resumed her trek to the command center, evil thoughts about Beckett bouncing around her brain. Eden was silent, no doubt picking up that Mercy was furious.

Her boots were loud on the stairs, and she jerked her head for Eden to open the door. No one was inside the main room. The door to Pete’s office was closed.

“Pete!” she shouted. She didn’t care if he took away her food again.

To her relief, footsteps sounded in Pete’s office. He opened his door, surprise in his eyes.

“Jessica?” He frowned at the boy she held tightly against her shoulder. “What happened?”

“Noah needs a doctor. Now.”

Pete’s face cleared. “I told—” he started in a patient voice.

“*Now, Pete.* Or by the time Jason returns, his boy is going to be dead.” She pinned him with a grim stare. “Do you want to be the one to inform Jason his boy died because you wouldn’t get him a doctor? Because I don’t.”

Behind her, Eden softly gasped. Mercy wished to comfort her, but Pete was her focus.

“What will the other parents think when this boy dies because you wouldn’t act? Do you think they’ll be understanding?”

Eden muffled a sob.

If that teenager’s sound of grief didn’t change the asshole’s mind, Mercy didn’t know what would.

“A doctor. We’re almost out of time,” she urged. She turned Noah’s face so Pete could see the lethargic boy.

Indecision flickered in Pete’s eyes, but he nodded. “Sean can drive him to the urgent care center.”

“Good.” If she hadn’t been so angry, her knees would have given way in relief.

“Sean’s at the construction site,” he told Eden. “Go get him.”

Eden dashed out of the room.

“I’ll go with him to town,” Mercy stated.

“No. Sean and another lieutenant can handle this.”

“But—”

Pete held up his hand, his eyes hard. “You’re getting your wish. Don’t push it.”

Mercy clamped her jaw shut, biting back another plea. Her arms locked around the boy as if her determination could keep him alive. It would be a struggle to release him to Sean. She and Pete stood silent, neither dropping the other’s gaze.

“Thank you,” she finally said. She was thanking him for crumbs again.

“I’m not without feelings.” His words were stiff. “I want what’s best for everyone.”

“I know.” She wanted to say a hell of a lot more, but she’d get at least another thirty-six hours without food. She’d plowed through several

boundaries and knew Pete's patience was wearing thin.

Dictators didn't like agitators.

And since her first day, against all her good intentions, she'd rocked the boat.

Fifteen minutes later, a small crowd had gathered and watched as Sean and another man drove away with Noah. People whispered among themselves, and Mercy could feel their eyes on her back.

*Will I be ostracized or lauded?*

She didn't care.

Mercy's arms felt unbearably empty, missing the weight of the boy. She set a hand on Eden's shoulder. The teen hadn't left her side since she had returned with Sean.

"Will he be okay?" Eden whispered.

"I think he'll be fine." She leaned closer to the teen, feeling horrible that she'd mentioned Noah's possible death in front of her. "I'm sorry if I upset you. It was the only way to let Pete know how serious the situation was and to get him to act."

"I'm just scared for Noah."

*Me too.*

The girl tipped her head against Mercy as they watched the taillights disappear in the murky gray afternoon. Mercy shook her head and blinked, trying to clear her eyes. Little things were floating in her vision.

*It's not my eyes.*

Tiny bits of snow were falling, gently winding their way to the ground, where she focused on the delicate white sparkles on the dirt. She willed the crystals to melt. They didn't, and icy foreboding crawled up her spine. Winter in the mountains had arrived.

*Hurry back, Chad.*

# SEVENTEEN

Mercy helped another woman stack wood while several men chopped. The snow had let up after two inches had fallen, but she suspected more was coming. The stacked wood was covered with tarps, which annoyed Mercy. Unless someone was assigned to remove snow from the top and around the covered stacks every day, everyone would have to dig to get to the wood. It was best stored under a roof.

She'd mentioned the problem to the men chopping wood. They'd ignored her.

"Jessica." Mercy spun around at Vera's voice. Vera's skin looked more yellow than usual against the snowy-white background. But her eyes and the force of her stare were as tough as ever. "You're needed in the kitchen."

The other woman stacking wood stopped and scowled. "I need her."

Vera looked down her nose at the woman. "This is important. And I've been watching you for a full minute. You're moving as slow as possible to make Jessica do most of the work."

Mercy had noticed her partner slacking off but hadn't cared. She had nervous energy to burn. Since Chad had left, she'd felt wound tighter and tighter by the hour.

"What do you need?" Mercy asked as she followed Vera through the snow, kicking the fluff out of her way.

"Cindy burned her hand," she said, sounding exasperated. "I decided you should at least look at it."

"How bad is it?" Mercy wondered if the other kitchen women had insisted on medical care. Vera didn't seem happy to be fetching her.

"Covers most of her palm and fingers. Some blisters. Sort of a chalky white in spots."

Alarm shot through Mercy. The chalky white could mean a third-degree burn.

And Vera had watched her stack wood for a full minute before saying anything?

*Power trip.*

“How bad is the pain?” Mercy crossed her fingers, hoping the shock and pain wouldn’t send Cindy into labor.

“Pretty bad. That’s why I came.”

*And took your own sweet time.*

Mercy wondered what she had against the pregnant woman. Vera’s frequent criticism of Cindy felt personal. Not that she treated the other women any better.

“I’m stopping at the supply depot.” Mercy jogged past Vera toward the little building straight ahead. She’d seen gauze and antibiotic cream among the meager supplies. That would help if Cindy had second-degree burns, but if they were third degree, there wasn’t much Mercy could do.

She could picture the recommended treatment for third-degree burns in her first aid manual. *Call 911.*

Her knock brought Beckett instantly to the door. He looked past Mercy at Vera. “What?” he asked the older woman.

Vera pointed at Mercy. “Cindy has a bad burn. Give Jessica what she needs.”

*Thank you.*

Beckett promptly brought the beat-up medical box. Mercy snatched the gauze, medical tape, and tube of antibiotic ointment. She squinted at the date. Two years expired. It was better than nothing, she decided. Rooting around in the box, Mercy found nothing else of help.

*I’ve got nothing for her pain.*

She handed back the box. “Vera will fill out the log. I need to go.”

Beckett glowered. “Now wait a minute.”

Vera glanced at the supplies in Mercy’s hands and lifted one shoulder in acquiescence.

Mercy darted away, cursing both stubborn people under her breath. No empathy. If Cindy went into labor, how many people would Mercy have to beg to get her to a hospital?

At the mess hall she bounded up the few steps and burst in the door. The benches were empty, dinner not starting for another hour. She hit the

swinging door to the kitchen and found Cindy sitting on a stool in front of the sink, running cold water over her hand. Two other women worked close by and looked up with expressions of relief.

Cindy's face was pasty. Sweat dotted her temples, and her stomach seemed impossibly large to Mercy. As if it'd doubled in size overnight.

*Please don't go into labor.*

There was no avoiding it; that baby would come at some point. Soon.

Mercy forced a smile onto her face and gently pulled Cindy's hand out of the water. Giant blisters laced her palm, and her fingertips were white. *Damn.* "How are you feeling?"

"My palm is killing me," she said through pale lips. "The fingers don't really hurt."

The nerve endings had been severely damaged. Third-degree burns were often less painful at first. At least the burns on her fingertips were small.

Mercy returned the hand to the stream of water and pulled up another stool for herself to keep an eye on Cindy. Without any pain reliever, the cold water was the best she could do. "How's the baby?" she asked tentatively.

"Okay. Kicking lots."

"Good. Any contractions?" Mercy held her breath for the answer.

"I've had a few single, light ones recently. I assume they're those fake ones, you know?"

"Right." Mercy hoped.

"You should pop the blisters," one of the women suggested. "Get that nasty fluid out of there."

Cindy went another shade paler.

"I don't want to risk any infection," Mercy told her. "They'll deflate with time. How did this happen?"

The pregnant woman sighed. "I was stupid. I grabbed the pan in the oven without a mitt. I don't know where my brain is these days."

"Pregnancy brain," Mercy commiserated. "My sister complained about it nonstop the last few months of her pregnancy."

She froze, and panic pummeled her brain.

*Jessica doesn't have a sister.*

Her gaze flew to Cindy's, but the woman was focused on her hand under the faucet.



*Cindy wouldn't know that.*

It wasn't as if Jessica's personal profile had been passed to every resident.

"How's the injury?" Vera spoke behind Mercy.

*But Vera might know.* Mercy couldn't breathe, wondering if the woman had overheard.

"Hurts," answered Cindy. Her eyes were wet.

"Hmmm." Vera's tone was accusatory. Her presence was like a ticking bomb behind Mercy's back. "I guess you'll be off duty for a few days."

"This sort of injury will take more than a few days—" Mercy started.

"My left hand is fine," Cindy cut in. "I'll be slow, but I can still do stuff."

Mercy bit her tongue.

"Of course you can," answered Vera. "I'm sure you'll feel better soon. Let's see the hand." Vera held her position behind Mercy but bent forward over her shoulder, her coat brushing Mercy's back. She suppressed a shiver at the touch.

Vera disturbed her on many levels.

Cindy pulled the hand out of the water with a wince, showing Vera.

"We don't have any ice, but you could try snow for the pain," said Vera.

Mercy weighed the suggestion. Snow wasn't clean, and she wouldn't put it on the fresh wounds. But Cindy's face had lit up at the suggestion, and her eyes pleaded with Mercy.

"We can put it in a plastic bag," Mercy stated, kicking herself for not thinking of it earlier.

Taking Cindy's arm, she gently dried the hand as Cindy winced. She spread the expired antibiotic cream over the blisters. *I hope the cream hasn't degraded into something harmful.* She loosely wrapped the whole hand with gauze.

One of the women handed her a gallon sealable bag. The inside was lightly smeared; it'd been cleaned and recycled. Mercy didn't mind as long as it didn't leak. She tested it with water and was satisfied. "I'll be right back."

She stepped out the back door, instantly aware of the crisp, clean scent of the air compared to the heat and meat smells of the kitchen. Both were

good, but she closed her eyes for a long moment and inhaled, hoping to slow her rapid pulse. She still didn't know if Vera had heard her slip about her sister's pregnancy.

*What's done is done.*

She scouted for a pristine area of snow. People had been in and out of the kitchen, tracks leading in every direction. She spotted an undisturbed area at the far corner of the building. As she crouched to scoop handfuls into the bag, she heard a voice from around the corner.

"Pete moved up the timeline."

Mercy went rigid, her bare right hand in the snow.

"Bloodthirsty, is he?" came a second male voice.

"This isn't about blood," the first voice lectured. "It's about principles. What they're doing is unconstitutional, but we're down two drivers. Soon as they get back tomorrow, we're in business."

*Get back to the kitchen.*

She didn't move. Details of Pete's plan were more important.

More important than her safety.

"Hope Pete knows what he's doing." The second voice was worried.

Mercy couldn't connect faces with the voices. She listened harder as she slowly scooped snow into the bag.

"You questioning his leadership?" The tone was hard, full of steel and condemnation, and the hair rose on Mercy's neck.

"Fuck no," corrected the second man. "I just want it to go as planned. Lots of things could go wrong. Speeding it up can mean mistakes."

"Everything is packed. We're heading out the morning after tomorrow."

*Is Chad one of the drivers they are waiting for?*

*Does he know their plan?*

"By the next day, people across the country will be grateful for the risks we took. It'll be covered by every network."

*It's big. Are they using the stolen weapons? Explosives?*

"Are you sure they'll never know it was us?"

Mercy tentatively eliminated a plan with the stolen guns. Anything with gunfire probably wouldn't end up anonymous. Explosives could be set and detonated after everyone left the area.

"Yep. Pete's planned it perfectly."

Boots crunched in the snow, their steps growing fainter, and Mercy blew out a breath of relief. Her knees wobbled in her crouch, and she sat hard in the snow, her pulse still racing.

The day after tomorrow was The Day.

But she didn't know what or where or how. And she had no way of communicating with anyone. She had to get out of the compound to warn the ATF.

"What the hell is taking so long?" Vera snapped from the kitchen's back door.

"Sorry, Vera." Mercy rapidly filled the bag and jumped to her feet.

The woman's nose and mouth were scrunched up in anger. "Doesn't anyone hustle anymore?"

Mercy scurried past Vera.

*Like you hustled to get help for Cindy?*

# EIGHTEEN

Driving with one hand, Ollie took a long sip from his thermos, attempting to avoid burning his tongue on the hot coffee. He turned onto the country highway out of Eagle's Nest that headed toward Bend and his community college. He sped up, appreciating the sight of the crisp white-topped mountains against the blue sky to the west. The range had received fresh snow recently, its gray summer silhouettes a thing of the past for the next eight to nine months.

Winter was definitely coming.

Which meant Truman and Mercy's wedding was less than three months away. Ollie shifted in his seat. He'd spent a lot of brainpower to think up a wedding gift that symbolized how important they were to him. It was impossible. If only—

Suddenly distracted, he leaned forward to get a better look at the large birds circling in the sky to the right of the highway.

*Something got hit by a car.*

He glanced over as he sped by, trying to identify the type of animal lying far off the road. It was a long, pale lump with a few birds on top.

*Did I see an orange hat?*

Ollie pulled onto the shoulder and craned his neck to see out the back window. The lump was too far away to distinguish details. He turned and stared out his windshield. If it was a body, he had no wish to see it. He'd stumbled across skeletal human remains a few months ago, and that had been disturbing enough for one lifetime.

*It's nothing. Just go to school.*

He pulled back onto the road, deciding to move on. If it'd been a body, someone would have already stopped.

*I can't.*

He pulled a U-turn. Traffic was always light on the road, especially this early in the morning. He'd take a look, satisfy his curiosity, and continue on to class.

He passed the lump, made another U-turn, and parked on the edge of the road. The birds flew off but maintained their circle in the sky. Straining his eyes, he tried to make heads or tails of what he saw, but the lump was about thirty feet off the road and down a small slope. He'd have to move closer.

Swearing under his breath, Ollie hopped out of his old truck and carefully stepped down the short bank to where the ground leveled off. He walked through the sagebrush, reddish-brown dirt, and ancient volcanic rocks of all sizes. The larger rocks were the reason he wasn't certain about what he saw.

"Fuck." Ollie whirled away from the sight, his coffee burning in his gut.

It was a body. Male. Shot in the forehead and the chest.

A filthy orange cap, the kind hunters often wore, lay two feet from the body.

Ollie held his breath and steeled himself for another look. The man lay on his back, his right arm stretched out above his head as if he were reaching for his hat. There was no question that the man was dead. The birds had already worked on his face. The victim was naked except for his underwear. Even his socks and shoes were missing.

With shaking hands, Ollie slid his phone out of his pocket and called Truman.



"Think we should call state for help?" Officer Ben Cooley asked Truman.

Truman lifted his cowboy hat to run a hand through his hair as he evaluated the dead body. "I already called Deschutes County for their evidence team. This is the third man who's been shot and dumped over the last few weeks. Bolton has been handling those investigations."

*But this one is in my jurisdiction.*

Not that he would shut Bolton out of the investigation. Common sense said the detective should be involved in this case, but Truman intended to keep his foot firmly on it. It was his. He had already felt personally

connected because one of the victims had been found at Britta's, but this made his association feel stronger.

"You don't recognize him?" Truman asked. Ben had worked for the Eagle's Nest police department for over thirty years. He knew almost everyone in the area.

"Seems familiar, but I can't quite place him. Hard to do with part of his face missing. Damned birds," Ben answered, scratching under his chin as he pondered the body. "Looks young. Speaking of young men, how was Ollie after finding him?"

"He was shook. I told him to go home, but he insisted on going to class. Said it'd keep his mind on other things."

"That boy has some bad luck. Found two bodies this year."

"He thinks he's pretty lucky these days," Truman replied.

Ollie had a permanent home as part of Truman's family.

Crouching next to the body, Truman estimated the victim to be in his twenties or thirties. "I want to see underneath him." He handed Ben a pair of vinyl gloves. Truman had already taken several dozen photographs of the body. They could do a quick study without concern about disturbing the scene.

"I'll roll him toward you," Truman said, lifting the man's shoulder and hip. He was heavy. The body wasn't in full rigor yet; his arms were stiff but not completely frozen in place. No swelling or hint of decomposition. No doubt the cold temperatures had helped, and Truman suspected he'd been shot at some point overnight. There was an exit wound in the back of his skull and a hole in the dirt under his head. He had been shot in the head as he lay on the ground.

But no hole in the ground below the exit wound in his back. Possibly he'd been standing when shot in the chest and had fallen.

The crunch of gravel announced another vehicle had arrived. Truman stood, expecting to see a county cruiser. Instead it was his youngest officer, Royce Gibson. Royce was an enthusiastic and hardworking cop, but he was also the most innocent and unsuspecting man Truman had ever met. The rest of his team had made it their mission to frequently prank the officer. Just that morning his office manager, Lucas, had given him a mayonnaise-filled doughnut. Royce had eaten half before he realized something wasn't right. Truman had learned long ago not to accept food from Lucas without careful investigation.

Royce stopped at the top of the short bank, staring across at the scene. Truman waved him down. The cop could use a little hardening up. His face always gave away his emotions. Sure enough, Royce's mouth dropped open as he got closer.

He stopped several feet away and averted his eyes, swallowing hard. "Jeez, Truman. What do you think happened?"

"I think he was shot," Truman answered dryly. "Do you recognize him?"

Royce took two hesitant steps closer and made himself look at the face. "Holy shit!" He rubbed a trembling hand across his forehead as he turned away.

Truman raised an eyebrow. "Is that a yes?"

Royce's gaze darted to the body and away again. He audibly swallowed. "Sorta looks like Gerry Norris. Works at the gas station. Well, I assume he still works there. I didn't see him around much this past summer." Royce shuddered. "Worked for Nick Walker at the lumberyard a few years back. I think Nick let him go. Nasty parting, if I remember right."

Nick was Truman's almost-brother-in-law. Married to Mercy's sister Rose.

Ben had listened closely as Royce talked. "I'll have Lucas get us a home address and Norris's license photo to check," he said, tapping on his phone and stepping away.

"You sure that's who this is?" Truman asked. "Why don't I recognize him?"

"Well—I'm not positive. Hard to tell, really. Sure feels like it could be him." Royce took another rapid glance at the victim. "Maybe you don't know him because he worked the graveyard shift. Uh . . . I need to get something out of my truck." He headed back to the road before Truman could say anything else.

Bolton's Explorer had just parked behind Royce's patrol vehicle. Evan Bolton raised a hand at the young officer, who returned the gesture but kept walking. Bolton's gaze followed Royce, watching as he climbed in his SUV and simply sat, staring down at his lap. The detective shrugged. Truman understood Bolton's confusion. Royce always had a cheery word for everyone. Typically too many cheery words. It was often difficult to get the officer to stop talking.

“We meet again,” Bolton said as he approached Truman. “I’m beginning to dread your phone calls.”

Truman didn’t laugh and launched directly into business. “This victim was shot in the chest before he took a bullet to the head. I believe we’ll find the second bullet in the ground under his head. And we have a possible identification on him already.”

Bolton scanned the body. “Good. We can compare the bullet to the one we pulled from the second victim. Nice that we’re early to this one. I had an artist put together some sketches of the first two victims. They’re already posted online, and they’ll be on the local news tonight. Somebody out there should recognize them.” He bent closer. “Why did he shoot you in the chest first?” he muttered. “Who ID’d him?”

“Royce. Says he thinks it’s Gerry Norris. A local.”

“So that’s why Royce looked ready to puke,” Bolton commented.

Truman studied the detective. Bolton had always impressed him with his steady demeanor no matter what horror was in front of him. But at what cost had he developed that calm?

“Have an address for Norris?” Bolton asked.

Ben rejoined the group. “I got it and a photo,” he answered. He held up his phone, which displayed an enlarged driver’s license picture. “This guy looks a lot heavier than our victim. Face is rounder. Now I’m not sure it’s him.”

Truman compared the photo to the body. Neither he nor Bolton could be certain it was Norris.

“I’ll text you the address, Truman,” Ben said as he stomped and waved an arm at a bird that had ventured too close, its beady eyes on the body. “Damned birds.”

“Wait for the evidence team and medical examiner,” Truman told Ben. He glanced back at Royce, who was still sitting in his vehicle. “Get Royce back down here and have him help the team. I don’t care if he just holds a garbage bag or takes bird duty. Keep him busy with something.”

Ben nodded solemnly, understanding in his gaze.

Truman looked to Bolton, who was eyeing the birds with distaste. “Let’s go.”

As they headed toward the road, Truman received a phone call.

“What’s up, Lucas?” Truman signaled for Bolton to wait.



“I’m entering Samuel’s reports from last night, and I just discovered he broke up a domestic dispute between Gerry Norris and Kim Fuller at Norris’s address,” Lucas said triumphantly. “Thought you’d like a heads-up.”

“Nice job. Send me a scan of Samuel’s report.”

“I got lucky.” Lucas sounded smug.

Truman ended the call. “We’ve got a girlfriend to interview,” he told Bolton.



Gerry Norris lived in an old Eagle’s Nest building composed of four apartments that had seen better days. The architecture suggested it’d been built in the seventies, and it currently needed a new coat of paint. The outdoor landings were covered with green artificial turf that had thinned to threads in front of each apartment door.

After Truman knocked, a chain stopped Norris’s door from opening more than five inches, and suspicious female eyes studied the men. “More cops?” she asked with a sigh.

“Sorry to bother you, ma’am,” Truman answered, holding up his identification. “We’re following up on last night’s report. Are you Kim Fuller?”

Samuel’s report had been clear and concise. At 8:00 p.m. neighbors had reported a fight in the apartment above them. When Samuel responded, he’d found Fuller and Norris drunk and screaming at each other but with no apparent injuries. A disagreement about money was the source of the argument. He’d separated the two of them and talked to each individually, and it had been agreed that Norris would spend the rest of the night with a friend. At 9:00 p.m. Samuel had dropped off Norris at a home a mile away and watched him enter the house before leaving.

The friend’s house was Truman’s next stop.

“Yes, I’m Kim.” The blonde woman closed the door, removed the chain, and opened it wide, releasing a strong cigarette odor from the apartment. She was very thin and wore yoga pants and a sweatshirt. “I thought everything was over once the officer left,” she said, standing firmly in the doorway. “It wasn’t a big deal. The neighbors downstairs are a *pain in the butt!*” she shouted toward the floor.

“Do you mind if we come in and talk?” Truman asked.

She looked from Truman to Bolton. “What’s wrong with right here?”

*I want to see inside your apartment.*

“Nothing,” he agreed. She was already defensive, and he didn’t want to push her more. Yet. “The report says the argument started about money. What happened?”

“I told him he needs to get a job if he wants to go party every night. He hasn’t worked since June, and I’m tired of hustling my ass off to keep him in beer.”

“Where do you work?”

“Colonel’s in Bend.”

Truman knew the dive bar. He’d never been inside, but Samuel had gotten food poisoning there. Twice. When Truman asked why he’d gone back, he’d shrugged and said the burgers were worth the risk.

Nothing was worth food poisoning to Truman.

“Have you heard from Gerry since he left last night?” Bolton asked.

“Nah. I’m sure he’s still sleeping it off.” She leaned against the doorway, crossing her arms below her breasts and inspecting both men in a curious way that made Truman want to scratch his neck. She appeared to like what she saw in Bolton.

“The two of you argue a lot?” Truman asked.

“As much as anybody.”

“He ever get physical with you?”

She smirked. “No. He wouldn’t do that. I’m his bread and butter right now. He needs to keep me happy.” Her considering gaze roamed over Bolton again.

*This is happy?*

“Do you have a picture of both of you?” He didn’t want to ask for just a picture of Norris. She would know instantly something was wrong.

She scowled. “Why?”

“There weren’t any pictures with the report. Usually we take photos of who we’re dealing with,” he lied.

Her phone was tucked in the waist of her yoga pants, and she flashed more skin than necessary as she pulled it out. She held up the phone. The lock screen was a selfie of her and Norris.

Norris wore a cap. Again Truman couldn’t be certain he was the victim. He asked her to send the photo to him and excused himself and

Bolton.

He led Bolton down the stairs. “Time to visit the friend’s place where Norris spent the night.”

*Was Norris killed by his friend?*

# NINETEEN

By the next morning, another three inches of snow had fallen. The compound had transformed into a rustic winter wonderland, making Mercy miss the homey, secure feeling of her own cabin during the freezing months. Last night had been cold in the women's building, its insulation lacking. The beautiful snow hid the fact that the facilities had been built for temporary summertime camping, not wintertime living.

Mercy was one of the first people in line for breakfast, a headache pounding in her skull from her thirty-six hours of no food and constant overnight analysis of the conversation she'd overheard yesterday. Her brain hadn't stopped. Pete's plan would kick off in twenty-four hours, and she hadn't come up with a solution to stop them. She'd wandered the compound, checking for a way to get out. There was none. Even if she did escape, she still had to find a phone.

*And hope there is decent wireless coverage.*

She'd wait for Chad to return and send him to use the satellite phone.

A few men lined up behind her, and she covertly studied them, wondering if any were the two she'd overheard yesterday.

She got her food, spotted Eden at a table in the mess hall, and sat beside her, curious about what had happened to Noah in town. The girl nodded at Mercy's greeting and continued to pick at her scrambled eggs, resting her head on one hand, her eyes red and swollen.

Clearly Eden hadn't heard any news about Noah.

Mercy realized the teen must feel as alone as she did with Chad gone. Eden currently didn't have a brother or father. Or mother. Mercy committed to keeping the teenager close and distracted from thoughts of her little brother. And maybe Eden's presence would help Mercy forget how isolated and vulnerable she currently was in the compound. Mercy ate and, even

with the mass of turmoil in her head, the breakfast was one of the most delicious meals she'd had in years. Amazing what supreme hunger could do.

Pete entered and scanned the room. Spotting Mercy, he strode toward her. He didn't look like a man with a mysterious plan of destruction. She wiped her mouth, fear and hope battling in her stomach as she wondered if he had news about Noah. Eden saw him approach and gave a small gasp. She sat up straighter on the hard bench, anticipation on her face.

He stopped at their table, a light dusting of snow in his hair and on his coat. "The urgent care center transferred Noah to a hospital last night. He was dehydrated."

A knot untied in Mercy's chest. No doubt fluids and antibiotics would make a world of difference in the boy's health.

"The hospital insisted Noah have a parent present," Pete continued. "They said they'd assign him a county caseworker if a parent didn't appear." Annoyance weighed heavy in his tone. "That is part of what I wanted to avoid," he said, pinning a harsh look on Mercy. "We don't need the government telling us how to take care of our children."

*Yet I have to force you to take care of them.*

"I called Jason in Portland and told him," Pete said. "He made it to the hospital late last night to be with his son and sent Sean back here."

"Is Chad at the hospital too?" Mercy asked.

"No. I rented him another vehicle to stay in Portland and get the shipment." Pete looked behind him, checking on the other mess hall residents. "All of my order hadn't arrived like they told me. They swear it'll be there in a few days, so I told Chad to wait for it."

Mercy's heart dropped. Chad was out in the wide world without an escort; he had the ability to communicate with the ATF, take long showers, and get Starbucks. But Mercy was stuck in the compound with news of a big event occurring tomorrow and no means to warn anyone. At least Pete's news meant Chad wasn't the driver they were waiting for. He might know nothing of the plan. Relief hit her, and the tension evaporated. She hadn't realized the level of her agitation, wondering if Chad was part of Pete's plan.

Sean passed behind Pete's back, a tray of food in his hands. His gaze collided with Mercy's, but he walked on.

Pete glanced at Sean as he took a seat a few tables away. “Sean barely made it back home in the middle of the night. The roads are insanely slick, and a lot more snow is forecast over the next few days. County won’t send plows up here unless I ask them to, and our landlord says the cost would be on me.” His face was grim. “Good thing we’re prepared for winter.”

Mercy had seen their stores; this compound wasn’t anywhere near prepared. Uncertainty swamped her. “But what about Chad—and Jason? How will they get back if the roads are bad?”

*Am I stuck here? Possibly for the rest of the winter?*

The ATF needed to know what she’d overheard.

Pete was already walking away. “We’ll figure out something,” he said without concern. He stopped at another table, greeted the men, and joined their conversation.

*At least Noah is getting treatment.*

“Eden, want to come with me?” Mercy asked the teen. The girl nodded, looking encouraged, and took care of her tray without asking where Mercy was going. “That was good news about Noah,” Mercy added. “He’ll quickly get better in the hospital.”

“I’m so relieved.”

Mercy understood.

Outdoors, Mercy pulled on her gloves, eyeing the snow. Finding the satellite phone was completely out of the question. Frustration made her want to hit something. She was powerless.

*Will innocent people die as a result of their plan?*

Eden adjusted her hat and then tucked her hands under the armpits of her thick coat.

“Do you have gloves?” Mercy asked as she pulled up her hood.

“No.”

“Then our first stop is to requisition some gloves for you.”

Eden made a face. “I doubt they have any left.” They took the broken path through the snow toward the supply depot, their boots crunching in the white fluff.

“I probably should hide while you ask for gloves,” Mercy admitted, not wanting Beckett to deny Eden something simply because Mercy was there.

“Beckett’s a dick.”

One side of Mercy's mouth rose in a half smile. "You noticed that, did you?"

"Hard to miss. Where did you want to walk after that?" Eden's cheeks were pink from the cold, and Mercy's heart did a double beat at the sight. Kaylie's cheeks flushed the same way.

A craving to see her niece stole her breath. She desperately missed the teenager and wondered if that was why she was so focused on Eden.

"Nowhere," Mercy said once her lungs returned to normal. "I wanted to roam around a bit. Enjoy the sight of the snow. Maybe go up to the clearing, where the new building is."

They passed several people heading to breakfast. Nods were exchanged, but no one spoke directly to the two of them. Mercy wondered if that was normal behavior, or if she'd been identified as a troublemaker already.

She didn't care what they thought. She should care, since Chad had told her not to make waves, but she couldn't sit by and let shit hit the fan.

"I saw you the first day I was here." Mercy put the other residents out of her mind and concentrated on Eden. "Vera was giving me a tour, and you were hiding in the women's cabin. I didn't say anything to Vera. I figured if you were hiding, there was a good reason."

Eden's cheeks grew pinker.

"No one was supposed to be in the cabin," Eden admitted. "You and Vera surprised me. Cindy was dead asleep before you came in. I never worry about waking her."

"What were you doing?"

The teen kicked at the snow. "Just looking around."

Mercy said nothing.

"Vera often has candy," Eden said after a long silent moment. "No one is supposed to have it in camp, but somehow she gets it." The girl frowned. "I don't take it all—just some. I think it's funny that she can't report that someone is stealing from her—"

"Because she'll have to admit she has contraband," Mercy finished with a grin. "I get it."

"I share it with the other kids," Eden quickly added. "They know not to get caught with it, or else there will be no more in the future."

"How quickly we learn to deceive," Mercy murmured. "Do you snoop through everyone's stuff?"

Eden looked away. “There is seriously nothing else to do here. I usually don’t steal—unless it’s something they’re not supposed to have anyway. I’ve never taken more than some candy and beer.”

“No alcohol is allowed either?” Mercy hadn’t heard that rule.

“Right. But the men hide it here and there outside around the camp. I take it just to mess with them.”

Mercy grinned. “I’m liking you more and more.” Her mind shifted into another gear, wondering about Pete’s plan for tomorrow. “Eden, have you ever found something . . .” Mercy searched for a way to say *weapons* without using the word. “Found something that alarmed you?”

“Oh, I stay *out* of the men’s cabins.”

Mercy snorted. “Not like that. Maybe something dangerous that the younger kids shouldn’t play with.”

Eden put a hand on Mercy’s arm to stop her. Her blue eyes were amused. “What on earth are you trying to say? I’m not ten. Just ask.”

Mercy knew she’d broken a rule of speaking to teens. Don’t bullshit; they recognize it.

“Have you ever found weapons where you knew there shouldn’t be any?” she blurted.

Eden’s eyes searched hers. “The patrols carry guns. They keep them in the armory.”

“Not like that. A cache of hidden weapons. Ones not being used.”

Two lines formed between Eden’s eyebrows. “I don’t understand.”

Mercy formulated a reasonable lie. “Chad mentioned that someone had said they’d seen a lot of weapons, but he thinks they were lying. I’d hate for the other kids to find something like that.” She fixed an earnest expression on her face.

Eden still looked confused. “No. No one would leave out something like that.”

“But they might have them.”

Annoyance crossed her face. “You want to know if Pete has a bunch of weapons. Just say it.”

She was caught, but she couldn’t stop now.

Mercy sighed. “It makes me sound nosy and suspicious.”

“It does.”

“But what if the guy who told Chad wasn’t lying? Wouldn’t you want to know what was going on? This is supposed to be a safe place.”



“This is a fucked-up place,” Eden spit out. “Who lets Noah nearly die because of made-up principles?”

“I completely agree with you,” Mercy said quietly.

“Then why are you here?” Eden asked, her gaze earnest. “I’m here because my dad made me come—and now he might be unable to come back if the weather doesn’t let up!” Moisture started in her eyes.

Mercy pulled the teen in for a hug. “I’m sorry your family isn’t here.”

“I don’t want to be here!” Eden said, her face pressed into Mercy’s coat. “I hate it here. I don’t know why anyone would choose to come to this stupid camp.”

Temptation to tell the truth hovered like a storm cloud around Mercy. It was a need to comfort the girl and also unload her own burden of secrets to someone, anyone.

She rubbed Eden’s back and analyzed her situation. Again.

Chad was gone for a few days or possibly much longer. She hadn’t made friends who might take her into their confidence and disclose where weapons might be or more about Pete’s plan. All she’d accomplished was to rile up the commander and some of his associates.

And save Noah’s life.

There was nothing for her to do but sit tight and keep her ears open.

Eden pulled back and wiped her eyes. “I need gloves.”

“Yes, you do. And I won’t hide from Beckett.” Mercy lifted her chin. “If I can convince Pete to send Noah to the doctor, I can convince Beckett to part with some gloves.” They continued on to the supply depot.

Someone had shoveled a small clearing in front of the depot’s door. Fresh footprints indicated people had been there recently. Mercy knocked, and Beckett promptly opened the door. His eyes narrowed, and his mouth turned down.

“Eden needs gloves,” Mercy stated, keeping her tone pleasant.

His gaze went to the teen and softened slightly. “Give me a minute. Everybody wants gloves today. Not much left,” he said gruffly. He disappeared into the small building, and Mercy immediately followed, with Eden close behind. Last time he’d shut the door in Mercy’s face. Maybe she was moving up in the world.

The interior reminded her of someone’s overstuffed garage. Crammed shelves lined the walls, and more shelving units full of cardboard boxes filled every available space. Contents were listed on the boxes in childish

letters. *Sheets, flashlights, boots.* Cracked plastic laundry baskets held clothes, and worn denim and chambray showed through the sides. A half dozen of the baskets were labeled as men's clothing. Only one was labeled as women's. Mercy looked for a children's basket and didn't see one. Nothing was new. Everything was secondhand.

Beckett grabbed a small box off a top shelf. Gloves and hats.

Mercy studied the rest of the supply depot as Beckett and Eden considered the leftover gloves. Eden had found one she was happy with, but it didn't have a mate.

A corduroy coat tossed on the top of one of the men's clothing baskets caught her eye.

It looked like Chad's coat.

Her gaze locked on a red plaid shirt in the next bin, and her pulse stuttered.

That was definitely Chad's shirt.

He'd been wearing it when he left with Jason yesterday. Beckett and Eden's glove discussion faded away as Mercy's vision tunneled on the shirt, and Vera's words rang in her head. *We reuse everything until it falls apart and is beyond repair.*

They'd taken his clothes.

They'd known he wasn't coming back.

*Dear Lord. No.*

Her knees turned to water, and she grabbed the adjacent shelf for balance, abruptly understanding there had never been a shipment to pick up in Portland.

Chad had been eliminated.

Probably as an assignment for Jason. Eden's father, Pete's most recently branded and fervent follower.

Mercy took deep breaths as another thought blasted into her brain.

*Is my cover blown?*

# TWENTY

Mercy couldn't think straight after seeing the clothing.

As she blindly walked across the compound, her throat tightened, Chad's kind face flashing in her mind. She hoped she had jumped to conclusions when she saw his clothing in Beckett's supplies.

If Chad had been eliminated, wouldn't Pete have immediately taken her for questioning? If Chad's cover had been blown, it was logical his girlfriend would be suspected.

But no one had approached her. Pete had talked calmly to her at breakfast, acting as if nothing had happened. The men she'd overheard yesterday hadn't mentioned having a traitor in their midst. Wouldn't that fact be passed around?

Unless everyone knew, and they were all biding their time to see if she gave herself away.

Mercy wanted to pull out her hair. Her brain was in high paranoia mode.

*Did I overreact?*

Chad could be doing exactly what Pete said. Sitting in a hotel, waiting for word on a shipment. Maybe people were expected to occasionally trade out their clothing to keep things more equal.

Rags for everyone.

Maybe she'd been mistaken about the clothes. Maybe it just looked like Chad's clothing.

Maybe.

Maybe.

There was nothing she could do about it now.

A sense of a clock ticking down propelled her to do something—anything—to find more information on the *big plan* for tomorrow. It was

time to act, not sit idle and stress.

Mercy had sent Eden back to Sadie's, not wanting the girl around because she had decided to take another look at the new garage. If the trucks were being packed up tonight for the plan tomorrow, that meant their supplies were somewhere on the compound. And the new structure was the only place Chad said he hadn't searched.

If someone asked what she was doing, she'd say she was just looking at the trucks, wondering when Chad would be back. It was a weak excuse, but she couldn't think of another, and right now she didn't care. Something big was about to happen, and she had to figure out a way to stop it.

She debated tinkering with the vehicles and discarded the idea. What went on under the hood of a truck was foreign to her. She knew where to add oil but nothing else. Her brothers had been the ones to learn about engines; she and her sisters had learned how to cook.

It'd always been a weak point in her preparations. Knowing how to keep a vehicle running would be extremely important if she was suddenly alone, mechanics gone, internet gone. The topic had kept getting pushed to the bottom of her preparation list. Maybe deep down, she'd hoped her father or brother would be with her.

*Bullshit.*

She'd always expected to be on her own.

Like now.

She followed a broken path toward the old carport and new garage, her boots crunching in the snow. Stopping behind a tree before she crossed the clearing, she watched and waited for a long moment.

It was silent. She didn't see anyone near the carport or working on construction. No tire tracks led away from the buildings. The snow had already filled in Sean's tracks from last night's return. The vehicle Chad and Jason had driven to Portland was still gone.

Holding her breath, she moved out from behind the tree.

Tension boiled in her veins as she reached the garage. The scent of fresh-cut lumber met her, its soothing odor clashing with the anxiety bouncing in her head.

"Hello? Anyone here?" she called out, injecting a cheeriness she didn't feel into her voice.

No answer.

She passed by the new roll-up doors, headed for a regular door she'd seen on the south side of the building. An open padlock hung on a hook by the door, giving her hope. The only other locks she'd seen in camp were on the supply depot and command center. She turned the knob. It swung open, and she pumped a fist.

"Hello?" she called, embarrassed at the way her voice cracked.

No answer.

She took two steps into the dim interior and called again, letting her eyes adjust. Two large utility vans that had seen better days were parked inside. She moved back out and gazed at the aging carport, remembering that she'd previously seen the vans parked under the structure. Now there were only two four-wheel-drive trucks. Stealing a vehicle crossed her mind for the thousandth time, but the only way to drive out of the compound was through the front gate, which was monitored 24-7.

Gazing to the east, she remembered that Chad had said the compound was bordered by a steep ravine. He'd said it was difficult to cross. She would get nowhere taking a vehicle that way.

She could go on foot. Looking up at the gray clouds still dropping snow, she weighed the option. She knew how to survive in the woods and could find her way north toward Ukiah. But she preferred to do it with *some* supplies. Not just a pair of boots and a jacket. Her fingers ached to hold her Leatherman and a compass. Without her usual equipment and provisions she felt naked and didn't dare venture into the unknown.

Her best bet was to sabotage Pete's plan from inside.

Somehow.

She checked for people again and saw no one. Now was as good a time as any.

Making her decision, she entered the big garage again and saw there was easily room for three more vehicles beyond the vans. Empty shelving lined half of the back wall, and four storage rooms filled the rest. She silently jogged past the shelves to check the rooms. The first door was locked. She yanked on the handle, noting the heavy-duty padlocks and solid construction. Whatever was inside, they had put extra effort into keeping it safe. She moved to the second and third. Both locked. The fourth door opened.

Empty. It wasn't large. Maybe four feet wide and six feet deep. No shelving. She swore and examined the sturdy doorframe, wondering what

was being kept from prying eyes in the first three rooms.

Frustrated, she moved to the side of one of the utility vans. It had windows only on the driver and front passenger doors. Cupping her hands on the passenger window, she peered inside. The seats were ripped, and wires hung out where a radio had once existed. She wondered if Pete had removed it on purpose, keeping his people in the dark as usual. She tried the door. It opened, and she crawled onto the passenger seat to look in the back. It was empty except for a stack of padded blankets such as movers use to protect furniture.

She moved to the next van. That one's seats were in better condition, but again no radio. The vehicle also wasn't locked. Opening it, she knelt on the seat and peered into the rear of the van. Two plastic bins sat behind the driver's seat, each filled with elongated plastic-wrapped bricks.

"Looking for something?" A hand grabbed her upper arm and yanked her backward out of the van, and her arms flew out as she scrambled to keep her balance and land on her feet. Shock coursed through her, and she lost her breath.

Instinct took over. She planted her legs and thrust her other elbow back at his nose. It connected with bone, sending waves of pain down to her fingers, but it'd nailed his jaw. She glanced back as he shook off the impact, and he tightened his grip on her right arm.

Sean.

She flung her elbow back again and hit his nose, making his eyes instantly water, and he let go of her arm. She turned and aimed a knee for his crotch, but he shifted, and she struck his thigh.

A blow to her nose made her drop to her knees. Agony erupted in her head, and she fought to open her eyes as burning tears streamed and mixed with the blood flowing from the injury. Blinded, she heard him circle behind her, and a boot to her back knocked her to the ground.

She was facedown, his knee on her spine, and then he wrestled her arms behind her back, ripping off her gloves. The clicks of handcuffs shocked her. "You carry cuffs?" she said, spitting the blood that had drained into her mouth.

"Always," he grunted. He hauled her up by one arm, and she felt as if it would tear out of the socket. Spinning her around to face him, he eyed the blood on her face with distaste. "Shit." Keeping eye contact, he picked up her gloves and used them to wipe off the blood.

Stars exploded in her vision when he touched her nose, and she reared her head back, the pain making her thighs shake.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

“*Sorry*”? *Seriously*?

“Was that necessary?” she asked. A metallic flavor covered her tongue, and blood flowed down the back of her throat.

“I believe you started it,” he answered, intent on getting rid of the blood on her face.

“No, you fucking started it. Didn’t anyone ever tell you not to grab a woman? Especially from behind?” Anger pulsed through her muscles.

“Pete wants to see you.”

Mercy’s heart dropped.

“Why?” she managed, struggling to keep her voice calm.

“Dunno.” Sean wouldn’t look her in the eye. He finished cleaning her face but didn’t look satisfied with the results. Blood still oozed from the right nostril, and she couldn’t breathe through her nose.

He took a firm hold on her arm and jerked, making her stumble, leading her away from the vehicles. Mercy had a feeling her undercover assignment was over.

*They know.*



Sean didn’t say a word as he escorted her through the compound. People stared. Actually, the men stopped and stared. The women looked and then quickly averted their gazes. Sweat beaded on the back of Mercy’s neck, and her pulse raced.

She felt as if she was marching to her execution.

*Maybe I am.*

Chad was gone. She was on her own.

The plastic bricks she’d seen in the second van flashed in her memory.

Explosives.

*What will they blow up?*

She fought to clear her head. Panic was of no use. *Focus*. She tripped on the first step at the command center and would have landed on her face if Sean hadn’t kept a death grip on her arm. He opened the door and thrust her through. Stumbling, she caught her balance and found the other three

lieutenants, Vera, and Beckett in the room outside Pete's office. The eyes of all five judged her. Mercy automatically looked to Vera, hoping for a break in the woman's tough shell. Vera's expression was stone. Mercy would find no ally there.

*As if I didn't know that.*

"He's waiting for her," Beckett rumbled. The large man's arms were crossed on his chest, anger blazing from his icy eyes.

Vera opened Pete's door and stepped back, condemnation radiating from every pore. Sean pushed her forward into the room, where Pete sat on the edge of his desk, facing her. Judge and jury.

The door shut, and she glanced back. Sean had left.

She was alone with Pete.



"What happened to your nose?" Pete asked.

"It met Sean's fist." Mercy kept her expression neutral. Pete was doing the same.

"I didn't order that."

"Did you order the cuffs?"

"No." A brow lifted. "I take it you didn't come willingly?"

"Sean scared me. He silently came up from behind and grabbed my arm. My instincts kicked in, and I fought back." She tipped her head toward him, her gaze earnest. "With Chad gone, I'm on edge. I've never lived in a place where I'm completely surrounded by men I don't know."

"My men wouldn't do anything."

Mercy said nothing.

"I don't allow it," he emphasized.

"You can't police them every second," she said softly.

"This wasn't how this interview was supposed to start, Agent Kilpatrick."

A shrill noise erupted inside her head.

The sound of terror.

The room spun, and she felt as if she were falling, but her feet were planted firmly on the ground. Her hands turned to ice as sweat dampened her neck and lower back.

*He knows who I am.*



“What does the FBI know about us?” he asked calmly. “What information have you passed on?” He pushed off the edge of his desk and slowly paced around her. “How are you communicating?”

Her heart was trying to beat its way out of her chest, and she could barely hear his words over the clamor in her skull. He stopped directly behind her, and his breath moved her hair along her jaw, making her skin crawl. She briefly closed her eyes, fighting a shudder. *He’s too close.*

“I don’t know why you’re even here,” he said quietly into her ear. “I thought the ATF was monitoring us. There’d been no mention of the FBI. Until now.”

*How did he find out who I am?*

She stood silent. He continued his walk and stopped two feet away in front of her, his eyes staring daggers into hers.

“Once I knew your name, you were easy to research online.” He smiled, keeping his focus steady. “How’s the leg? Your shooting was all over the web earlier in the year.”

Her healed thigh twinged in response.

“Digging a little deeper gave me insights into your world. A niece . . . a fiancé . . .”

Blackness swamped her peripheral vision, and the office faded away. Anger replaced her terror, and all her senses homed in on Pete’s face.

*If he touches my family . . .*

The cuffs bit into her wrists as her hands strained to get loose.

“I like to know about the families of my people. Information is power.” He tilted his head to one side, reminding her of a bird. “A little whisper here and a quiet word there. My men perform best when reminded that no one is outside of my influence. I may sit up here in these hills, but my reach has no limits.”

He waited for her to speak. Mercy counted her breaths, trying to slow her racing lungs and heart. Her priority at this moment was to stay alive. Pete wanted information. He wouldn’t kill her until he had it.

“The government has no business spying on its people. This country was built on freedom. Our leaders seek ways to quash and keep us silent while they stomp on our rights.” He stepped back and sat on the edge of his desk again, his arms crossed, his eyes hard. “We have the right to bear arms, but the government can’t keep their noses out of it. Their weapons data collecting process is illegal.” He snorted. “The ATF doesn’t follow its own

rules, which say they are to eliminate certain identifying information from some weapons sales after a set time period.” He paused. “Guess who is hoarding information on gun owners when they’re not supposed to? It’s up to us to destroy their illegal record keeping if they won’t do it themselves. Those records belong to the people, not the government.”

Mercy tried to keep up with his twisted logic, wondering where he believed these illegal records were being kept. Records weren’t solely stored in file cabinets in a back room anymore; most records had digital backups.

What did he plan to destroy?

Was that the purpose of the explosives in the van?

“You agents of Babylon try to suppress us when all we want is to be left alone.”

*Agents of what?*

“We are peaceful. We can govern ourselves. We deserve our own place to live in the US apart from the rest of you. It’s not out of line to demand such a place. Even Martin Luther King Jr. suggested a separate nation for the colored.”

*Racist and wrong.*

She swallowed and spoke up. “King supported an integrated community. You’re thinking of Malcolm X.”

His face flushed red, and fury lit his eyes. Fear ignited all her nerves.

*Why did I open my mouth?*

“Cunt.” He stepped aside and swung a steel-toed boot at the edge of her left kneecap.

Pain radiated through her body and exploded in her brain like a firework. She collapsed to the floor, blind from the tears. She rolled onto her right side as an inferno raged in her leg.

*“Racist asshole,”* she managed to say between clenched teeth.

The steel toe connected with her stomach.

She couldn’t breathe, her diaphragm refusing to function.

The door swung open behind her.

“Lock her up,” ordered Pete. “She won’t need rations.”

# TWENTY-ONE

Truman entered the medical examiner's office the morning after the discovery, ready to observe the newest John Doe's autopsy. He had a body to identify.

After interviewing Gerry Norris's girlfriend, Kim Fuller, Truman and Bolton had driven to the friend's home where Norris had been dropped off the night before. A bleary-eyed Norris answered the door. He wasn't dead; he was just pissed at his girlfriend.

For once, Truman had been relieved that Royce was wrong about something.

Truman chose to be present for the autopsy. It was his case, and he felt an affinity to the victim, who appeared to be about his own age. He hated that the man had been left alongside the road, and he kept comparing the death with that of the man found in Britta's field. Both had been shot and dumped recently. Why?

He stuck his head inside the lone autopsy suite. Dr. Lockhart worked in a small facility, just herself and three other employees. Truman had been afraid she'd send his victim to the bigger office in Portland, but she'd worked on the other two John Does that Truman suspected could be related to his case, and she wanted to see the third.

"Hi, Truman," Dr. Lockhart said cheerfully as she lifted *something* out of the torso of the body on her table. She set the organ on a scale hanging from the ceiling, and her assistant made a notation. An eighties rock anthem played in the background, and the aseptic room smelled of strong disinfectant with an undertone of something very, very foul. "Protective gear is to the right of the door."

Truman had just grabbed a gown when his phone buzzed. He checked the screen, intending to let it go to voice mail, but Detective Bolton's name

appeared.

“Daly here,” he answered.

“Truman, I’ve had an unusual turn in the second John Doe’s case.”

Truman looked over at Dr. Lockhart. She was concentrating on her work. “What do you have?”

“Something a bit hard to believe. You at your office?”

“No, I just arrived at the medical examiner’s. She’s working on the third John Doe.”

“That’s right. I wanted to be there.”

Dr. Lockhart set a different organ on the scale, and Truman’s throat tightened. “I haven’t talked to her yet.”

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.” Bolton ended the call.

Truman put on the gown, slipped on gloves, and then added a mask and face shield. He felt ready for battle. He didn’t mind autopsies. He’d always had an interest in anatomy and physiology, and he respected that mysteries were solved through the invasive examination.

His victim lay on a wheeled stainless-steel table with a raised edge on all four sides. The far end of the table butted up against a sink where a long hose could stretch to rinse the victim—hence the need for the raised edge. Dr. Lockhart stood on a small stool beside her patient. Her male assistant was still taller than she. Truman was too.

She’d already completed the large Y cut from shoulders to groin. The sternum and a portion of the ribs had been cut and lifted away so she could access the lungs and heart. Truman glanced at a side table, spotting the large pruning shears with curved blades. The cutters were nearly as long as his arms. Shock had rattled him the first time he saw a medical examiner pick up the gardening tool and coolly start snapping ribs. They were effective.

Dr. Lockhart hadn’t peeled back the scalp, opened the skull, and removed the brain yet. The sound of the Stryker saw examiners used to remove the cap of the skull was one that Truman would never forget. He gazed at the victim’s face and prepared his stomach for what he knew would come soon.

“Have anything for me?” he asked the pathologist as she hummed along to Bon Jovi.

“I do.” She looked up, and her eyes danced, glittering behind her mask. “We identified him with his fingerprints.”

Truman nearly pumped his arm in celebration. “Sweet. Who is he? Wait—how come you didn’t call me?”

“Because you will have to share jurisdiction on this murder—and I knew you were on your way here.”

“Share? With Deschutes County? I know—”

“No,” Dr. Lockhart stated as she lifted out a jumbled mass of intestines and mesentery she had cut from the muscle walls. “This victim’s prints showed up in a federal database. He’s a government employee. More specifically, he works for the ATF, and I notified them already.” She glanced at the clock on the wall. “I expect someone from their office any minute.” She met Truman’s gaze. “As you can imagine, they move fast when one of theirs is murdered.”

“No doubt.” Truman wondered if the identification meant his victim wasn’t related to the first two murders. Or would they take another look at the other victims? It had been impossible to get prints on the severely decomposed body found a month ago, and prints of the man found in Britta’s field had led nowhere. Perhaps the involvement of the ATF would breathe new life into the first two cases.

“What else have you found?” Truman asked, wanting to collect as much information as possible in case the ATF agents booted him out the door when they arrived.

“I’ve examined the bullet entrance and exit in the skull. They are larger than the other two victims’ wounds, which is logical since the recovered bullet is larger than victim two’s bullet.”

Truman deflated a bit. His victim was looking less and less related to the other cases.

“He was a healthy male who I now know is thirty-three. Good muscle tone. No tattoos or major scars. I believe he had macaroni and cheese for his last meal.” She winked at Truman, who grimaced.

“What’s his name?”

“Timothy O’Shea.”

“Know anything else about him?” Truman asked, studying the damaged face. With his name rattling in Truman’s head, the autopsy now felt like an invasion of the man’s privacy.

“He weighs one hundred and eighty-two pounds.”

Not exactly the insight Truman had in mind.

A whoosh sounded, and Truman glanced back at the door. A tall, dark woman and a man had entered, both wearing suits. The ATF agents. “Dr. Lockhart?” asked the woman.

“Yes. Please put on the protective gear by the door.”

The two agents quickly dressed and approached. Truman had moved to the other side of the autopsy table, hoping he looked like another assistant in his gown and gloves. He was determined to milk his anonymity as long as possible. Dr. Lockhart shot him a side-eye, aware of his objective.

“I’m Carleen Aguirre, the resident in charge for the Portland ATF office,” said the woman. “This is Agent Neal Gorman.” Both agents glanced at Truman, who turned his attention to Dr. Lockhart’s hands in Timothy O’Shea’s torso.

The woman walked to the head of the table and stared down at the man’s face, her eyes going soft. “I’d hoped there’d been some sort of mistake,” she said quietly. “I see his fingerprints didn’t lie.” Her sigh was audible and heartfelt. At the foot of the table, Agent Gorman was silent as torment flashed in his eyes.

“He is your agent?” Dr. Lockhart asked.

Agent Aguirre nodded. Her chest rose in a deep breath under the pale-blue gown. “I’ll notify his family.”

“Now, Carleen—” Gorman started.

She cut him off. “I know his wife personally. *I’ll do it.*”

“I want to go with you.”

Agent Aguirre nodded, her focus still on the victim.

“Are cowboy boots standard footwear during autopsies?” Gorman suddenly asked. His narrowed eyes were locked on Truman. “Who are you?”

“This is Police Chief Daly,” Dr. Lockhart announced. “Your agent was found in his town.”

“Thank you, Chief,” Gorman said. “We’ll take it from here.” He awkwardly dug under his gown and came up with a business card. “You can send your reports to this email.”

Truman accepted the card, tucked it in a pocket, and held his ground. Both agents stared at him and then exchanged glances.

“Chief—” Aguirre started.

“My son found your agent’s body,” Truman cut in. “He was carelessly dumped in my town. I pay my respects by finding the truth, and the first step to finding justice for Timothy O’Shea is this autopsy. This is where I let my victim know that I will fight for him.”

*I called Ollie my son.*

It was right. The teen was part of his heart.

He looked from a silent Aguirre to Gorman. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to continue to observe.” Respect flashed in Gorman’s eyes.

“I appreciate your words, Chief,” Aguirre said. “And O’Shea is lucky to have been under your watchful eye, but this case is a delicate one. O’Shea was working an investigation when he was murdered.”

“Are you aware there’ve been two similar murders found in the past month in this general area?” Truman asked.

Agent Aguirre blinked. “No. How similar?”

“Single gunshot to the head. Male. Naked. Dumped.”

“I did the autopsies on the first two murder victims,” Dr. Lockhart added. “They remain unidentified. This man was shot twice—once in the chest—unlike the others.”

Gorman cocked his head as he and Aguirre had a silent conversation via gazes across the autopsy table. Aguirre mashed her lips together, concentration filling her face.

“Could the first two murders be related to O’Shea’s investigation?” Truman asked, not liking the agents’ silent response.

“We’ll review them,” Aguirre said tightly, exchanging another look with Gorman.

She looked rattled, the pulse at her neck rapidly beating. Gorman couldn’t stand still. He tried to plunge his hands into his front pockets and discovered the gown was in the way. He hiked it up, put his hands in his pockets, realized how ridiculous he looked, and removed them. “I need to make a phone call,” he said, pivoting to leave the room.

The autopsy suite doors swung open before he reached them. FBI agents Jeff Garrison and Eddie Peterson strode in, alarm on their faces. Truman caught his breath.

*Mercy.*

“You two don’t need to—” Gorman held up a hand to stop the two agents. Eddie pushed it away, his agonized gaze locked on Truman. Truman’s stomach landed somewhere near his feet. Nausea rocked him.

“Truman—” Eddie started.

“Agents!” Aguirre said loudly. She took several steps toward the men. “Why are you—”

“He needs to know!” Jeff argued, now face-to-face with Aguirre and pointing at Truman.

*What’s happened to Mercy?*

Truman couldn’t speak or move, panic freezing his muscles. He simply stared at the two agents.

*Why did Aguirre stop Jeff?*

“This is an ATF investigation,” she snapped at Jeff.

“No. He—”

“I don’t care that he found Tim’s body! This case does not involve—” she stated.

“Truman!” Eddie was heated as he tried to push by Gorman, who’d attempted to block him from moving closer.

Truman numbly focused on the despair in Eddie’s face and braced his arm on the autopsy table, feeling his knees about to crumble.

*It’s not good news.*

Eddie turned angry eyes on Gorman. “Get the fuck out of my way.”

“Make me, hotshot,” Gorman uttered, moving up in Eddie’s grill.

A loud metallic clanging hurt Truman’s ears. Five pairs of eyes turned to see Dr. Lockhart still on her stool and waving a large crowbar, which she’d banged against the leg of the autopsy table. “This is *my* workplace. Get out. All of you.”

“Truman, Mercy was partnered with this ATF agent on her assignment,” Jeff said into the silence.

Truman spun around and met Jeff’s tormented gaze.

His heart stopped. *The ATF?* “What? Where is she?”

*“Agent Garrison—”*

Jeff whirled on Aguirre, heat raging from his eyes. “He’s her fiancé.”

Aguirre closed her mouth, her eyes wide.

“What’s happened to her?” Truman snarled, looking from one agent to the next. “Just fucking tell me!”

*Is she dead?*

Eddie raised his hands in a calming motion, making Truman want to knock his head off. “Truman . . . we don’t know,” he answered quietly. “We have no way to contact her.”



Truman closed his eyes as his heart shattered and fell to the floor.

# TWENTY-TWO

Truman leaned against the rear of Eddie's SUV, his stomach still on a roller coaster. The four agents and Truman had convened in the ME's parking lot, leaving Dr. Lockhart to finish her autopsy in peace. Truman didn't trust himself to drive at the moment. Fury had him seeing red after Jeff and Agent Aguirre told him the details.

Their words spun in his head. *Undercover operation. Militia. Remote compound. Weapons theft. No contact.*

And now her partner had been murdered.

Truman refused to believe she had been killed. Every time his brain tried to go down that path, nausea swamped him and he yanked it back. He would shatter if he allowed the speculation to fully bloom.

"Why did you let her go?" he asked Jeff for the third time. His voice was calm when every fiber of his body wanted to scream the question at Mercy's boss. He felt as if he were straddling a sinkhole, his foundation in pieces at the bottom.

"I couldn't stop her."

Truman knew this was true.

"What are we doing about it?" he asked, including all four agents in his question.

"The FBI is taking the safety of one of their agents very seriously. HRT has been activated," answered Eddie.

The FBI's Hostage Rescue Team was the best of the best, called out in high-risk operations. Catching the bad guys wasn't their objective. Getting the job done and rescue were the priorities. It was rumored they didn't carry handcuffs; they used their weapons instead.

It didn't calm Truman's rage. Anger was his friend; it kept despair at bay.

“They’ll be on the ground near the compound late tonight,” Jeff added. “We’re all the way across the damned country from their headquarters, but Portland FBI’s SWAT team is also on its way. The minute Agent Aguirre contacted me about the death of their agent, I lit a fire all the way up the chain of command to get immediate action.”

“Late tonight,” Truman repeated. Almost an entire day lost.

“With a murdered ATF agent and a possible FBI hostage in an armed militia compound that might have a huge store of weapons or explosives, it was agreed to move the teams into place immediately. Negotiation comes first, but we want the manpower in place and ready if they are needed. The Portland FBI team should arrive first. They’re flying in and landing near Pendleton.” Jeff looked grim. “Our negotiators will get started immediately, and we should know by the time HRT arrives if we’ll even need their tactical expertise.”

*It could be too late.*

“We can’t get recent satellite photos,” Gorman added. “The cloud cover and snow are causing issues. We’ve considered sending a drone, but it’d have to fly low under the clouds and could be seen and tip our hand, so we’ll have to operate off what we have from last week.”

“How did this operation go to hell?” Truman burst out at the ATF agents. “What the fuck happened up there?”

Carleen Aguirre took a deep breath. “I wish I had a better answer for you. Our last communication with Agent O’Shea before Agent Kilpatrick joined him was encouraging. He felt he’d earned the trust of some of the more important men in the compound, but he still didn’t have a confirmation on the stolen weapons or this ‘major plan’ he was hearing rumors about.” She looked him in the eye. “By all accounts, it was moving smoothly, although it was a little slower than we hoped.”

“You sent her in there with no prep time.” Truman ran a hand through his hair as he paced, glaring at Aguirre and Gorman. “You sent her in blind.”

“We appreciate what she did for us,” Aguirre said quietly. “She was sharp and smart. With the little time we had, there was no one else I would have felt as comfortable with to send into that situation. I have confidence in her. I still do. We’ll get her out.”

It hit Truman that Agent Carleen Aguirre was the first person who’d outright implied she believed Mercy was still alive. Everyone else had

spoken about the rescue. No one had said they believed it would be successful.

“Mercy is fucking resourceful,” added Eddie. “She probably has half those guys tied to trees and the other half convinced they should let her do the same to them.”

Truman stopped and squeezed his eyes shut for a long moment. “What am I going to tell Kaylie?”

“Shit,” mumbled Eddie, looking away.

“I can’t do it.” Truman continued his pacing. “If I tell Kaylie, I have to tell Mercy’s sisters and her parents and Ollie—I’d have to tell my men why I’m headed out of town.” *I can’t handle their grief in addition to my own.* He rubbed his chest, feeling his heart’s fierce rhythm. “I can’t bring myself to do that right now.”

“I can help you tell the family,” offered Eddie.

“No—it’s not just telling them. They’ll be worried out of their heads and unable to do anything about it.” He shook his head. “Mercy wouldn’t want her family needlessly worried.” He met Carleen’s dark gaze. “I can’t do that to them until I have some facts.”

“You mentioned heading out of town,” Carleen slowly said. “There’s no role for you in this—”

“He’s going with us,” Jeff asserted. “The FBI takes responsibility for his presence.” He looked pointedly at Truman. “Don’t get any ideas that you will be rushing a militia camp with the HRT team. You’ll be behind the scenes with me.”

Truman nodded. If that was the only way to get near the compound, he’d take it.

When he got there, he’d decide what to do.

Right now he was apt to Rambo his way inside.

A familiar Ford Explorer turned into the lot, and Truman recognized Bolton’s vehicle. He’d completely forgotten the county detective was coming to brief him on something about the second John Doe. Truman walked away from the federal agents, desperately needing to put some space between them and himself.

A hole had been punched through his chest, and wind kept whipping through, chilling his heart and lungs.

It hurt.

A passenger got out of Bolton's vehicle, and Truman searched his memory to attach a name. Darrell Palmer. Britta's neighbor who she had first thought might be the dead man on her property.

*Interesting.*

Truman nodded at Bolton and held out a hand to Darrell, pretending he hadn't just received the worst news of his life. "Mr. Palmer."

The man's eyes were red and swollen, and he had a hard time making eye contact with Truman.

"What can I do for you?" Truman aimed the question at Bolton, who looked grim enough to strangle someone.

"Darrell has identified our second John Doe. It's his brother, Stephen."

Truman spun to Darrell. "Your brother? Why didn't you say anything when we showed you the photo?" He remembered how shaken Darrell had appeared when he looked at the picture of the dead man. Truman had chalked up his reaction to seeing a dead body.

Darrell looked at Truman, twisted his mouth, and then looked away. Truman impatiently raised a brow at Bolton. "Well?"

*I don't have time for this.*

Bolton grimaced. "Darrell believes his brother's body was left as a warning to him." He glared at the older man. "He didn't say anything the other day because he feared for his own life."

"Keep talking," said Truman. The explanation didn't make sense. "Who did it? And why was he left on Britta's property?"

"I think they mistook it for my land." Darrell finally spoke up. "The layout of the field and driveway is identical to mine—just a half mile farther down the road."

Truman waited for the rest.

Darrell squeezed his eyes closed. "I haven't seen Stephen in a long time. We parted ways a few years back. He was bitter and angry and blamed everyone for his financial problems but himself." His eyes opened, and he looked earnestly at Truman. "It all was of his own doing." He shook his head. "My brother didn't care to work and spent every dollar he had and then some, but I'd heard he'd joined some group." Darrell stopped speaking and shoved his hands in his pockets, his focus drawn to the federal agents across the parking lot.

"Group?" Truman prompted, tamping down the anger that threatened to distract him.

“Antigovernment, living on an isolated compound,” supplied Bolton. The hair rose on Truman’s arms. “Where?” he choked out.

*It can’t be the same.*

Bolton frowned and gave him an odd look. “Darrell’s not sure. Somewhere east of here. Closer to Pendleton or John Day.”

“What does this have to do with your brother’s murder?” Truman asked Darrell.

Discomfort flashed. “I talked to Stephen about a month ago. He told me about the place he was living in. He sounded cocky and pleased, and said this group was going to stand up to the government and get what they wanted—”

“What did this group want?” Truman cut in.

“I don’t know exactly,” Darrell said. “Stephen was being secretive and smug about it. I think the only reason he called me was to sell me some rifles. Said he had access to several and asked if I was interested. Promised me a fantastic price and rattled off a half dozen different types he could sell me. When I asked where the weapons came from, he got defensive. ‘What kind of brother do you think I am?’ and that sort of bullshit. He said he was trying to raise money—that his *friends* were legitimate dealers. I didn’t believe him and told him so. His records as a minor are sealed, but he was arrested a few times for breaking and entering, and the only thing he stole was weapons.” Darrell shook his head. “Even when he was young, he was always after a fast buck.

“Then he talked again about how his group was going to get the government off their backs and make the US a better place for Americans. More cocky crap I didn’t need to hear. So I threatened to call the police—I wouldn’t really. I just wanted to shake him up a little bit. It sounded like a stupid place to be, and it was the only thing I could think of that might make him leave. He’s always been one to protect his own ass. Anyway, his demeanor and tone changed when I mentioned the police. He sounded scared. He warned me not to, saying the last guy who’d gotten shit from his family back home had disappeared.”

*Our first John Doe?*

“What happened to the last guy?” Truman asked, steel in his voice.

“Stephen said he didn’t know, but he’d heard a rumor that the man’s body had been used as a message to warn his family to back off.”

Truman met Bolton’s eyes. “The first unidentified male?”

“Possibly.”

Looking back at Darrell, Truman asked, “So your brother was murdered and dumped as a message for you not to report this antigovernment group? That doesn’t sound right.”

Darrell pulled at the sleeves of his shirt, his hands unable to hold still. He plunged them back in his pockets. “I think he tried to get out,” he admitted. “By the end of our call, I felt like he was listening to me.”

“They killed two birds with one stone. The murder was a threat to keep you quiet, and they got rid of a member who was causing problems.” Truman narrowed his eyes at the brother. “What made you finally speak to us?”

Darrell lifted his chin. “I decided, ‘Fuck them.’ They can come after me if they want. But I’m going to keep hounding them and demand they be investigated until the police take notice.” Fury flashed in his red-rimmed eyes. “He was an idiot, but he was my brother. No one deserves to die like that. Now are you guys going to do something about that group?”

Truman’s lips lifted at the corners, but it wasn’t a smile. Too much shit had happened that day for him to smile. And it kept piling on.

“Would you believe the FBI and ATF are already on it?” Truman pointed at the group across the lot.

*To what lengths will this group go to protect themselves?*

He prayed it wasn’t too late for Mercy.



Truman arrived home to pack an overnight bag and realized he was already prepared. Thanks to Mercy’s influence, he had a small GOOD bag ready to go in his vehicle and a larger one at home. He grabbed the big one and added additional heavy clothing. He told Ollie he was needed out of town, and that he’d be back in a few days. “Order a pizza and take it to Kaylie’s,” he told the teen. “Mercy’s been gone four days, and I think she’d like someone to hang out with.” He made an excuse to his officers and promised Lucas to check in the next day.

Bolton had gone back to the Deschutes County office to take another look at the first murdered John Doe. If Darrell Palmer was correct that the group had killed another man as a warning to his family, then there was a good chance that the first John Doe’s family was staying under the radar,

terrified to identify their relative in case the group turned on them. Bolton strongly suspected that his family lived on the property where the first body had been dumped. Or at least nearby.

The ATF had jumped on Darrell Palmer's story. Now they had a reference from outside the compound that America's Preserve was planning something big. Based on Darrell's conversation with his brother, the theory that the group was selling the stolen guns to raise money gained traction.

But the nature and location of the *big event* were still a mystery.

Truman made the four-hour trip with Jeff and Eddie to Ukiah, and then they turned south to head into the national forest. As they gained elevation, patches of snow started to appear along the road. By the time they reached the base camp near 6:00 p.m., the ground had a five-inch layer of snow, and more was in the forecast for the next several days.

It was still light out when they arrived, and the base camp setup was in progress. The Portland FBI had flown in a point team to choose a clearing for the base of operations, and the negotiators were expected to arrive soon. Within half an hour, a large SWAT RV rumbled up the road: a high-tech rolling center from which the negotiators would hopefully mediate a peaceful surrender.

The primary objective was to have all the members in America's Preserve walk out, leaving their arms behind. If that wasn't possible, then getting the children out was next. Obtaining Mercy was also a top goal.

Jeff had spent most of the ride on his phone while Eddie drove. The main topic of discussion was whether or not the men in the compound already knew Mercy was an agent. The FBI was worried about accidentally exposing her and placing her in danger. The other concern was whether or not to mention the murder of ATF agent Tim O'Shea. No one knew how his cover had been blown, and it was possible the compound members had killed him on suspicion, not facts. The ATF didn't want to reveal that O'Shea had been an agent if the compound didn't know—Mercy would become the compound's next logical target.

The final decision was to not mention Mercy or O'Shea in negotiations unless America's Preserve brought them up first. The FBI and ATF would present the case of the ATF's stolen weapons and concern for the safety of the children as the reasons for their arrival.

But the two reasons were weak. There was no solid supporting evidence.



Agents Aguirre and Gorman had turned up the heat on the stolen-weapons investigation. A concrete link between the ATF robbery and America's Preserve was needed. The casual mention of the robbery to a local rancher was not sufficient to trigger this massive response from the government. The compound's role in the deadly heist was still a theory. Darrell Palmer's brother hadn't stated the weapons he had attempted to sell were from the robbery; it was an assumption.

Agent Aguirre was stressed. She'd already worked the investigation of the ATF robbery and the deaths of their two agents for eight months. Now she was expected to produce supporting evidence within a matter of hours.

Truman helped the Portland FBI agents set up their lighting and huge tents. His role was muscle, to be of use wherever was needed. That was fine with him. He kept his ears open as he worked alongside the agents, soaking in their discussions and plans. As he mechanically followed orders, letting his mind drift, he weighed what he'd learned that day about America's Preserve.

Undercover agent O'Shea had reported nine children lived in the compound, two of whom were toddlers. As Truman grabbed another giant tub of equipment, he thought of Rose and her infant son, wondering how she would have handled living in the rural camp with no help from her family or access to medical care.

*What does the compound do if someone breaks a bone or accidentally chops off a finger?*

"I'll be right back," Truman said to the agent he was helping and went to seek out Jeff. He found Jeff deep in discussion with three other agents near the SWAT RV. One of them was Supervisory Special Agent Bill Ghattas out of Portland; he was the head of the America's Preserve operation to find Mercy and generate a peaceful outcome. Ghattas had curly black hair and was big with broad shoulders. He looked like a defensive tackle.

Truman immediately interrupted. "You said you needed a stronger reason to explain your presence to the men in the compound. O'Shea reported that there was essentially no medical care available inside and that was part of the reason they'd approved the addition of his 'nurse' girlfriend." Truman included all four agents as he spoke. "Odds are they had to seek medical care outside the compound—possibly for something urgent like a broken bone or woodcutting accident. Maybe one of the kids

has needed emergency care. Someone should contact local medical facilities and see if anyone has been brought in with a serious injury—something that endangered their lives because of where and how they live.”

“HIPAA laws won’t let medical professionals disclose that sort of information without the permission of the patient or else their parent,” Agent Ghattas pointed out.

“I know,” answered Truman. “But look where we’re standing: the boondocks. Small-town residents talk and gossip and for the most part want to be of help. If we find the right person, we might get lucky with some information.”

The female agent nodded. “He’s right. If a child from that compound came into a doctor’s office with an alarming injury, people would hear about it.”

“Medical offices are closed,” said the man standing next to Ghattas. “We can’t do anything about it until tomorrow.”

“The hospital is open,” Truman stated. “Ever visit a small rural hospital? Everyone knows everything about the people who walk through the doors. We can start there.”

The group was silent for a long moment.

“You got anything else?” Truman asked. “If you highlight lack of medical care, it might give more weight to negotiating the release of the children.” Agent Ghattas nodded thoughtfully, approval growing in his eyes.

“They know why we’re here. They murdered the ATF agent that was inside,” argued the agent who had mentioned the medical offices were closed. “It’s logical that his girlfriend isn’t who she says she is. They’ll know we’re here to get her out—assuming she’s not already dead alongside a road like the first guy.”

“Sanders!” Jeff said sharply, shooting a glance at Truman.

Truman held up a hand to stop Jeff. He had asked Jeff to keep his relationship with Mercy on a need-to-know basis. Ghattas had repeatedly measured him with his eyes, speculating and curious, and Truman suspected he knew. Truman preferred to hear the agents talk openly in his presence and not hold back to avoid upsetting the panicked fiancé.

“We don’t know that’s happened,” Truman told the group, crossing his fingers in the hope that the pessimistic man wasn’t one of the negotiators. “Until someone inside acknowledges there is an FBI agent undercover, this

is our best shot.” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jeff open his mouth and then snap it closed, respecting Truman’s wishes.

“It’s worth a try,” stated Ghattas. He met Truman’s gaze. “I know the ATF agent was found in your town, Chief, so you feel you have a stake in this.” He jerked his head toward Jeff. “This guy has vouched for you. It’s your idea, so you get hospital duty tonight. I can’t spare an agent at the moment. And put together a list of other medical facilities in the area to visit tomorrow—I suspect the list will be short.”

Satisfied, Truman nodded at the agents and left. Jeff caught up and strode beside him.

“It’s a good idea,” Jeff said. “Unlikely, but solid.”

Truman didn’t say anything.

“I told SSA Ghattas who you were—this is his operation. He knows your fiancée is in there and agreed it didn’t need to be public knowledge. I assured him you wouldn’t cause problems. He said it’s my ass if you do.”

“And?”

“Just putting it out there. Again.”

Truman halted and turned to Mercy’s boss, irritation boiling under his skin. “Yes, I’m a damned wreck inside, but I wouldn’t do *anything* to compromise this operation. You don’t need to remind me.”

He stalked away to get the vehicle keys from Eddie, leaving Jeff behind, needing to stay in constant motion to burn off the clouds of apprehension and disquiet hovering around him.

*If I keep moving, Mercy will survive.*

The logic was false, but he gripped the thought like a lifeline.

Because he was already dying inside.

# TWENTY-THREE

It took over an hour for Truman to drive to the closest hospital. If not for the large red hospital sign, Truman would have assumed it was simply an old office building. The one-story brick structure was squat and wide, with a narrow driveway that arched under a covered area near the glass front doors. A wheelchair was visible inside the doors, and four lonely cars waited in the parking lot. The town had a light layer of snow, nothing like the accumulating inches up in the hills.

Truman had doubted and picked apart his idea the entire drive and now wondered if Ghattas had suggested he be the one to follow the unlikely lead to keep him out of the FBI's hair.

Truman parked and strode in the front door. It smelled like a hospital. A piney cleanser scent mixed with sterile bandages. No one sat in the dozen hard seats in the small waiting area, and he approached the counter, where a woman sat behind a sliding glass window. Without opening the glass, she held up a single finger to him as she finished filling out a form. Truman waited. She wore a bulky green sweater, and her gray hair sat on her head like a cloud. A collection of tiny penguins perched along the top of her computer monitor.

She laid down her pen, removed her reading glasses, letting them dangle on the chain around her neck, and slid open the window. "May I help you?" Her tone was pleasant, but her eyes warned him not to waste her time. She was in charge.

*Crap.*

He removed his cowboy hat, showed her his badge, and gave her a warm smile. "Good evening. I'm Police Chief Daly from Eagle's Nest—that's outside of Bend—and I'm investigating a report of child neglect that has led me all the way to your county and hospital." He smiled again,

hoping that mentioning children would reveal something soft under that rigid exterior.

“I won’t give you any information. There are laws to protect our patients,” she said firmly, her gaze still cold, armed to defend the privacy of every patient who had ever set foot in her domain.

Definitely not soft.

“I’m well aware of HIPAA laws,” Truman said. “I’m not asking for medical information. I’m simply looking for a few individuals.”

Her eyes narrowed into tight slits. “I don’t understand what you think I can do for you.”

Far down a hallway behind her, a young man pushed a yellow janitor’s bucket and mop. He paused and tried to listen as the woman talked, but immediately hustled away when Truman met his gaze. He suspected every employee strove to look very busy around the woman.

“Are you familiar with America’s Preserve?”

She sniffed. “Of course. Bunch of hermits living up there. They don’t talk to anyone.” Her grimace suggested that being asocial was an unforgivable transgression.

“Have they brought anyone to the hospital?”

A gate closed over her eyes. She’d appeared difficult to convince before, but now she was permanently shut down. “That’s private information.” She reached for the sliding window to push it shut.

“Wait.” Truman put out a hand to block the window but instantly yanked it away, aware of how aggressive he appeared.

She paused, warily eyeing him.

“I just need to know if any of the children have medically suffered because of where they live,” he said in a low voice.

Emotions warred in her gaze, and he knew he had convinced her. She was a grandmother at heart and—

“I can’t help you.” She slammed the window closed, alarming him that it would shatter.

Stunned, he stared at the glass, unable to move. She stood, giving him her back, and left her desk.

“Well, crap.”



Starving, Truman drove through the tiny, silent town, realizing it was nearly 10:00 p.m. and he hadn't eaten since breakfast. It'd been an exhausting day. An autopsy. The news about Mercy. The long drive. His failure to charm the front desk hospital warden.

It had been a first-class shitty day.

Up ahead on his right, a beacon summoned: a diner with an OPEN sign in its window. His stomach burned at the sight, so he pulled to the curb. Guilt flashed at the thought of everyone hustling their asses off up at the base camp. He'd refuel and get back ASAP.

The diner was the only source of life on the street. A half dozen large windows allowed its fluorescent light to spill onto the sidewalk. He pulled open the glass door, making a bell chime, and stepped in, welcoming the scents of coffee, grease, and meat that washed over him. Instant homegrown comfort.

An older couple sat in a booth near the window. Neither looked up as he came in, both intent on their slices of pie. At the counter, two stools were occupied. One by a man and the other by his hat. Truman took the stool next to the hat, setting his own on his other side. The man glanced his way and nodded amiably. He appeared to be in his midtwenties and wore the usual uniform of the area: worn jeans, scuffed boots, and thick coat.

An older man with heavy jowls appeared from the kitchen. He wore a white short-sleeved T-shirt, a paper hat, and a black apron. His arms were incredibly thin and covered with tattoos from wrist to sleeve. "Need a menu?"

"Nope. I'll take the biggest burger you've got and fries. Coffee too, please."

"Want a fried egg on that burger?"

"Absolutely."

He returned to the kitchen. From his seat Truman watched him start the burger and drop fries in the fryer. As they cooked, he came back to pour Truman a cup of coffee.

"Passing through?" he asked without any interest.

"Yep. It shows?"

"Most people are just passing through," the waiter/cook commented.

"Your food makes them not want to stay, Clyde," joked the man to Truman's left, speaking around a mouthful of fries.

“Is that why you’re in here stuffing your face five nights a week, Ethan?” the older man shot back, dark eyes twinkling. He topped off the joker’s coffee cup and returned to the kitchen.

“Good food?” Truman asked conversationally, scoping out his counter-mate. A local. And if he was in here five nights a week, it meant he didn’t belong to America’s Preserve.

“The best.” Ethan waved a ketchup-dipped fry in the air before popping it in his mouth.

Truman took a plunge. “You familiar with the people living up at the old church camp?”

The young man kept his gaze on his fries. “Why?”

“Heard there are children living up there too. Doesn’t seem like a group that’d have kids around.”

Another fry disappeared into Ethan’s mouth. “Seems okay.”

“Could be,” Truman said, but he used a dissenting tone. He silently sipped his coffee for a long minute, waiting to see if the man would fill the silence. He felt his neighbor study him from his boots to his hair.

“You heard things about the kids?” the man finally said.

Truman shrugged and drank his coffee.

“They don’t go to school,” said Ethan in a low voice. “Some of the teachers in town have complained. Said they need to be educated, and homeschooling doesn’t seem to be a priority for those folks.”

“That’s not good,” Truman agreed.

Ethan glanced over at the old couple, who were still eating their pie. “My brother works at the hospital. Said one of those kids was brought in on an emergency.”

Truman had struck gold. He met Ethan’s gaze. “The kid okay?”

“Yeah. But everyone at the hospital was pissed. Said the boy should have been seen at least a week ago. His infection was out of hand.”

“Poor guy. This was recent?”

Frustration filled Ethan’s face. “I think he’s still in the hospital. If he’d had antibiotics when the infection started, he wouldn’t have nearly died.”

Truman set down his mug. “*Died?*” Ethan had his full attention.

Ethan nodded, leaning closer. “They don’t believe in modern medicine up there. Say it’s made by the government to control us.” He rolled his eyes.

“Is that the first time someone has come in that sick?” Truman asked.

“Far as I know. My brother says they’ve had a couple of adults with bad cuts and some broken bones, and then they never pay. They just vanish, but the hospital knows where they live. The administrators don’t think it’s worth going up there to confront them.” He shook his head. “It’s not right.”

Clyde placed a burger in front of Truman. The patty was wider than the bun, and it dripped juice and grease on his plate. The fries were piled high, making Truman’s stomach growl at the sight.

“Coconut pie’s good if you got room after,” Clyde stated as he poured Truman more coffee.

Truman couldn’t look away from the burger. “We’ll see.”

Clyde cleared his throat. “The boy was only five,” he added to Ethan’s story, surprising Truman with the knowledge that the man had heard their conversation from the kitchen. “Completely dehydrated and had one of the nastiest ear infections the doc had ever seen. Lotta people in town upset about that. I heard the boy’s pop didn’t show up until later. Someone else brought in the child.”

Anger created an upheaval in Truman’s chest. “That’s how things are run up there?” he asked Clyde and included Ethan with a raised brow.

The two men exchanged a glance. “We don’t know what it’s like. No one is let in,” said Clyde. “There’s guards. People don’t come out much, and when they do, they don’t talk. Everyone’s curious, so when something like the boy happens, word spreads fast.”

“No one’s been inside and seen what’s going on?” Truman asked skeptically, hoping to find a source of insider information about the compound.

“No . . .” Ethan didn’t seem certain.

“What is it?” Truman asked.

Ethan looked to Clyde, who gave a quick nod.

“A guy I worked with a few years ago is up there now,” Ethan said. “A couple of months ago he hunted me down and asked if I knew anyone who’d buy some of his rifles. Said he needed the money.”

Déjà vu struck Truman, and he gave Ethan an encouraging look.

“I thought I’d help him out a bit and asked what he was selling.” The young man grew serious. “The weapons he was selling didn’t jibe with the casual hunter I used to know. And he offered a lot of them.” He leaned toward Truman, speaking more quietly. “The prices didn’t make sense either. They were way too low, which made me suspect they’d been stolen.”



“What did you do?”

“Told him I didn’t have any money. I didn’t want any part of it.”

Clyde grimaced. “I’ve heard similar stories a few times. Selling guns seems to be how they make their money.” He wiped the counter with a towel, his face grim, his jaw tight. He appeared to be done talking. Ethan focused on his own plate.

Truman lifted his burger and took a bite as Clyde went back to his kitchen. Selling possibly stolen weapons. A child who’d nearly died from lack of treatment.

Truman believed he’d found the impetus Ghattas needed to back up the FBI and ATF’s show of force.

And hopefully protect Mercy’s identity.

# TWENTY-FOUR

It felt as if the base camp had doubled in population when Truman returned. The Hostage Rescue Team had arrived, and more bodies strode purposefully about the clearing.

Truman spotted SSA Ghattas next to the mobile SWAT RV. He was talking to two men in olive fatigues and another agent in jeans and a jacket. Truman approached, his boots crunching in the snow, and the surprise in Ghattas's eyes confirmed that the FBI agent had given Truman the hospital assignment to keep him busy.

"Chief Daly." Ghattas introduced him to the other agents. One was in charge of the HRT, one was in charge of Portland's FBI SWAT team, and the third was the lead negotiator. "Any luck?" Ghattas asked.

"There's a young boy from the compound in the hospital right now who was brought in with a life-threatening infection. One that should have been treated a week ago. Supposedly his father is with him," Truman stated.

"Excellent." Ghattas's face lit up in surprise. "I'll get two agents to find the father. Some intel from him about the inside of the compound would be helpful." The two agents in olive nodded emphatically.

"And I talked to a guy who said they tried to sell him underpriced weapons," Truman added. "He backed off because the sale felt fishy to him. There've been a few other people in town who were approached for the same thing. My guy believes it's how they raise money."

Ghattas was pleased. "This is exactly what I needed to know."

"We can use that medical information about the boy when we talk to them," the negotiator said. "Could help us get the other kids out."

"Get the kids out before we have to go in," the HRT leader said, squaring his shoulders. The SWAT leader agreed. "At least we know one child is out. That leaves eight more inside."

Truman hoped their intelligence on the number of children was accurate.

A truck pulled in behind the RV, and Truman noted it had come from the direction of the compound, not the town. Two ATF agents he had met earlier immediately got out of the vehicle and approached their group.

“Success?” Ghattas asked as the man and woman walked up.

“It wasn’t easy,” said the younger agent. “When we approached the gate, two guys got out of a parked truck near the fence and pointed their rifles at us.” He blew out a breath. “Thought that was the end of it right there.” He thumped a fist on the ballistic vest hidden under his coat. “I’m thankful for these things, but they won’t do shit for a head shot.”

“They told us we were on private property and to turn around,” added the female agent. “I think we made the right decision to have me drive.” She raised an eyebrow. “They were a little surprised to see me. I’m not much of a threat, you know.” Her partner snorted. “I told them we’d leave, but before I identified ourselves, I politely asked them to not jump to conclusions and to first hear what I had to say.”

The younger agent turned to Ghattas. “Webber was great. You’d think she was addressing the queen of England. They were suspicious, but they listened. I kept my mouth shut.”

“I said we were with the ATF and that our boss would like to speak with their boss. I offered them the handheld radio. They tensed up when they realized who we were and refused to take the radio. One insisted it was a bomb.” She looked at the negotiator. “That’s when I used it to call you guys and prove to him it was a real radio. I also popped the back off to let him see the inside.”

“I figured you’d need to do that,” said the negotiator. “No one is more suspicious than these types of people.”

“He still wouldn’t take it,” Webber continued. “He gave me some line about the ATF having no jurisdiction in America’s Preserve, but I pointed out that his boss would probably prefer to decide who he spoke to and wouldn’t be happy that the guards had made the decision for him.”

“He said he didn’t want to wake up his boss,” the male agent added. “It’s pretty clear that they revere Pete Hodges.”

“Or at least are scared to death of him,” Webber said. “I asked if his boss would be happy to wake up and find out that his guards had been sitting on important information all night. He finally took the radio.”

“Good work,” said Ghattas. “I don’t care that it’s the middle of the night. Are you ready to get started?” he asked the negotiator.

“Absolutely. We prepped the whole drive here.”

“Okay,” Ghattas said. “Let’s make a call.” He checked the time. “Maybe we’ll have some peaceful results by daybreak.”

Truman thought the comment was overly optimistic. He knew men like Pete Hodges. When they felt trapped, they didn’t give up without a fight. They swung and punched and kicked, their own blood splattering on the ground, hoping to inflict damage and pain on their enemy—now the ATF—until they could battle no more.



Truman jerked awake in his camp chair to find Eddie staring at him.

He blinked. “Did you shake my chair?” he asked the agent.

“Yep.”

Panic blossomed in his chest. “Is it Mercy?” Truman sat up straight, running a hand through his hair. “What happened? Is there word?”

Regret flashed in Eddie’s eyes as he handed Truman a bottle of water. “Sorry, no word yet. I shouldn’t have shaken your chair, but I said your name five times. You’d asked me to wake you at noon. It’s almost one.”

Still disoriented, Truman surveyed the base camp. He had fallen asleep below one of the huge tarps, apparently too tired to care about the cold weather. The snow had formed drifts around every tree and on top of the vehicles. He shivered.

People moved here and there, still unpacking and getting organized. Truman had stayed awake until eight that morning, hoping for word from the compound. Overnight the negotiators had called on the radio every half hour with no answer. Truman hadn’t been allowed in the RV to observe. He’d relied on updates from Jeff and Agent Ghattas. Frustrated, he had finally given in to an overwhelming need for sleep, Mercy’s face in his mind.

He was painfully aware that the federal Waco standoff had taken fifty-one days and Ruby Ridge eleven. Neither operation had ended well. Truman wouldn’t stay sane if he had to wait that long, and he just needed to hear if Mercy was still alive. His nerves were shot.

Not knowing was hell.

“The two ATF agents arrived right after you fell asleep. Aguirre and Gorman,” Eddie said.

Truman still held them personally responsible for sending Mercy on the dangerous mission. “Any new information on the stolen-weapons heist?”

“Not on their part.” He gave Truman a weak smile. “They immediately went into town to follow up on your leads from the restaurant. My understanding is your dinner companions from last night are the only fresh leads they have.”

“What do we do now?” he muttered to Eddie.

“We wait some more.” The agent took a seat facing him and kicked the ground with the toe of his boot. He was hurting too. Mercy and Eddie had joined the Bend FBI office at the same time after working together in Portland. Mercy regarded him as a younger brother, and Truman reminded himself that he didn’t have a monopoly on caring about her.

But damn, it hurt. He was missing half of himself.

“There was some excitement while you slept,” Eddie told him. “They arrested the father of the boy in the hospital. Child endangerment charges. The doctor had been about to call the county sheriff on the father, but our agents reached him before he did.”

“Good.”

Eddie rested his forearms on his thighs as he leaned toward Truman. “Turns out the father had run off with the kids while the mother was out of town. She returned home a few months ago, found an empty house without her kids, and has been out of her head with worry, not knowing what had happened to them. She’s at the hospital with her son now. Can you imagine what that reunion was like?”

“Kids? Plural?”

“Yes. There’s a sixteen-year-old daughter still in the compound, according to the father.”

“She’s alone in there right now?” Truman asked. “No family? Doesn’t sound like an ideal place for a teenage girl.”

“It’s not. The father also told the agents that there’s a woman in the compound about to give birth.” Eddie shook his head. “Who would risk having a baby in the middle of nowhere with no medical help? The negotiators are debating how to use that news.” He grimaced. “I don’t envy

their job. If they say the wrong thing, everything can turn upside down in a split second.”

“Do you know where Jeff is?” Truman asked, wanting to find out the team’s next move.

“Last I saw he was taking the negotiators some lunch in the RV. And speaking of lunch, I’m going to get some before it’s gone. You coming?”

Truman wasn’t hungry. He swore his fries and burger from last night still sat in his stomach. “Later.”

“You might regret that,” Eddie said as he headed toward the other side of the base camp.

Thirstily draining the water bottle from Eddie, Truman headed toward the RV. It was huge, easily one of the longest RVs he’d ever seen. On the roof were several small satellite dishes along with two high-mast antennas. On both sides, pop-out sections had been extended, increasing the square footage indoors.

The door on the far side was open, and he heard people talking. He stuck his head inside and found himself in what looked like a set straight out of an action movie. A half dozen screens of every size covered one wall, along with high-tech electronics he couldn’t identify. A large room at the end could be sectioned off with sliding doors, and he spotted chairs, tables, and more screens in that room. Truman winced as he thought of his office’s ancient radio system back home. At least his department’s computers were up to date, but they had only three for the whole office.

Jeff spotted him and waved him in. Truman moved up the two metal steps, brushing the snow from his shoulders and eyeing Mercy’s boss. Usually Jeff Peterson never had a hair out of place or a wrinkle present. Now he’d clearly slept in his clothes and had shoved on a cap over his hair. So far showers were nonexistent at the base camp. Truman hoped they’d finish their mission before they were required.

Jeff introduced him to the three negotiators, who were all eating thick sandwiches. They were calm-looking older men. Jim Sanchez, the negotiator he’d met last night, was the primary who would communicate directly with the subject—if they ever managed to make contact. The other two men would listen and take notes, ready to take over the primary role if the compound leader showed a dislike for the first negotiator. For a split second Truman was surprised there wasn’t a woman on the team, but then

he realized that the militia leader would not be happy to speak with a woman.

“Time,” said one of them with his mouth full.

Agent Sanchez nodded and took a drink from a water bottle to wash down his sandwich. He pulled on a set of headphones and pushed a few buttons. “This is Jim Stapleton with the ATF,” he said calmly into his microphone. “Can someone answer the radio please?”

Truman raised a brow. *Stapleton? ATF?* Again, the FBI had prepared carefully, aware of Pete Hodges’s white supremacy views and hiding the fact that the FBI was heavily involved in this operation.

Every half hour for nearly the last twelve hours, they’d repeated the plea.

*Did Hodges destroy the radio?*

Truman wondered if they were wasting time.

“This is Commander Pete Hodges,” came a polite, low voice over the speaker. “What can I do for you?”

Everyone in the RV jerked to attention. The other two negotiators shoved their food aside and grabbed headsets. Jeff jumped to his feet from his perch on a countertop and quietly radioed for Ghattas to report to the RV. Truman froze, every nerve focused on the voice filling the command center from the speakers. He’d expected the agents to hear Hodges only through the headsets.

“Good afternoon, Commander,” Sanchez answered pleasantly. “We’d like to discuss the children who are living in your compound. It’s come to our attention that one of them was very ill when he arrived at the hospital recently.”

“Why is the ATF involved in personal matters?” The tone was still polite.

“Medical professionals are required to report when they feel a child’s health is in danger. After interviewing the boy and his father, we’re concerned for the health and safety of the other children.”

“That doesn’t answer my question about the ATF.”

Truman tensed.

“You’re right,” Sanchez said smoothly. “The local authorities were concerned about being able to reach you. As you know by the radio in your hand, we have the equipment necessary to conduct a conversation and keep a respectful distance.”

“I don’t believe for a second that the ATF is only here because they have access to radios.”

“That is correct,” said Sanchez. “We were already looking into a few reports of illegal weapons being sold in the area. But the safety of children will always take priority over a few sales.”

“Have a good day, Agent Stapleton.”

“Commander Hodges?”

Silence.

“Commander Hodges?”

Truman held his breath.

Agent Sanchez removed his headphones. “I’d say that was a successful first contact.” The other negotiators nodded enthusiastically. The three of them put their heads together and started an intense discussion about the content of the call.

Truman looked to Jeff. “*That* was a success?”

“He didn’t threaten anyone, and he was polite. Baby steps.”

“He also didn’t mention the FBI or Mercy,” Truman pointed out.

“Another good thing. We want him to believe only the ATF is here. If he brings her up, we can inform him of an FBI presence.”

*If he brings her up, does it mean she’s already dead?*

Foreboding raced through his blood, making him struggle to hold still. This could take days.

Ghattas darted up the steps and into the RV, panting for breath. ATF agents Carleen Aguirre and Neal Gorman were directly behind him, concern on their faces.

“Call’s over,” Jeff informed them.

“Shit. How’d it go?” asked Ghattas.

“Very good,” Sanchez said over his shoulder. “We’ll continue to call every half hour.” He returned to his three-man huddle, peering at the notes of the other men.

“Pete Hodges didn’t mention the FBI,” Jeff told the three agents. “He wanted to know why the ATF was here. Sanchez emphasized concern for the children inside and casually mentioned the gun sales, then Hodges politely ended the communication.”

“Sounds like an excellent start.” Carleen nodded with enthusiasm.

Truman steamed, his chest swelling. Jeff did a double take at his face and excused the two of them, dragging Truman outside. He hauled him



several yards away from the RV.

“You need to find some patience,” Jeff said, his face close, his grip on Truman’s upper arm. “I get it, Truman. I really do. But you’re going to get your ass sent home if you’re a distraction.” Jeff’s own concern for Mercy flashed before he packed it back in the box of emotions that every law enforcement officer tried to keep under lock and key.

Truman yanked his arm free but didn’t speak. If he voiced the clutter of rage and fear spinning in his brain, they’d banish him from the RV. He was lucky to have witnessed what he had; he wouldn’t get a second chance if he was a liability. “I know,” he said between clenched teeth as politely as he could.

“That call shows Hodges is curious,” Jeff told him. “He wants to know what is going on. He’ll want more information—there will be another call.”

Truman saw his logic.

*Everything is taking too long.*

“Go cool off. Tromp around in the woods for a bit and come back in a half hour. You shouldn’t be in the RV, but as long as they let me in, I’ll try to bring you with me.” Jeff pointed at him. “As long as you don’t do something stupid.”

“Thank you,” Truman muttered. He turned and blindly strode toward trees, the falling snow brushing across his face.



Truman wasn’t the only one pacing in the woods.

After a minute’s walk deep into the trees, he encountered an FBI agent pacing in snowy circles, stretching his arms behind his back and muttering a mantra. He wore the olive-and-black gear of the HRT members. Truman had watched the team’s men check their huge bags of equipment. Ballistic vests, helmets, neck covers, eye protection, cameras, grenades, flashbangs, custom-made weapons.

Each man seemed to have over sixty pounds of equipment to carry on his body. Maybe more.

The agent spotted him and halted, recognition showing in his eyes. He was of medium height and wiry, with close-cut sandy-blond hair. Truman didn’t remember his name—he’d been introduced to too many people.

The agent held out his hand as Truman approached. “Theo Cook. You’re the police chief.” Age lines crinkled at the corners of his eyes as he smiled. His face was well weathered. This wasn’t some fresh-faced gym rat rookie; he was an experienced agent.

Truman shook it. “Truman Daly. Don’t let me interrupt you.”

“You’re not. I’m just clearing my brain and sucking in a little of this amazingly crisp air. My team has spent hours poring over intel on the compound and running scenarios. We needed a short break before we dive back into it.”

“What if your team is needed for a different emergency before you’re done here?”

“There’s a second team back home. We’re always ready to go when called upon.”

Truman studied the man. He and Mercy had talked in the past about the HRT. No woman had ever qualified for the team; all had been unable to pass the brutal physical tests. He’d heard the members called modern-day warriors, trained to strike. They were fast, violent, and deadly.

“You’re staring,” Cook said, pinning Truman with his gaze.

“Sorry. I was wondering what your job is like.”

Cook shrugged and relaxed. “There is nothing else like it. Well—Delta or Team Six would disagree with that statement.”

Truman nodded. The Army and Navy Special Missions Units were also elite professionals. “What’s your position?”

“I’m part of the assault team. Not a sniper.”

Cook would be on the front lines if they invaded the compound.

“Our snipers are currently doing recon,” Cook said. “We have three in positions around the compound. They’ve been feeding us intel since the middle of the night. Their scopes are good for more than lining up their shots.”

Truman froze. “Have they seen the FBI agent?”

“No. They’ve seen women, but none of them are Special Agent Kilpatrick.”

That wasn’t the answer Truman had wanted to hear.

“What else have they seen?”

Cook pressed his lips together, and Truman knew the agent regretted sharing as much information as he had.

“Never mind,” Truman told him. A craving for information about the compound was gnawing away at his gut, but he didn’t want to press the agent. It wasn’t his place.

But he wasn’t ready to let Cook go yet. “How do you handle it?” Truman asked, scrambling for a question that didn’t apply directly to the mission.

“Handle what?”

“You go directly into the hot zone for your job. It’s not a question of if you’ll be shot at, but when you’ll be shot at. How does fear not affect you?”

Understanding crossed Cook’s face. “Fear isn’t a bad thing. It can be good. I don’t experience a scared type of fear.” He hesitated, twisting his mouth as he tried to find the right words. “It’s a fear that gives me more respect for things. It keeps me on my toes.”

Truman was skeptical.

“The only person who should have fear is the guy on the other side of the wall when we come in.”

“You walk right into gunfire.” Truman knew he was repeating himself, but he still couldn’t comprehend the mind-set needed for Cook’s job.

“Sometimes. As long as it doesn’t hit me, I’m okay.” Cook was completely serious.

*Jesus.*

“We train,” Cook continued. “We know how to analyze a situation and go hard. You aren’t on this team if you can’t make a split-second decision under pressure. When all else has failed, our job is to be the professionals that get it done.”

Calm, cool, and collected. Gratitude and awe filled Truman. Cook was the type of person who could get Mercy out of the compound. “Thank you,” he told the agent, offering to shake his hand again. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Cook quirked a brow as he took the hand. “It’s my job,” he said simply. “But you’re welcome.” He gave a brief nod and walked off, again stretching his arms behind his back, working them in circles.

Truman knew Cook wasn’t unique. All the members of his team were just as driven and committed.

For the first time, Truman felt a glimmer of hope.

# TWENTY-FIVE

The day dragged, and Truman struggled to stay patient.

He tried to make himself useful, moving equipment, bracing tent poles, and even washing dishes, while sticking as close to the negotiators' RV as possible. The storm had picked up, a heavy white fall that made the base camp feel more isolated than ever. The snow set Truman on edge.

It was a ticking clock.

What if Ghattas decided the snow would grow too deep to continue the operation? Every half hour, the negotiators had attempted to reach the compound. And every half hour they had been ignored.

"Maybe he got rid of the radio," Truman suggested to Jeff when he came out of the RV after the fourth failed call.

"They're weighing that possibility, but they're convinced he's playing a waiting game, trying to keep the upper hand by showing that he'll answer on his own time."

A pissing contest.

Truman went back to his odd jobs around the base camp.

At four o'clock Jeff stepped out of the RV and signaled Truman, who had been talking with a small group from the FBI's SWAT team. Truman excused himself, his eyes fixed on Jeff as he strode over, his skin vibrating with the unknown.

*Good news? Bad news?*

"Hodges answered," Jeff said quietly as he led Truman into the RV. Inside were the same three negotiators, SSA Bill Ghattas, Agents Aguirre and Gorman, and the SWAT team leader. Agent Sanchez was writing rapidly on a yellow legal pad as he focused on Hodges's words. The tension in the RV was palpable, but Agent Sanchez's voice was calm as he replied to Hodges.

“I don’t understand your benefit from such a request,” Sanchez said into his headset mic.

Truman gave an inquiring glance at Jeff, who shrugged one shoulder. Ghattas caught Truman’s eye for a moment, and he knew the SSA wasn’t happy to have him listening, but he would let it slide for the moment.

“I need to hear from Jason himself that he’s being treated fairly,” Hodges’s voice came through the speakers.

“Jason?” Truman mouthed to Jeff.

“The sick boy’s father,” Jeff whispered back.

“I’m sure we can arrange a phone—” Sanchez began.

“No. Not a phone call,” said Hodges. “I need to see that he hasn’t been injured or isn’t being threatened. I don’t have any reason to trust the ATF.”

“And this will help establish that trust?” Sanchez asked into his mic while eyeing Ghattas.

Ghattas nodded.

“It will help,” said Hodges.

“I can make this happen. I can get Jason Trotter up here for you,” Sanchez answered. “But before I do, I’m going to ask something of you in return for the same reason. Trust. We need a two-way street here.”

“I’m listening.”

Truman recalled a negotiator’s guideline: make concessions, but always get something in return.

“I’d like you to let some of the children come out,” Sanchez said.

“I don’t think so. This is their home.”

“I understand. But maybe their parents are a bit worried now since the Trotter boy became so ill. If their parents want to leave with the children, they are free to go wherever they please. We will not detain them.”

Hodges was quiet for a long moment.

“We’re just looking out for these kids,” added Sanchez. “At the moment, you and I are simply having a talk. No one is in any trouble. Let’s keep it that way by making certain that the children have access to medical care.”

Another negotiator guideline: minimize the consequences.

“I’ll see what the parents think. Hodges out.”

Sanchez spun around in his chair with his hands up in the air. One of the other men slapped his palm. “Yes!”

Now that Truman understood what the negotiators were looking for from Hodges, he knew that call had been a solid step forward.

“He even signed off,” Agent Aguirre said. “All very civil so far.”

“But no mention of an FBI agent,” Truman reminded her, concerned that the team had forgotten one of its primary reasons for coming to the compound: to get Mercy out of a hostile situation.

“I’m thinking that no complaints about Agent Kilpatrick is good news,” said Ghattas.

Truman’s acid stomach didn’t agree with him; no one had heard from Mercy in five days.

Anything could have happened.

“I’ll send some agents to get Trotter out of the county jail and bring him up,” said Ghattas. “If Hodges wants to see one of his men, we can do that.”

“My men will transport Trotter to the meeting spot and provide backup at the gate. Out of sight of course,” said the SWAT leader, determination on his face. “We’ll figure out the logistics immediately.” He left the RV.

“Now,” said Ghattas as he rubbed a hand over his face. “What to do about the safety of our agent inside.”

“Her name is Mercy,” Truman stated. Beside him, he felt Jeff stiffen.

Ghattas exhaled and shot Truman an exhausted look. “Special Agent Kilpatrick,” he conceded. “We’ve received no indication of her status whatsoever from Hodges, and the HRT snipers haven’t seen anyone of her description inside.”

“What have they seen?” Agent Gorman asked. The question had been on the tip of Truman’s tongue, but he’d held back; he’d already learned from Cook that it was considered none of his business.

“There is a guard rotation on the perimeter, and our men are trying to establish the pattern. They have eyes on the command center, the children’s cabin, and the mess hall. All the intel that was received from Agent O’Shea on the layout of the compound has been accurate.”

The RV went silent at the mention of the murdered agent’s name. Aguirre pressed her lips together, her eyes suddenly bright. Gorman set a comforting hand on her shoulder. Guilt flowed through Truman. He’d nearly forgotten about the man Ollie had discovered.

“So far,” Ghattas continued, “we haven’t seen any odd actions. People come and go from all the buildings. It appears to be business as usual.” He looked every person in the eye. “I expect to see that change now.”



An hour later Hodges told the negotiators he’d let all the children out after he saw that Jason Trotter wasn’t being mistreated. An agreement was reached that three government vehicles would park one hundred yards from the gate at 7:00 p.m. to transport the exiting children and their parents. Two FBI SWAT agents would accompany Trotter on foot within fifty feet of the gate. Once Hodges had spoken with Trotter, he would release the children and their parents.

The base camp had erupted with action. SWAT and HRT geared up. They would park out of sight two hundred yards from the gate but move closer on foot through the woods to observe and provide cover for the release of the children.

Truman watched the agents put on their body armor and helmets. The men were silent, their expressions showing deep focus. Their helmets were equipped with cameras, and all the agents had earpieces and microphones to stay in constant contact. The camera feeds from the snipers and the helmets would be monitored at the base camp, where other members of the teams would observe and relay information.

Truman and Eddie found a place with Aguirre and Gorman at the monitors in a second RV that had arrived that morning—the FBI’s command hub. This vehicle had a semi’s cab instead of looking like a traditional RV. Inside it was stocked with as much high tech as the negotiators’ SWAT RV, if not more. Truman stayed to the back of the group while watching, keeping his expression neutral, hiding that his heart felt as if he’d drunk ten shots of espresso.

Once the children were out, new negotiations would begin to empty the compound of all residents. If Hodges failed to comply promptly, HRT would enter to find Mercy.

*We’re one step closer to getting her out.*

Truman still refused to consider the other possibility: Mercy was dead. He had decided to believe she would soon be out. Because if he paused or looked back, he might not find the strength to go on.

His inner fortitude grew weaker by the hour.

He had to keep looking forward.

He moved his gaze from monitor to monitor, primarily watching the three snipers' scope transmissions, fascinated by the sight of people moving in the compound. His eyes ached as his brain attempted to turn each figure into Mercy. The sun had set, and the camp was displayed in shades of gray on the monitors. The snow was a constant dust falling across the screens, affecting the clarity of the images.

"I don't like that this is happening after dark," Ghattas murmured.

"We can see better than anyone inside," said another agent. "We have the best equipment, and our men are used to working in the dark."

One of the snipers' scopes was trained on the gate, which was estimated to be three hundred yards from the center of the compound. It was a simple livestock gate made of horizontal steel bars, the type available at any farm equipment store. Two of Hodges's men sat in a truck with several inches of snow piled on the hood and cab. For a very, very brief moment, Truman pitied them their freezing, dull guard duty. The snipers' earlier reports had stated that both men were armed. Each with a rifle and a pistol.

Truman switched to the view that showed the Portland FBI's SWAT agents escorting Jason Trotter to the gate. The agents wore full gear, carrying Colt M4 Carbines on their shoulders and 9mm Sigs on their thighs. Those were the weapons that Truman could see; he knew there were more. The men followed the long drive, breaking three paths in the snow. Trotter was cuffed and wore a ballistics vest under his coat along with a helmet.

Ghattas wasn't taking any chances with his prisoner.

According to Jeff, Trotter had been reluctant to participate. He'd seemed content to sit in jail and hadn't wanted to face Pete Hodges. "Trotter got caught," Jeff had told Truman. "I suspect the boss isn't happy. Trotter is scared to see him."

"Shouldn't have kidnapped his own kids," Truman had answered.

Truman couldn't see them, but he knew the area near the compound's gate was crawling with HRT and more SWAT. Some of the monitor views were from their cameras, and their commanders occasionally voiced instructions. A few more agents were stationed to the southwest and southeast of the gate, watching the compound's perimeter.



“There are eight children and several adults leaving the cabin area and moving in the direction of the gate,” one of the snipers announced. Every head in the RV swiveled toward that camera view.

Apprehension buzzed in the command unit. The air felt charged. Truman shifted his feet and crossed and uncrossed his arms, unable to stay motionless.

The view of the children was fuzzy, but it was clear two toddlers were being carried and several other kids held the hands of adults. Truman strained to make out the adults’ features. Judging by hair, most of them were women, but he wasn’t certain.

“Seven men have just left the command center,” spoke a different voice over the speaker. “Six are carrying rifles. The seventh man has a weapon at his hip.”

Ghattas leaned closer to the monitor. “That’s Hodges.” He tapped the man in the center of the group without a rifle. “I’m positive.” The men walked seven abreast; two of them held flashlights.

Truman had seen photos of Hodges and agreed with the agent. Hodges’s posture was ramrod straight, and he put out a natural air of command. Even in pictures.

The flashlights bobbed as the seven men made the long trek to the gate through the falling snow. The gate did not have an overhead light, and usually the guards made do with flashlights or lanterns. As the flashlights moved closer inside the compound, the guards flipped on the headlights of their truck and stepped out. The agents and Trotter had already reached their position fifty feet from the gate and stopped. The truck’s headlights shone directly on Trotter and his two escorts.

“Shit,” said Eddie under his breath. “I don’t like that at all.”

Truman didn’t either. The three men stood in a spotlight.

He checked the monitor that showed the group of children. They were still moving south but had more ground to cover to reach the gate.

“We’re in position,” said one of the escorting SWAT agents. “Fifty feet out. Can we ask them to move the headlights?”

“Go ahead,” said the SWAT commander.

“Can you point the headlights in a different direction?” one of the agents shouted to the two guards.

Now standing in front of the gate, the guards ignored the request as they waited for the two groups inside the compound to arrive.

Tension in the RV skyrocketed. “They’re sitting ducks,” said the SWAT commander.

“Hodges is still coming,” asserted Ghattas. “So are the children. The headlights aren’t good, but I believe they’re following through.”

“Does Hodges need six escorts?” muttered Agent Aguirre.

“Show of power,” answered Truman.

“All the adults with the children are women,” one of the snipers announced. “There are no men in the group. Six women. One appears to be very pregnant.”

Ghattas pressed his lips into a line. “The fathers won’t leave? Or Hodges won’t let the fathers leave?” he asked quietly of no one.

Truman suspected the second reason was accurate. Hodges had fewer than thirty men. There weren’t enough to spare. There were supposed to be eleven women in the camp, including Mercy. He guessed some had also not been allowed to leave.

*Or did they choose not to leave?*

“Keep the guards in your sights,” ordered the SWAT commander. Confirmations sounded over the speakers.

The group of children continued to approach as Hodges and his six men stopped on the inside of the gate. Truman leaned forward, staring at a grainy view of the women, his gaze locked on one of the women holding a toddler.

*Mercy.*

He elbowed Eddie. “Look at the woman on the left with the toddler.”

Eddie stiffened and laid a hand on Truman’s shoulder, his fingers digging into his flesh through his coat. “I can’t tell. Are you sure?”

“Height is right . . . walks the same.” Like an icy shower, relief shot through Truman from head to toe. He briefly closed his eyes and shuddered as stress exited his body.

Her cover was intact. She was coming out with the children.

It was almost over.

“I think Agent Kilpatrick is the female on the left holding a child,” Truman announced to the rest of the watchers.

At the front of the group, Jeff leaned closer to the grainy monitor, pulled his head back, squinted, leaned close again, and then nodded. “Glory fucking hallelujah,” he muttered. A pleased murmur sounded from the rest of the observers.

Hodges raised his hand, and his line of escorts stood at attention. They had removed their rifles from their shoulders but held them casually, pointed at the ground. They were a ragtag bunch. Some wore camouflage coats or pants, while others were in jeans. They varied in size from reed thin to one bearded man who was so heavy he had struggled to make the walk. Even with the poor video, Truman could see his chest heaving from the effort.

“Jason,” Hodges shouted across the metal. “Are you being treated appropriately?”

Trotter didn’t immediately answer, and one of his escorts shook his arm.

“Yes, Commander Hodges,” Trotter answered in a raised voice.

“Are you injured?” returned Hodges.

“No, sir.”

Hodges turned to the group of women and children waiting far to his left and waved for them to move forward. He said something unintelligible to the two guards, and they dragged the gate open. The children’s group walked through.

Truman held his breath, his heart drumming fiercely, his gaze locked on one woman.

*A few more feet.*

“Jason,” shouted Hodges again. “Has the ATF violated any of your rights?” His six armed escorts remained at attention, their rifles in hand but still pointed at the ground, watching the eight children and six women continue toward the two SWAT escorts and Trotter.

“Continue to the vehicles and get inside,” one of the SWAT team told the group as they approached. “Move faster, please.” Some of the children started to run, and the women followed. The pregnant woman lagged behind, one hand supporting her belly.

“No, Commander Hodges. I’ve retained my right to stay silent.”

A shot shattered the night, and Jason Trotter jerked. His escorts dropped his arms and returned fire, running to the cover of the woods. Trotter collapsed where he’d stood.

The agents in the RV jumped to their feet, and Truman’s heart seized as shouts erupted around him. He shoved aside an agent who had abruptly blocked his view of the monitor that showed the children and women being hustled into the waiting vehicles.

Shouts and orders streamed through the speakers as Hodges and his six escorts scattered, firing toward the escaping agents. The covert HRT and SWAT members returned fire, the sounds of the constant shots drowning out the shouts. Hodges's men continued to fire, spinning and shooting in every direction. Within seconds every compound member at the gate had crumpled into the snow.

The three vehicles of women and children barreled away from the scene, snow flying from their tires.

*She's safe.*

Like a wave, the HRT and SWAT agents poured out of the forest. Moving in steady unison toward the open gate and motionless bodies on the ground.

*It all went to hell.*

*That wasn't supposed to happen.*

His gaze leaping from monitor to monitor, Truman saw the agents on the perimeter of the compound enter and methodically start clearing the buildings. Bodies were strewn about the gate, their blood spray appearing black on the snow. Sporadic gunshots cracked in the air as other residents inside the compound continued to fire at the invading agents.

Pain shot up Truman's arm. Eddie's fingers had dug into his bicep, his eyes wide behind his glasses, staring at the monitors. Truman unhinged his grip, and Eddie blinked in surprise.

On the screens the compound members inside finally dropped their weapons, their hands in the air. They moved to their knees and stomachs on command and were searched by pairs of agents.

Within ninety seconds, the agents had cleared all the buildings, started aiding injured compound members, and rounded up the uninjured who were secured in the mess hall.

"Outside," Eddie told Truman, pushing him toward the RV door. "The vehicles with the kids will be back here any minute."

*How had I forgotten that?*

He bolted out the door, jogging through the snow toward where the three SUVs would appear with their precious cargo, Eddie right behind him.

"Oh my God," Eddie said as he caught up. "What the hell happened up there?"

"Who shot Trotter?" asked Truman. He was out of breath, and it wasn't from the short jog.

“I couldn’t tell. Where are they?” Eddie looked impatiently down the road that wove through the trees in the dark. “What’s taking them so long?”

“Maybe they had to stop to administer medical care.” Truman’s throat constricted. Only a few children had been in the vehicles when the shooting started.

*Who was hurt?*

“Headlights!” Eddie exclaimed as a soft glow appeared in the distance.

The engine sounds were the best noises Truman had heard in months. Beams of light lit up the trees around him and Eddie, and three sets of headlights came into view. Truman was opening doors before the vehicles had fully stopped. Children were crying, but he couldn’t stop to comfort them. He searched faces.

No Mercy.

He raced to the next SUV. The driver had already hopped out and was helping the hugely pregnant woman. “She’s in labor!” he announced, his eyes wide. “Get medical.” The woman’s face contorted in pain as she stepped down.

Mercy wasn’t in this one either.

“In a minute,” said Truman, already moving to the last vehicle. Dread crawled up his spine. *Was she shot?*

At the third SUV a toddler was shoved in his arms as the women helped the children out. His gaze locked on one figure. Tall, slender, dark haired, and holding the other toddler.

His heart stopped. He couldn’t breathe.

It wasn’t Mercy.

He’d been wrong.

Jeff had been wrong.

The ground seemed to melt away under his feet.

*Is she still inside the compound?*

# TWENTY-SIX

Hours later, Truman gave a wide berth to the bodies scattered in the snow at the gate. Seeing the deaths in person was overwhelming. A million times worse than viewing it on a monitor. He looked away as bile climbed in the back of his throat.

Again.

He was nauseated, sorrow and anger waging war in his brain and body.

After an initial search of the compound, Mercy was still missing.

“Lord help them,” Eddie murmured beside him as he took in the destruction.

Many men had died near the gate, ripped apart by bullets from SWAT and HRT. Truman recognized the overweight bearded man he’d watch limp and struggle to catch his breath during the march to the gate before the horror began. Now his pale-blue eyes were open, staring at nothing, his beard bloody.

The scene crawled with agents. They’d shifted into investigation mode as the SWAT and HRT men were debriefed back at base camp. Someone had transported the lights from the base camp to help illuminate the scene. “We need metal detectors,” one agent said as Truman passed by. “The hot shells sank in the snow.”

Conditions were far less than ideal in the steady snow and poor light.

SSA Ghattas looked as nauseated as Truman felt. “Who fired?” he asked a group of investigators as Eddie escorted Truman past. “Who fired the first shot at Trotter?”

The agent had been asking the same question since the gunfire had ceased. No one had a definite answer yet.

Truman pitied the SSA. The operation had flipped upside down and gone to hell within a tenth of a second, and Ghattas would be held accountable for it. The story would rip through the media like a wildfire. No doubt rumors had already started, because three injured men from inside the compound and the pregnant woman had been rushed to the hospital.

Questions would be asked.

Answers would be presumed.

Conjecture would reign in the public domain.

No agents had been hurt; that was the only bright side. Two had been hit, but their vests had stopped the rounds, and now they nursed sore ribs. Jason Trotter's life had also been spared due to the ballistics vest Ghattas had made him wear.

Ten yards inside the gate, Truman paused. Pete Hodges lay faceup in the snow. He'd been shot in the face and the chest, but his vest had stopped the shot to the chest. Truman had been told he was the only person in the compound wearing body armor. His men had been unprotected.

Truman despised the man for that fact.

More than he already had.

He suspected Hodges had ordered Trotter shot if he revealed that he hadn't shared what he knew with the investigators. When Trotter had answered Hodges by stating that he'd maintained his right to remain silent, the trigger had been pulled with the intent for his knowledge of the compound's illegal activities to die with him.

Another backup plan of Hodges's that had failed.

Truman pulled his gaze from Hodges as they continued deeper into the compound. His feet were heavy, his muscles begging for rest. Part of him wanted to find a dark place and hide for twenty-four hours. The other part of him wanted to rip the compound apart until he found Mercy.

She had to be here somewhere.

*A fresh grave would be hidden by the snow.*

He moaned and pressed his temples with both hands, and Eddie glanced at him.

"You okay?" he asked.

"No."

Eddie nodded, and they continued their trek. Their destination was the mess hall, where the remaining members were being held and questioned. At least there was light inside the buildings of the compound, Truman

thought as they entered the mess hall. Weak, yellow light, but it was better than nothing.

The men and women had their wrists zip-tied behind their backs. They sat on the floor, leaning against the walls, carefully watched by armed agents. Three other agents were individually interviewing the residents, taking them one by one to the back of the mess hall for privacy, where their neighbors couldn't hear who was lying and who was telling the truth.

Eddie stopped near the closest agent standing guard. "Any results?" he asked in a low voice.

The agent was grim. "Nothing on our missing agent."

*Her name is Mercy.*

"No one here will verify that someone of her description was even in the compound," the agent added.

"Did she not make it to the camp?" Truman suggested. "Did something happen before she arrived?" His head throbbed at the thought. If she hadn't made it to America's Preserve, where was she? Why hadn't she called?

"Crap," agreed Eddie.

Mercy's identity was no longer a secret to protect from the compound members. Finding her was the priority.

A snow-covered agent appeared at the mess hall door, and Truman's heart gave a wild kick at the concern on his face. "I need an ax," he shouted, gasping for breath and stomping the snow from his boots. "Where can I find an ax? Or bolt cutters?"

"There's axes in those," said a younger militia member, jerking his head toward a row of rickety cabinets. All the doors hung open; the contents had been searched. Truman caught his breath at the rows of gas masks on the shelves.

*What emergencies was this compound prepared for?*

The snowy agent grabbed two axes from a bottom shelf and dashed out the front door.

Eddie and Truman exchanged a look and ran after him.

They followed the man, running south across the snow. He caught up with five agents jogging in the same direction, most of them carrying flashlights. Truman recognized the large bulk of Ghattas in their midst. He and Eddie joined the tail end of the group.

*Something is up.*



Several minutes later they entered a large clearing. Ahead was the largest building Truman had seen on the compound. “That’s the new one that Agent O’Shea couldn’t get into, right?” he panted at Eddie.

“I think so.”

The men reached a side door. The agent with the axes handed one off and entered first. The rest filed in, their flashlights roaming over two parked vans and a wall with shelves and storage units.

“That smell . . . ,” said one of them, covering his nose. The odor was coming from a storage unit.

Truman recognized the odor of death. Dizziness swamped him.

*No.*

The agent swung the ax at the first storage unit’s padlock. The clang of metal on metal echoed in the large space. The padlock didn’t break. He swung again with the same results. Truman’s mind screaming in alarm, he shoved forward and grabbed the second ax from an agent waiting to take a turn at the door. Foreboding choked him.

“Get back,” he ordered as he strode to the unit. The agent who had swung at the lock took one look at his face and leaped out of the way.

Anger and fear fueled his swing. The lock split and scattered across the floor.

Truman froze, the ax clenched in his grip as he faced the door.

*I can’t open it.*

A hand on his shoulder gently pulled him back. Agent Ghattas stepped past Truman and opened the door.

Flashlights lit up the interior as a putrid wave of odor hit the group. On the floor a man lay facedown wearing only underwear. His back was a rotting mess.

*Not Mercy.*

Truman’s knees became water, relief and dread battling inside him.

*Where is she?*

“What happened to his back?” asked an agent.

“I think he was whipped,” answered Ghattas. “Some of the interviews mentioned whipping as punishment, but no one has said these storage units are prison cells.”

*Units. Plural.*

Truman whirled back to the group. “Open the other doors,” he croaked.

The next two rooms were empty.

Truman stared at the padlock on the fourth door.

*I'd know if she was gone. I'd feel it.*

*Right?*

But right now he felt nothing. Nothing but nausea.

An agent swung, and the padlock on the last door flew off.

Empty.

A long exhalation escaped him. Eddie met his eyes, his relief reflecting Truman's.

Ghattas stepped into the last unit, his flashlight focused on the floor. He bent over, staring at something. Truman couldn't stay back. He slipped through to the front of the group that had gathered at the fourth unit. On the concrete were dark-brown smears.

"They were locking up their own people," Ghattas spit out. "After they tortured them."

Truman's gaze locked on the unit's floor.

Caught in the dried blood were several long, black, wavy hairs.

The screams in his brain started again.

# TWENTY-SEVEN

The compound was a snowy landscape, buried under nearly a foot of white fluff. And it continued to fall as Truman wearily strode up the steps to the mess hall. The morning had brought much-needed light to the investigation, and the compound had been searched from top to bottom again. Truman had joined the team of agents who'd scoured the buildings in the daylight.

No Mercy.

But there had been a huge breakthrough. The women who had left with their children verified that Mercy had been in the compound. They claimed Noah Trotter would have died if Mercy hadn't insisted he be taken to the hospital. One woman said she'd heard the men grumbling about her pushy ways, but no one had seen her since she was escorted to the command center after breakfast the day before yesterday.

She'd gone in and never come out.

Pete was dead. His interactions with Mercy forever silenced.

*Why did no one else admit she'd been in the compound?*

Truman paused and turned around, one hand on the mess hall door. Tall firs surrounded the compound, many of their branches coated in snow, drifts forming against their trunks. A thorough outdoor search was nearly impossible and might be delayed until spring.

His heart couldn't wait that long.

Numb, he stepped inside and took a seat at a table where a few agents were eating breakfast. The smell of eggs and coffee turned his stomach.

The FBI had started to transport the militia members off the compound. Several were still in the mess hall. Overnight, blankets and pillows had been brought in from the cabins for the detainees, and agents had supervised bathroom breaks. The interviews had continued through all hours of the night. Everyone in the mess hall—men and women—had

denied meeting anyone named Jessica. No matter that the half dozen released women back at the base camp claimed she'd been there.

*Did Pete order that she not be discussed?*

The rest of the agents had been informed of Truman's relationship to Mercy, but it wasn't mentioned during the interviews. The members of the compound knew only that the agents were searching for Jessica Polk—not why.

Not long after the storage units had been discovered, the agents had found enough C-4 in the adjacent vans to destroy a large building. The militia interviews had uncovered a plan that had been scheduled for last night to destroy the ATF office in Yakima. The appearance of the ATF with a radio and questions at the America's Preserve gate had halted the plan.

"Why that building in Yakima?" Eddie had asked the agents during a break from conducting interviews. "It can't be that important. It's a small satellite office, and the explosions were supposed to go off at night—chances were no one would be hurt. I don't get it. That was the *big plan* we heard rumors about?"

Ghattas had been grim. "For some reason they believed it was an important hub for ATF servers, which it's not, but the driving force behind their plan was to destroy what they believe was illegal information on gun owners that was stored on these nonexistent servers. It was to be a Second Amendment victory. One to be celebrated across the US. They thought they'd be heroes."

"Where did they get that false information?" Eddie had wondered out loud. "Why did they deem it reliable enough to risk going to prison?"

"I don't understand how a lot of these people think," Ghattas answered. "We're not dealing with the sharpest tools in the shed here, and they are as uncooperative as possible. Most of them won't tell us their names or how many men lived here. I'm not even sure we have the right names for the dead."

Truman had listened but didn't say a word. He didn't give a shit about the militia's plan or the names of its members.

He had one mission.

Find Mercy.

Truman eyed the three female compound members who were still in the mess hall. They sat together against the wall, wrapped in their blankets, slightly separated from the men. Two looked at the floor, occasionally

glancing up with fear in their wide eyes. One caught Truman's gaze, and terror flashed before she immediately focused on the floor again. The third woman had her chin up and glared at everyone who walked by. She was horribly thin, and the yellow cast to her skin disturbed Truman. He estimated she was in her sixties but then wondered if her poor health made her appear older than she was.

"She didn't say a word in her interviews," said a female FBI agent at Truman's table, noticing his consideration. "Her name's Vera. She's got the brand, so I'm not surprised she's staying silent."

"Brand?"

The agent touched her own wrist. "Right here. Hodges's most loyal followers wear his brand. I can't imagine allowing someone to do that to me. Even if my husband suggested it as a sign of commitment, I'd say, 'Hell no.'"

Truman stared at the woman on the floor in wonder. "But he's dead. Her allegiance to Hodges goes beyond the grave?"

"It appears to be that deep for a few of them. They're completely closemouthed. Eventually they'll come around." She took a bite of scrambled eggs. "The other two women talked a little bit, but nothing useful."

"I'd like to talk to the three women together," Truman said.

The agent scrutinized him. "Don't think that's gonna happen. You're an observer, nothing else. I'm sorry about your fiancée, Chief, but that doesn't mean we don't follow procedure."

Truman mulled this over.

"It can't be against the rules to openly speak to them," Truman suggested. "I'll just ask them if they need anything else—bathroom break . . . coffee . . . tea."

The agent scratched at her neck. "We're all fucking exhausted, you know. Right now I can't focus on anything beyond my breakfast." She concentrated on her plate, scooping up more eggs, avoiding Truman's eyes.

*Thank you.*

He went and poured a cup of coffee at the counter. Instead of returning to his seat, he sat on the end of a bench close to the women and faced them, keeping the coffee for himself. All three averted their eyes. Even Vera did after giving him a hard glare. He sipped his coffee, and his gut burned with acid. The other two women appeared to be in their thirties. One redhead and

one brunette. All three wore grungy clothing and had their oily hair pulled back in ponytails. Their life at the compound hadn't been an easy one.

"I'm looking for my fiancée," he said in a quiet, calm voice. And waited.

*Ghattas will have my head for revealing that.*

Confusion crossed the faces of the younger women, and each stole a glance at him. Vera stared into the distance.

"We're getting married in December."

Satisfaction flashed on Vera's face, and fury flew up Truman's spine.

*She knows what happened.*

He took a long breath, determined to not reveal any emotion.

"We've determined that she was seen going into the command center the day before yesterday." He paused, waiting for the two younger women to look at him. They did. "You knew her as Jessica. She was working undercover."

His heartbeat pounded in his ears as he hoped revealing Mercy's cover wasn't an enormous mistake. *It was time. We weren't getting results.*

Ghattas might disagree.

Shock registered, and the two younger women looked at each other. Vera held fast, her attention focused beyond Truman.

"Vera," said the woman with brown hair. "Did you know Jessica was a spy?"

She wouldn't meet the two women's gazes.

"I'd say Vera was well aware of that fact," answered Truman, studying the silent woman. *Finally. We're getting somewhere.* "She didn't share that secret with the two of you?"

They emphatically shook their heads.

"I wonder why the two of you weren't told."

"Yesterday Pete ordered that no one was to ever mention Jessica again," said the redhead. "We were to act as if she was never here." She frowned, holding Truman's gaze. "Did you know she was sleeping with Chad?"

*No wonder Pete left them in the dark.*

"The relationship was part of her cover," he explained.

"I can't believe they expected her to have sex with someone," the brunette said in disgust. She sent Truman a pitying look.

Truman prayed for strength. “Where did she go from the command center?”

“Last time I saw her was at breakfast two days ago,” said the redhead.

“Same,” agreed the brunette. “I saw Pete speak with her during breakfast. Everything seemed fine. I didn’t see her go to the command center.”

Vera’s eyes blazed as she finally met Truman’s gaze. “We deal with spies as necessary. Your little whore got what she had coming.”

Truman was crouched before Vera in a flash. “Keep talking,” he ordered, trying to control the drumming in his chest. “Where is she?”

“You FBI think you can tell us what to do.” She spit near his boots. He didn’t flinch, his gaze boring into her. “You’ll find her inside the new garage. Check door four.” She smirked.

The storage unit with the dried blood.

“That unit is empty,” Truman said with a calm he didn’t feel. “We found a beaten dead man in the first one. No one in the rest.”

Vera’s brows came together. “Pete locked her up in there after he found out she was a spy.”

His lungs stopped. She truly believed Mercy should be in that unit.

*But she’s not.*

The other two women were shaking their heads, desperation in their eyes. “We didn’t know about any storage unit,” said the brunette. “Pete told us Jessica left and not to mention her name again.”

“Pete told me her name was Mercy,” Vera said, drawing the words out with a smug look on her face.

A primal fire raged through Truman’s veins. He stayed motionless, staring at the bitch, his vision tunneling until her face was all he could see.

*Her cover was blown.*

“She’s in that unit,” Vera asserted. “Pete locked her up after he confronted her and then beat the crap out of her.”

The fire inside him started to roar.

“As I said,” Vera stated with a sneer. “We don’t like spies.”

*Where is she now?*

# TWENTY-EIGHT

## *Yesterday*

She would freeze to death.

Mercy curled up in a ball on the icy concrete floor. Frigid air blew in under the back wall of the unit, so she huddled in a corner near the door, the least cold place she could find. She had no concept of time and didn't know how long she'd been left alone. It could have been an hour; it could have been a day.

She wanted sleep. Lots and lots of sleep. When she slept, she was no longer cold. She no longer ached.

*They say when you freeze to death, you simply fall asleep.*

She was okay with that.

Truman would be there. If she couldn't have him here, she'd settle for him there—where there was no cold. No pain in her gut. No throbbing in her knee. No dried blood in her nose and hair.

Pete had added more blows as they dumped her, taking pleasure from each kick and punch after he'd attacked her in his office.

She didn't yell for help. There was no point. This was Pete's domain, and these were his people. No one defied Pete.

And she was the lesson for the people who did.

No one outside the compound knew she was in trouble.

Chad was dead; she was positive. There was no other way Pete could have discovered her name.

*Chad didn't know my name.*

*Then how?*

Nothing made sense.



She touched her eyes to see if they were open. There was no adjusting of her vision in the sheer darkness of the tiny room. It was black. The absolute silence messed with her equilibrium. Or the imbalance was from the kicks to her head.

*Truman would hate this small space.*

Her fingers picked at the dried blood on her cheek, and it felt as if needles stabbed under her nails. Splinters had lodged under them as she sought to find a weakness in the storage room's construction. She'd pulled them out the best she could with her teeth, but tiny ones still remained.

The construction was strong.

Images coursed through her thoughts. Kaylie. Her cabin. The mountains. Rose. Baby Henry. Her mother. Truman's slow smile. Truman's cat, Simon.

She snorted and painfully grinned in the dark. Simon's meow would be a welcome sound at the moment. She sucked in a shuddering breath.

*I won't believe I've seen them for the last time.*

*I can't.*

Because if she did believe, it meant she'd given up.

As long as she could breathe, she wouldn't give up.

She needed to be ready if someone opened the door. Fight. Scratch. Bite. Kick.

Tears leaked. There wasn't a body part that didn't hurt, and simply shifting to a different position took her breath away.

*Sleep. I'll feel better when I sleep.*

Drowsiness overtook her, and she sank into blessed nothingness.



A clunking sound pulled her from sleep. She blinked hard, still unable to determine if her eyes were open.

The storage unit door swung open, and faint light outlined the silhouette of a very large man.

She coiled into herself.

*Fight.*

*I can't.*

"Can you get up?" rumbled a male voice.

Beckett. She ducked her head tighter. No one hated her more than the quartermaster.

“Come on. Get to your feet.”

Hands slipped under her armpits and lifted. Her legs stiffly uncurled, and her gut wrenched with agony as she straightened her back. She inhaled sharply as tiny explosions of pain radiated up her spine. But she was standing.

One foot was asleep, and she braced a hand on the wall, tentatively putting her weight on her throbbing knee. Beckett’s hands slid away, and he took a step back.

She swayed a bit but stayed upright.

*I can do this.*

His face came into focus, and he glared at her, evaluating her from head to toe. “You’re up, but can you walk?”

“Yes,” she croaked. She wasn’t going to fail in front of him.

“Show me.” Skepticism rang in his voice.

She held her breath and took a few steps, stopping in the doorway of the unit. He was alone.

*Kick to the groin.*

Wasn’t going to happen with her knee in pain.

He bent over and picked up a mug. “Here,” he said gruffly, holding it out. “Water—wait.”

He pulled a rag from his pocket and dipped it into the cup and then dabbed at the layers of blood under her nose. She saw stars.

“You do it.” He pushed the rag into her hand.

Mercy held it against her upper lip, softening the crustier bits of blood. She didn’t take the mug of water he held out, eyeing it with suspicion.

He noticed. “It’s just fucking water. Drink it.”

She took it. She drank and tasted blood. Swishing more water in her mouth, she spit to the side. He watched as she finished the water, which quenched a thirst she hadn’t known existed.

“Better?” he asked as he took the mug.

Surprisingly she felt much stronger.

“Yes. Are we going somewhere?” She continued to clean her nose and lip. If she had to meet Pete and his minions, she wanted a semiclean face.

“Yep. This way.” He turned and marched toward the door.

Mercy took a few hesitant steps, trusting her balance more each second and moving toward the open garage door. She wondered what or who was waiting for her outside. It was nighttime. The moon was bright, but clouds threatened.

“How long was I in there?” she asked.

“About seventeen or eighteen hours, I reckon.”

“Now what?”

“No questions.”

As usual. She followed him across the clearing. The snow was a few inches deep and luminous from the light of the moon, making their path visible. Her legs moved evenly. She had favored the battered knee at first but discovered it felt better if she used a full range of motion.

When they reached the trees, Beckett stopped and looked her over again. “Here.” He gave her a small drawstring bag.

“What is it?”

“Some food. A compass. Something for pain. It’s not much.”

Mercy stared at him. *He’d only give me a compass if . . .*

“What—”

“I wouldn’t take time to ask questions. Just get moving.” He pointed to the ravine. “Go south, walking in the bottom of the ravine until you come across a towering rock face on your right. It goes straight up. You can’t miss it. When you see it, turn to the southeast and go as straight as you can for a mile or so. Use the compass. It’ll be a slow incline upward, and you’ll come across a cabin. The land around it is bare of trees. You can’t miss it. Should take five or six hours.” He frowned, squinting at her legs. “Probably more for you. You won’t be moving very fast.”

She couldn’t speak.

“The guy in the cabin will get you out. If he can. Supposed to get a heavy snowstorm later today.”

“Why are you doing this?”

He scratched his beard and didn’t look her in the eye. “Don’t cotton to killing women. No matter who they are or what they’ve done. It’s not right.”

“Killing?” Her voice was hoarse.

“Pete decided a few hours ago. He’d already told everyone that you’d decided to leave, and he told us senior members that you’re too big a risk.”

He looked away. “Killin’ women isn’t right,” he said forcefully, as if to assure himself.

Beckett’s old-fashioned code of honor was saving her life.

When he looked at her again, his expression was all business. “The ravine is pretty steep but not impossible. You’ll find a less steep place where it’s easier to get to the bottom a hundred yards south of here.”

“Thank you. I don’t know how to—”

“Don’t thank me. Your odds of making it aren’t very good, but I had to give you a chance. Nelson Dean lives in the cabin. He won’t be happy to see you, but he won’t kill you.”

*Is that his idea of an endorsement?*

“Nelson founded America’s Preserve. When Pete convinced the members that he should be the leader, Nelson left.”

“Did Pete convince you?”

“Enough talking. Get going before the sentry comes by.” He shot her one last glare before turning around and limping away.

Mercy watched him for two seconds.

*I’m out of here.*

As she started toward the ravine, tiny flakes of snow began to fall.

## TWENTY-NINE

Mercy stumbled and plodded a hundred yards south as Beckett had suggested and then slowly inched down the slope toward the bottom of the ravine. Her shivers wouldn't stop. If she wanted to warm up, she had to keep moving.

Which sucked because all she wanted to do was lie down and sleep.

Memories of Pete's fury and fists kept her feet moving.

After Beckett had left, she'd checked the bag he'd given her and nearly cried at the sight of the old bottle of Children's Tylenol. She immediately chewed and swallowed five, remembering the pleased expression on Noah's face when he'd tasted the grape medication.

*I hope he's healthy.*

She'd done her best by the boy.

The bag from Beckett held a small bottle of water, several stale slices of the mess hall's dark bread, sliced cheese, a pair of mismatched gloves, a tiny flashlight, a compass, and a Leatherman tool. She had fingered the multi-tool, peering at it in the dim light, positive it was the one Pete had taken from her.

*Did Beckett know that?*

She had immediately put on the gloves, thankful the men hadn't taken her heavy coat. Since she didn't want to use her flashlight yet, she tripped several times on the way down the ravine. Her knee pounded with pain but bore her weight. She took several breaks to catch her breath and brush off the snow sticking to her face. The bottom wasn't much farther.

"Jessica." A hoarse whisper behind her.

*Eden.*

Mercy whirled around as the teen caught up and hugged her, nearly knocking her down the hill. "Eden, what are you doing? You need to go

back.” Panic for the girl seized Mercy. She knew what Pete was capable of.

“I’m not going back,” Eden whispered, her face stubborn in the moon’s pale light. “I hate them. My dad and Noah are gone, and I don’t trust that he’ll come back for me.”

“Your dad has a brand,” Mercy argued. “He’s committed to Pete. He’ll be back.” The teen had a small backpack over her coat. Mercy had to convince the girl to return to the compound.

“I don’t care. I’m done.” She peered at Mercy from under her hood and tentatively reached to touch her nose, yanking her gloved hand back at the last second, a look of pity on her face. “You’ve got two black eyes. They beat you, didn’t they? Are you okay?”

“Barely. And I fear the same for you if they catch you with me.”

“Pete told everyone you decided to go home, but I didn’t believe him.”

“How did you know where to find me?” Mercy asked.

“I saw you with Beckett.” She wrinkled her nose. “And got close enough to hear him tell you where to go. I ran back to the cabin, grabbed my stuff, and followed your trail.” Eden looked up at the gently falling snow. “We’re going to lose the moonlight to the clouds soon. I hope it snows hard enough to cover our tracks by morning.”

“My tracks. You’re going back.”

“No. I’m not.” Her chin lifted, and stubbornness rolled off the teen.

*What if I never find the cabin?*

Eden would die too.

Mercy was too tired to argue. And she knew that two were better than one in a survival situation. Especially when she could barely stay on her feet.

“Let’s go then.”

Eden surprised her by pulling Mercy’s arm over her shoulder. “I saw you limping.”

“Pete did a number on my knee.”

“Asshole.”

They worked their way down the slope, and the teen’s support made a big difference in Mercy’s balance. They reached the bottom and trekked south, the snow blowing at their backs. The gentle snowflakes grew thicker and dropped faster. Mercy was thankful their tracks would be covered, but she was miserable, hurting, cold, and worried.

Very, very worried.

“At least it’s not too deep,” Eden murmured. Their boots sank a good six inches with every step, and Mercy’s thighs burned from the unfamiliar, awkward stride needed to efficiently walk in the snow.

“Were they going to kill you?” Eden asked after several minutes of silence.

The blunt question startled Mercy. “I think so. Beckett said that’s why he was releasing me.”

“Was it because you helped Noah?” The teen’s voice hitched.

“No.” Mercy glanced at the girl. Snowflakes coated her eyelashes below her hood. Both of them wore knit caps under their coats’ hoods and had pulled their collars up over their mouths and noses.

“Then why?”

*Lie to her.*

There was no point. Pete already knew the truth. If caught, Eden would not be tortured to reveal what she knew about Mercy; Pete would simply do away with both of them.

She halted and faced the girl. “You need to know that I only wanted to help the people here,” Mercy started. “I knew the children in this compound were at risk. Noah proved that.”

“I don’t understand.” Eden frowned, her eyes searching Mercy’s.

“My name isn’t Jessica, it’s Mercy. I work for the FBI.”

Eden’s expression blanked, and she went still, her wide blue eyes stunned.

“Chad worked for the ATF. Two ATF agents were murdered during a robbery of a large number of stolen weapons which were tentatively traced to America’s Preserve. Chad and I were undercover to find the truth and the weapons.”

“That’s why you asked me all those questions about Pete and my dad?” Eden’s voice cracked, a hint of betrayed pain in her tone.

“It was. We were still fact-finding.” Mercy took Eden’s hands, squeezed them, and leaned close. “But how I feel about you and your brother is very real. You remind me of my niece—she lives with me, and I miss her very much.”

The teen was silent.

“I’ll give you another chance to go back to the compound now that you know the truth. Beckett’s instructions sucked. Especially for walking in

a snowstorm. And I honestly don't know how far I can walk. I'm dizzy, I hurt, and I'm fucking exhausted."

*I miss my family.*

Tears dampened Mercy's lashes, and pressure built in her swollen nose. Sympathy sparked in Eden's eyes, and she dabbed at Mercy's upper lip. "Your nose is bleeding."

"It's completely clogged and probably broken."

"Your lip looks pretty bad too."

Mercy inhaled. "Everything is bad right now," she attempted to joke.

Her light tone didn't fool Eden. "We'll find that cabin," the teen stated with the defiance Mercy had first adored about her. "Together the two of us can do it."

Mercy almost believed her.



Their progress through the snow was hard going and slow. They took frequent breaks—primarily for Mercy—and eventually finished the food and water Beckett had packed. Eden had humbly admitted she hadn't thought about packing food. Mercy understood. The girl hadn't known they'd be walking in the snow for a full day. Or longer. Mercy hated to eat all the food, but her body desperately needed the fuel to heal and continue her pace in the punishing environment.

Eden had filled the empty water bottle with snow and tucked it under her coat, letting her body heat slowly melt the white fluff. At first Mercy had worried that the bottle would make Eden colder, but both of them puffed with exertion. Sweat beaded Mercy's skin, and she alternated between chills and shivers.

Sitting down during the first break had been a huge mistake. Mercy's body had nearly refused to get back up. After that, she simply rested against a tree or braced her hands on her thighs for several minutes, panting and fighting her dizziness.

She'd vomited twice and was angry with her body for purging the food she'd eaten for strength. A concussion was her suspicion. The kicks and punches to her head had rattled and bruised her brain.

The sun came up, creating a weak glow behind the white and gray of the cloudy sky. But at least they could see. Their eyes strained to stay open



as the wind changed course and sandblasted their faces with tiny, hard snowflakes. Mercy preferred the huge, slow-falling flakes. And no wind. Their weather had frequently alternated between the two types and also included everything in between.

“I hate snow,” Eden muttered. “Never hated it before.”

Mercy said nothing. She was thinking about Beckett and wondered if anyone at the compound had noticed she was missing. Would Pete know he was the one who’d released her? Would Beckett be punished? It was unsettling. She had previously burned with hate for the man, and now she was concerned.

Or had Beckett deliberately sent her off into the wilderness in a storm? Was there really someone living in a cabin out here? Maybe letting Mercy die a natural death didn’t go against Beckett’s code of honor. She shoved the worry out of her thoughts; she had no strength to dwell on doubts.

They had little concept of time. Eden said it’d been three or four in the morning when she’d spotted Mercy and Beckett leaving the compound, and Mercy estimated the sun had risen around seven.

“Eden?” Mercy asked as a thought occurred to her. “What were you doing out of your cabin that early in the morning?” The fact that this question had just occurred to her told Mercy how slow and injured her brain might be.

The teen ducked her head. “I wander around sometimes.”

She recalled Eden’s previous confession of searching through people’s belongings. Did she do it at night too?

“I don’t sleep well. I like to hide from the sentries and see if I can get around the compound without them spotting me. They haven’t yet,” she added proudly.

“Don’t be so sure about that,” said Mercy, remembering how stealthily Sean moved through the night. She wouldn’t be surprised if he’d tailed the teen and watched her wander for his own amusement.

Sentry duty was dull.

Mercy had kept an eye out their entire trek for the steep rock face Beckett had described. *You can’t miss it.* Nothing resembled it. So far they had passed gentle or moderately steep slopes with snow and trees. No rock.

*Did we wander off course?*

She didn’t think so. They had definitely followed the bottom of the ravine. There had been nothing lower to walk along. She’d checked her

compass a few times, learning they had steadily traveled just a few degrees to the west of south. When they found the rock face, they were to turn southeast for a mile to reach the cabin.

*Maybe the rock face isn't that steep and was covered with snow. We didn't see it.*

Terror shot through her freezing limbs as she imagined them wandering, lost in the white gloom.

A few minutes later, the sides of the ravine flattened out as the women slogged up a slight incline. They reached the top and stopped, panting and staring at the flat, frosted terrain ahead. The visibility was poor. Mercy judged it to be less than fifty feet because of the blowing snow.

Without the sides of the ravine to guide them, she was at sea.

“Are we walking the right way?” Eden asked.

Mercy hadn't voiced her own doubts during their hike, not wanting to unnecessarily alarm the teen. “Yes,” she answered with as much conviction as possible.

“But where do we turn to walk southeast?”

“It's farther ahead.” She hoped.

Pulling out the compass again, Mercy searched for a landmark to use so she could guide them in their original direction. There was nothing. The trees had stopped with the ravine.

“Eden, I need you to walk straight ahead and stop when I yell.”

“Why?”

“I want to use you as a landmark, so we can continue moving in the same direction the ravine took us.”

Eden nodded and trudged forward, breaking a trail. The snow had steadily grown deeper and now was to the tops of their boots.

“Stop!” Mercy yelled as Eden started to fade into the snowy haze.

The girl didn't stop.

Mercy took a few running steps, her knee and head throbbing in pain. “Stop!” she screamed at the top of her voice, imagining Eden disappearing for good.

Mercy didn't want to be alone.

Eden stopped and turned around. Mercy caught her breath and set the compass with shaking hands. She gestured for Eden to take several steps to her left until she was properly in line. Then Mercy painfully hiked to join

her and suggested Eden frequently look backward to be certain Mercy was still in sight. They repeated the slow process several times.

Finally their path sloped down and became a gentle ravine with low sides.

*Is this right?*

They moved on, Eden's shoulder under Mercy's arm again.

A minute later Eden stopped. "Look!"

Through the snowy fog, a towering rock cliff loomed ahead on the right. Mercy nearly cried in relief.

They took a short break, and Mercy chewed up the last of the Children's Tylenol. Her pain was better than when Beckett had woken her, but she could feel her first dose wearing off. As with the food, she hated to use the last of the Tylenol, but right now it was important she feel her best to keep up the difficult hike.

"Beckett said the cabin is about a mile southeast from here." Mercy needed to say it out loud again, even though Eden already knew. The vague directions terrified Mercy. No doubt the cabin was easy to find on a clear day, but walking in a thick white soup made her skin crawl with apprehension.

The cabin would be easy to miss.

"Let's go," said Eden. "We need to do that landmark thing with the compass again, right? There're no trees."

"Yes." Mercy took a hard look at the barely-there round illumination in the sky behind the fog of snowfall, mentally marking the height of the sun. It was her only way to judge time. At their slow pace, a mile would easily take an hour. Assuming Beckett's estimate of a mile was accurate. She pointed, and Eden trudged ahead.

After repeating the landmarking process several times, Mercy noticed the teen could move farther away before she nearly vanished into the white haze. The falling snow had lightened up, and Mercy had to squint against the glaring stark white of the ground. Spindly trees cropped up occasionally, and Mercy used them for landmarks, thankful that Eden could help her walk during those times.

It went on and on as they paced exactly southeast.

Their breaks grew more frequent, and Mercy glanced at the position of the pale circle behind the low, gray clouds in the sky.

*Has it been two hours? Maybe more?*

A mild panic set in. She breathed heavily, and Eden passed her the bottle of melted snow. The water was lukewarm and felt like heaven sliding down her throat. The teen was a good partner. She hadn't complained, and Mercy had noticed Eden would spend extra effort to break up the snow in her trail. An attempt to make Mercy's hike as easy as possible when she followed.

Eden was a good kid and deserved to be with her family. Her mother had to be searching for the children. Mercy couldn't imagine a mother who would abandon kids like Noah and Eden.

Mercy leaned against a skinny fir tree for a break. Tears welled as she wondered if she'd ruined Eden's chance to be reunited with her family. Horrible scenarios of dying in the wilderness spun in her brain, dragging her toward a deep pit of despair. She'd fucked up. They'd missed the cabin. Everything was her fault. If she hadn't accepted the ATF assignment, Eden would be just fine.

But Noah would be dead.

Breath rushed out of her lungs. She'd saved one sibling only to lead the other to a possible death.

"Do you smell that?" Eden asked, spinning in a circle, her nose in the air.

"I can't smell a thing." Her nose didn't work. She'd breathed through her mouth the entire hike.

"It's woodsmoke. Quite strong." Eden's blue eyes lit up.

Relief weakened Mercy's knees, and she sat hard in the snow, her gloved hands pressed to her face.

*We'll be okay.*

# THIRTY

Pristine snowdrifts surrounded the squat cabin, and smoke curled from the chimney.

It was the most beautiful sight Mercy had ever seen. And as if the weather had decided to celebrate with her, the fog lifted, and they could see clearly in every direction. Eden had tracked the odor of smoke. Mercy had been no help, but after a few minutes of walking in circles, they'd spotted the cabin.

*Thank you, Beckett.*

Eden started to rush toward the house, and Mercy grabbed her arm. "Wait. We need to announce ourselves." The resident of an isolated cabin wouldn't expect company. Especially in a snowstorm.

They stopped about fifty feet from the cabin. Mercy cupped her hands around her mouth. "Mr. Dean?" she hoarsely yelled. "Nelson Dean?"

Eden took up the call. "Nelson Dean?" she shouted with the strong lungs of youth.

A figure moved at the window. Mercy waved her arms, hoping she appeared nonthreatening. The door opened, and a tall, gaunt, graying man aimed a rifle at them.

"Who's there?"

Eden stepped in front of Mercy, surprising her. "I'm Eden Trotter. Beckett sent us. Can we warm up?"

The rifle dipped a few degrees. "You both women?" Surprise filled his tone.

Mercy moved from behind Eden. "Yes," she croaked, pushing back her hood.

"You walked from the compound in this shitstorm?"

"We did," answered Eden.

The rifle now pointed at the ground. “You said Beckett, eh? You in trouble?”

“Definitely,” Eden told him.

“Come on in then.” He stepped farther out from under the eaves of the cabin, his boots sinking into the snow. “You must be freezing.”

Mercy couldn’t move. Her energy was depleted. Eden wrapped Mercy’s arm around her neck and shoulder, hauling her forward. Every last ounce of Mercy’s strength was used to raise her feet and step. Nelson Dean leaned the rifle against the house and came out to help. He was close to seven feet tall, his face long and lean with a long, thick beard. Bushy gray eyebrows nearly covered his brown eyes. From what she could see, his eyes were kind.

“Thank you,” she breathed.

“What kind of fool travels in this?” he asked as he copied Eden’s position by putting Mercy’s other arm over his shoulder. He straightened and nearly lifted her off her feet. “You must be on Pete’s shit list. What’d you do?”

Speaking was too hard for Mercy. Nelson’s open front door beckoned, promising heat and food and rest, and she couldn’t look away.

Nelson tripped, his chest jerking forward as a warm spray covered Mercy’s face and the crack of a rifle filled the air.

*He’s been shot.*

Mercy fell, Nelson’s body weight yanking her down. Unable to catch herself, she landed face-first in the snow with Eden beside her.

*I can’t breathe.*

Floundering, she got her arms under herself and pushed up.

Eden started to shriek, and Mercy stared at Nelson, her heart hammering in her chest.

The snow was pink with spray, and a large chunk of Nelson’s skull was gone.



Mercy fought to make her lungs work.

Still on her hands and knees, she had her eyes locked on the sight of Nelson’s shattered skull a few feet away. She tasted his blood in her mouth and spit, spraying more color on the white snow.

From Mercy's other side, Eden continued to wail, her high-pitched words unintelligible. She flailed in the snow, crawling away from the dead man and Mercy.

*Who shot him?*

"Eden, stay down!" Mercy shouted as her brain came back online. Adrenaline pumping her muscles, she lunged after the teenager and protectively threw herself onto Eden's back, pressing her into the snow.

Eden fought to fling her off, and Mercy leaned close to her ear. "Stop it! We need to get inside and take cover." The girl stilled. "Stay low and run." She rolled off the girl and struggled to get to her feet, her knee trembling with pain.

*I can't do this.*

"Don't move."

She knew the male voice.

Sean.

Mercy froze. And then slowly looked over her shoulder.

Ten feet away, the tall man pointed a rifle at her back.

"Sean!" Eden exclaimed in relief at the familiar face. "I'm so glad—" Eden cut off her words with a gasp. Mercy swore she heard cogs grind in Eden's brain as she processed that a man she knew had shot another in the head.

"Hello, Eden," he said with a laugh, pointing the rifle at her.

The teenager's mouth hung open.

Fighting an instinct to flee, Mercy said nothing, desperately searching for options.

There were none.

Although the temperature was freezing, sweat gathered on her upper lip.

The rifle swung back to Mercy. "Did you know you're hanging out with an FBI agent, Eden?" he asked.

*Pete told him.*

"Yes." Eden's voice shook, but Mercy was proud of her for staying calm.

"Let's go inside," Sean said, indicating with the gun for them to rise. "And do everything I say. No fucking around. You run, you die. Either from my bullet in your back or from the cold."

Eden pushed slowly to her feet, but Mercy couldn't stand. Her adrenaline had vanished, leaving her weaker than before.

"Get up," he snapped.

"She's hurt," Eden shot back as she bent to help.

"Yeah, I know. I heard about Pete's punishment, and it's been obvious over the last several hours."

*He followed us?*

Mercy managed to get to her feet, facing Sean and leaning heavily on Eden, trying not to gasp for air as pain raced up her leg. Surprise lit his eyes as he studied her face.

"Wow. Pete was more pissed off than I realized. You look like hell."

Self-conscious, Mercy looked away at his intense stare, and her gaze fell on the body in the snow. Her stomach curdled at the spray pattern of blood and brains. "Why him?"

"Nelson? Pete will appreciate that I got rid of the asshole. Now, inside!"

With Eden's help, Mercy walked toward the door. A minute ago the open door had been a beacon promising warmth. Now it was a door to a prison.

*What will he do with us?*

She shuddered, and her hands clenched at the thought of returning to Pete. He'd kill her this time. *I can't let that happen.*

The air inside the small cabin was heavenly on her icy cheeks. A woodstove in the corner churned out ample heat. The main room contained a small table, a chair, a bed, a rough sink with a single dripping faucet, and many shelves of canned and packaged food. A glimpse into a second tiny room revealed bins and food-grade buckets stacked to the ceiling.

Nelson was prepared for the winter.

He was Mercy's kind of person.

He *had been* her kind of person.

She thrust the image of his shattered head out of her mind.

Sean gave Eden cuffs to lock Mercy to the bed frame. Her face pale, Eden secured Mercy's wrists as Sean closely watched, snapping at her when she fumbled with the awkward cuffs. He held a pistol at her head, his rifle swapped for the gun.

Mercy shot a glance at the rifle leaning against the wall.

He saw her look and smirked. "Don't get any ideas."



Mercy sat on the floor and leaned against the mattress, assessing the bed. The frame was made of rough wood and bolted to the wall. She tugged at it and determined it wouldn't budge.

Sean checked Eden's work and then rapidly tied the teen to the other end of the bed with rope.

Once he was satisfied with the knots, he sat heavily in the chair and rubbed his face, exhaustion showing in the droop of his shoulders.

"What are you—" Eden began.

"Shut up," he said coldly. "I don't want to hear a word from either one of you." He rose out of his chair and paced the length of the room several times, deep in thought, an intent look on his face as he mumbled under his breath. Mercy watched, wondering if he hadn't thought ahead before shooting Nelson and taking the women hostage. Again his movements reminded her of a law enforcement officer's. Or a soldier's.

Eden leaned her head against the bed and silently mouthed to Mercy, "Now what?"

Mercy raised one shoulder and gave a slight shake of her head, feeling her brain and thoughts slow down. Her own exhaustion swelled and spread, taking over every limb. Now that she'd sat down, her body insisted on rest. She twisted to lie on the floor, her hands elevated by the cuffs, and closed her eyes, no longer caring what went on around her. She was warm, and both of them were alive.

For now.

She slept.

# THIRTY-ONE

It took two more days to get a search canine on the scene.

The delay had worn Truman's patience down to nothing. A car accident just outside Ukiah had halted the first dog who had been called out—the dog was fine, but his handler had a broken leg. After that, locating an available federal K9 team had been more difficult than expected. An ATF dog and handler were finally flown in from Seattle.

Two days lost.

Two days with Mercy *somewhere*.

Every agent and Truman were livid at the delay.

Another mystery had been raised by Noah Trotter's mother. Her sixteen-year-old daughter had not been with the women who'd left the compound or found inside with the members who'd remained.

In the interviews, everyone stated Eden Trotter was part of their group and seemed confused as to why she was missing, although no one could specifically remember seeing her the day of the raid. The teenager was added to the search.



Truman and several agents spent the two days widening the physical search for Mercy and the teenage girl beyond the compound. It was hard, frustrating work. The snow was over a foot deep. Every time Truman's foot hit something hidden under the thick white blanket, his heart stopped. He pushed himself, rarely taking breaks, eating only when Eddie shoved food in his hand. Needing sleep made him angry at himself for needing time to recharge.

As they searched, the bodies at the gate were removed, and the remaining members taken to the county jail for questioning. Federal crime scene teams covered the compound, bringing in heaters to melt the snow in places to see what was hidden beneath. They collected evidence as SSA Ghattas and Agent Aguirre dealt with angry FBI and ATF upper chains of command. And the media.

Truman ignored the conversations about who was at fault; he didn't care.

He had one objective. Find Mercy.

The ATF dog finally arrived, and Truman, Agent Gorman, and a few other ATF and FBI agents followed the canine and handler on their search. The snow didn't slow down the Labrador retriever. Truman had questioned how the dog could smell things below the snow.

"Airborne particles still exist that he can pick up with his nose," the ATF handler explained. "His primary job is to find explosives, but he does search and rescue and also cadaver work too."

The dog had led them to several cabins, the mess hall, and the kitchen. When they followed the dog to the command center, the dog had signaled inside Pete's office, surprising the handler. "That's his explosives sign."

The agents ripped the room apart. Under the flooring of the command center, they discovered the stolen guns from the ATF robbery and more blocks of C-4. After inventorying the weapons, they determined that out of more than three hundred stolen weapons, about fifty were missing, possibly sold for the cash.

Selling weapons wasn't America's Preserve only source of income. During their interviews, many of the arrested members stated they'd handed over their savings to help fund the compound. A lockbox holding nearly \$20,000 was also found with the weapons under the floor.

*Yet his people wear rags.*

After the command center, the dog led them to the storage unit where Mercy had been held captive.

After finding the unit, Truman watched the agent reward the dog with a rough game of tug-of-war in the big garage. He moved outdoors after a few seconds of the dog's happy tail and enthusiastic leaps. The cheerful sight was too much. How could the world move forward as normal when his world had been ripped into pieces?

Impatience percolated under his skin. The dog was getting results, but they weren't the results Truman wanted, and the process was slow. The agent wouldn't rush the dog, letting him take his time and stopping for frequent breaks and play.

"We'll find her," Agent Gorman said to Truman as he joined him outside. The man's face was long, weighed down with guilt and exhaustion. Truman was still angry with him and Agent Aguirre for leading Mercy into this disaster.

Truman didn't reply.

When reward time was over, the dog led them across the clearing and then stopped at the trees. The handler led him in a circle, giving him encouragement.

From what Truman had seen, Mercy had walked through every part of the complex.

Catching a scent, the dog shot off, and the men jogged after him, breaking paths in the fresh snow. Truman panted as he moved, suddenly aware he'd forgotten breakfast that morning. His life was completely upside down and backward. He couldn't think straight.

*Is this how Mercy felt when I was stuck in Ollie's cabin last spring?*

Truman had gone missing for nearly two weeks, ill with a fever and nursing a broken arm, unable to communicate that he was alive and safe in the isolated cabin. Back home, Mercy had led an aggressive search, and his town had started to grieve. It'd been worse for her than him. At least he'd known he was okay and would eventually be healthy enough to walk several miles out of the forest.

But Mercy hadn't known if he was alive.

Just as he knew nothing right now.

Not knowing was hell.

His nerves had grown hypersensitive and his temper short during the three days he'd known she was missing. He felt like water simmering in a pan, hovering just at that moment before it breaks into a boil. It was just a matter of what triggered his boil and when.

The dog started down the ravine that bordered one side of the compound. It was steep, and it was impossible to see if there were footholds under the snow. The men slowed, and the handler called the dog to wait. He stopped, furiously wagging his tail as he looked expectantly at the shuffling men.

They inched their way down the ravine. Truman stumbled twice, tripping over rocks hidden under a foot and a half of snow. It took twenty minutes for the men to get to the bottom. Delighted to resume his work, the dog darted along the bottom of the ravine for a hundred feet and then circled under a tree and sat in the snow, ears forward and eyes eager, looking to his handler.

“Did he lose the scent?” Gorman asked.

Truman’s pulse raced as he watched the immobile dog.

“No,” said the handler. “That’s a hit.” He glanced nervously at Truman. “Something dead is under there.”

Truman and the other agents attacked the snow with their hands only to find bare ground. Men were sent back to the compound for shovels. The long minutes of waiting nearly heated Truman over that boiling point.

The men returned and started to dig, immediately finding results. Parts of severely decomposed bodies began to appear. Twice Truman had to stop digging to lunge away and vomit. Gorman tried to make him return to the compound. He wouldn’t.

“The decomposition is far too advanced,” one agent stated, holding his collar over his nose. A half hour of digging had determined the dog had hit on a shallow grave containing three bodies. “These have been buried for months if not longer.”

Relief sent Truman to his knees, and he was not ashamed that he cried.

The canine’s handler made increasingly wide circles around the grave, trying to find another trail. The dog didn’t catch Mercy’s scent, and the search was temporarily halted to recover the dead.



The next morning Truman and Agent Gorman followed the K9 team again. The other agents who’d searched with them yesterday had been pulled to help the investigation inside the compound. Truman felt slightly abandoned, but he knew the dog was what was important. A dozen men could follow the dog, and it wouldn’t speed up the search.

The Labrador started where they’d left off yesterday and spent two hours in the ravine without results. The handler took the dog on a slow, thorough search around the perimeter of the camp, hoping to pick up another trail. The dog’s tail didn’t wag as it had the day before, and the

handler took more breaks and played more games, trying to keep the Lab's spirits up. The dog seemed nearly as down as Truman felt.

No more trails were found.

After a long afternoon, the K9 handler told him he didn't believe there was anything else to be found outside the compound. His eyes were cautious as he spoke to Truman, offering to try again tomorrow but stating he had faith in his dog's abilities and believed any further search time would be a waste. Truman told him he didn't care, and two days with the canine was not enough. The handler pressed his lips together but didn't argue.

That evening, back at the base camp, Truman rubbed his face with his hands as he paced outside the camp in the heavy snowfall. A tiny voice in his head told him the K9 handler was right, but Truman refused to admit it. He wasn't ready to stop.

He unzipped an inside pocket in his coat and pulled out her engagement ring, staring at the piece of metal and diamonds.

*She'll wear it again.*

Truman no longer felt the cold. He wanted to scream. He wanted to sleep. He wanted to get drunk. He wanted to feel her in his arms. And never let go. He shoved the ring back in the pocket and carefully zipped it closed.

"Truman."

He whirled around to find Agent Ghattas watching him. Jeff and Eddie were behind him, snow speckling their hats.

"What happened?" Truman choked out.

"Nothing has happened. We just need to talk."

Fear overcame him, and he held his breath. No good news ever came out of that phrase, and Eddie and Jeff wore faces of stone. Whatever Ghattas had to tell him didn't please them.

"For the last few days we've covered every inch of this compound," Ghattas began. "Actually, we've covered every inch multiple times, and the snow keeps getting deeper. The K9 has thoroughly covered the area outside the compound more than once."

"Send up a drone with FLIR. It can cover—"

"Have you even noticed the weather, Chief?" Ghattas held out a hand, and snow accumulated in his palm. "The snow screws with the infrared."

Truman held very still, his vision tunneling on the agent.

*Don't . . .*

“The forecast for the next few days isn’t any better.” Ghattas looked aside and rubbed his neck. “The Labrador’s handler is concerned about a third day of work in the snow. It’s hard on the dog. It needs some downtime.”

“Don’t do this.” Truman could barely speak.

Regret filled Ghattas’s face, his gaze soft and his mouth turned down. “I gotta put a halt to the outside K9 search for now—”

“No!” Rage and despair lashed out in his shout. “Not yet!”

Jeff and Eddie stepped forward, concern in their eyes.

“Don’t come any closer.” Truman pointed at them, his arm stiff. “Do something, Jeff! You know this isn’t right!” He inhaled, air rasping in his dry throat. “Mercy’s out there somewhere, and we’re not going to pause. Not now. She comes first!”

“Truman . . .” Eddie’s eyes were wet behind his glasses. He clamped his jaw shut and turned away, wiping his face.

Truman stared from one of them to the other.

*This isn’t going to happen.*

“Fuck you,” he said in a low tone as a mad upheaval rose in his chest and turmoil boiled over in his nerves. “*Fuck you,*” he yelled directly at Ghattas. “You tell whatever asshole sits above you that you’ve got a missing agent, and you’re not stopping until she’s found!” He lunged into Ghattas’s personal space, making the man raise his hands in defense. “You can spare men to search for her. I don’t care what the weather is supposed to do. It doesn’t matter. Get more dogs—”

“*I’m working* on getting more dogs,” Ghattas shouted, moving closer until Truman could feel his breath on his face. “Chief Daly, I sympathize, and you have no idea how much I hate to do this.” His eyes narrowed to angry slits. “But you are out of line. Go home.”

*Not in a million years.* “No, I’ll keep—”

“That’s not a request. That’s an order. You are no longer welcome at my crime scene. We’ll continue to search for Mercy, but you are done. I know Jeff warned you to keep your behavior in line, but you just stepped over that line. Now get out.” He no longer shouted; his words were deliberate and even. And cut even deeper. The SSA stepped backward, not releasing Truman’s gaze.

He meant business.

Truman saw red. *I don’t care. I won’t give up.* “Just because you—”

“Get out, Chief Daly. You’ve got ten minutes to pack your stuff. If I see you in this base camp or in the compound, I will have you arrested.”

Truman couldn’t speak. His heart was a jackhammer, pummeling his ribs. Jeff’s expression was numb. Eddie had moved away from the argument and braced his hand against a tree, refusing to watch.

*They can’t help me.*

He studied Ghattas’s face. Closed. Impenetrable.

*I’m on my own.*

Truman strode away without looking back.



# THIRTY-TWO

Ollie stared at his boots as Truman spoke, the words reverberating through his head.

*Mercy missing.*

He swallowed, his dry throat protesting. If Truman was sitting here in Mercy's apartment explaining what had happened instead of out hunting for her, the situation was bad.

Beside him on the couch, Kaylie was shaking her head, clutching her cat to her stomach. "No. No," she repeated over and over during Truman's story. Tears streamed as she listened, and Truman moved from his chair to sit on her other side, his arm around her. She buried her face in his shoulder, and Truman looked at Ollie over her head, his eyes stricken.

Ollie pulled inside himself, staying rigid, refusing to give in to the emotions shooting through his nerves. He wasn't like Kaylie; he couldn't cry in front of her, and the effort was making him numb.

*There's something he's not telling us.*

He'd been told that Truman had left town as part of the investigation into the murdered man Ollie had found alongside the road. Either that story had been a cover-up for why Truman had really left, or the local murder was part of Mercy's investigation.

Ollie wouldn't ask in front of Kaylie.

"Why is this happening?" Kaylie sobbed into Truman's jacket. "I hate her job." She lifted her head and looked at Truman. "I hate your job too. Why is helping other people more important to you two than us? This is my father all over again—he didn't think about how his actions could hurt our family." She crumpled, her shoulders collapsing and her head bowing low over Dulce on her lap.

Ollie winced. Bad decisions had put Kaylie's father in a dangerous situation, and he'd been murdered. It wasn't the same with Mercy and Truman; their jobs were to help people.

Truman rubbed Kaylie's back. The broken look on his face stabbed Ollie in the gut.

"What was Mercy investigating?" Ollie asked. He felt as if he were floating. He was still sitting on the couch, but he saw Truman and Kaylie as if from a great distance.

"An ATF robbery. A lot of stolen weapons."

"Fucking weapons." Kaylie's words were muffled, spoken into Dulce's fur.

"We'll find her," Truman repeated for the tenth time, determination in his tone.

"How?" Kaylie asked, wiping her nose. "They made you leave."

"I'm going back out there. Evan Bolton told me about a private search-and-rescue canine he hired a year ago. The woman and her dog really impressed him. He contacted her, and she'll meet us there tomorrow morning. Bolton insists on going back with us."

"A search-and-rescue dog?" Ollie asked. His dog, Shep, had amazed him with his tracking ability in the woods. There was no one Ollie would rather be lost with.

"The search dog that the federal agencies brought in was great," said Truman. "Since I can't work with them any longer, I hired my own. I think it's the most effective tool to finding her. We'll search away from the compound, because the first dog did a thorough job. We need to look at the area farther out."

"But it's snowing," Kaylie pointed out.

"Doesn't matter to the dog. This woman says her dog has found several people in poor weather."

A very small spark of hope touched Ollie. He hung on Truman's words, searching his face for the truth. If Truman was optimistic, then he would be too. Forest survival was tough. No one knew better than he, and snow made it even tougher. But Mercy wasn't just anyone. She was resourceful and a fighter.

This was his family. Mercy, Truman, and Kaylie. The upcoming wedding would be a milestone for Ollie. His favorite people were bonding for life. And their happiness was a part of him.

With Kaylie's help, he'd found a wedding present. Kaylie had adored the idea, and they'd agreed it'd be from them both. Just yesterday Ollie had placed the order. The cost had been high, but he'd known it was the perfect gift.

A tribute to their patched-together little family.

Now it ripped him apart to think of the present. If it arrived, and Mercy hadn't come home . . .

*Stop. Don't go there.*

Kaylie shuddered. "Please bring her back, Truman." Her voice cracked.

Ollie's soul echoed her words.



Truman watched Mercy's sister Pearl slide into mothering mode with Kaylie. He'd informed Mercy's family of the situation before he told the teens, and asked Pearl to come stay with Kaylie so he could return to the search. Rose and Owen had both descended on their parents' home with their families, keeping vigil.

He watched Ollie out of the corner of his eye. The young man appeared stoic, but Truman suspected it was a shield to keep Kaylie from seeing his real feelings. Truman knew how to read the teen, and saw he was crushed and worrying inside.

In the kitchen Truman poured a cup of coffee, wishing it were something much, much stronger, and Ollie joined him.

"You told us you went out of town as part of the investigation into the guy I found by the road," Ollie said quietly as his eyes searched Truman's.

It felt as if a spotlight were shining in Truman's face. Even with all the media hype, the ATF had kept the murder of their agent, Timothy O'Shea, out of the news. The media knew the compound was tied to the death of the two ATF agents from the weapons heist but did not know an FBI agent was missing.

But he couldn't lie to Ollie.

"That murder was related to Mercy's investigation." He kept it simple but true.

Ollie was silent, scrutinizing, and Truman felt as if Ollie saw right through him.

“How?”

Truman searched for an explanation that wouldn't alarm Ollie. “The dead man was from the compound.”

“Why was he murdered?”

“He was against the compound leadership.” *Still true.*

The teen turned to check on Kaylie and Pearl, who sat on the couch, their heads together in comfort and sorrow. “Did the leadership believe Mercy was against them?” he asked quietly when he faced Truman again.

Pain and regret exploded in Truman's head. “Yes.”

Ollie's chest expanded with several deep breaths, and Truman put a hand on his shoulder. “We don't know that they hurt her.”

*Unless you include a beating and being dumped in a storage unit.*

“Mercy's odds aren't very good, Truman. She should have turned up by now.” The teen's face crumpled, and he strove to pull himself together.

Truman embraced him, clueless as to what to say, because the same sentence had been on repeat in his brain.

*Mercy's odds aren't very good.*



Truman turned off the rural road in the Cascade foothills onto the long drive that led to Mercy's cabin.

*Our cabin.*

He had been compelled to come, driven by an unreasonable hope that Mercy was at her cabin and unable to communicate. The feeling was illogical, but checking the cabin was the only way to eliminate the nagging question in his brain.

The new A-frame stood proudly where her original cabin had burned to the ground last spring. Mercy had crossed paths with an angry serial killer and his intended victim, and the result had been the loss of her cabin and a bullet hole in Mercy's leg.

Truman parked and stared at the new building. No one came out to greet him or waved from a window, and the hole in his heart ripped a little bigger. Her absence was overwhelming. The home was Mercy, a symbol of her determination, hard work, and obsession. She'd poured her soul into every bit of it.

His heart and feet heavy, Truman got out and went to check the large snow-covered stacks near the storage barn. He brushed four inches off one pile. The stacks were the panels and aluminum framing he'd ordered to build Mercy a greenhouse.

The greenhouse was a secret.

Due to her heavy workload, Mercy hadn't been to the cabin in three weeks. A record for her. In fact, during the previous two months, she and Truman had had to visit at different times, unable to make their schedules coordinate. She didn't know Truman had poured a concrete foundation for the greenhouse and started building a knee wall, working like a madman to make progress before the snow fell.

He walked across the foundation, leaving crisp boot-shaped prints in the snow. He tapped the half-built knee wall with his toe. It would be gorgeous when finished. An Eagle's Nest resident had given him the river rocks for free in exchange for removing them from her property. The greenhouse didn't need a knee wall. He could have quickly assembled it with the polycarbonate walls simply extending to the concrete. But he'd found a picture of an elegant greenhouse and instantly known it was a perfect way to personalize hers, embedding his love and heart in the construction.

It was her wedding present.

Few people would appreciate a greenhouse as a wedding gift, but it was perfect for practical, prepared Mercy. It would be strong and durable, built to last. Made with extruded aluminum framing and shatterproof polycarbonate panels, it would hold up to four feet of snow on its roof. To him the structure stood for so much more than growing plants. It represented their future, one they'd build and grow together.

Mercy would understand.

He left the concrete slab behind, no longer able to look at his half-finished project, and strode to the house. The interior had finally been finished with a lot of hard work from the four of them. It had two bedrooms, two small bathrooms, a tiny kitchen, and a good-size family space. "Not too big," Mercy had said over and over, hating the thought of having to heat the cabin during the winter.

Truman smiled, hearing her voice in his head. She'd known exactly what she wanted.

He jogged up the steps to the back door, kicking the snow from his boots. As he unlocked the door, he turned and looked at the forested property behind him. Right here he'd discovered Mercy's "dirty little secret." Truman had known her for only a few days, the smart and driven Portland FBI agent who'd come to help solve his uncle's murder, but he had followed her, wondering where she disappeared to at night. He had found her here, chopping wood at midnight and unable to relax until she knew she had done everything possible to prepare her cabin in case of disaster.

It had been eye-opening.

That night he saw *her* and came to understand the woman who'd captured his attention and heart.

Mercy had relaxed over her obsession in the last year but still stayed on her toes. She still checked international news and markets, looking for early signs of collapse, and she still harped at Ollie and Kaylie to always have their GOOD bags ready to go and additional smaller ones stored in their vehicles.

He stepped inside, the smell of fresh paint greeting him. The home was partially furnished. Mercy and Kaylie had haunted garage sales and antique stores all summer, on the hunt for the practical pieces she wanted. A simple couch, chairs, and coffee table sat in the family room. A table for four was adjacent to the functional kitchen. An elegant wall decal above the table read, FAMILY MAKES THIS HOUSE A HOME.

He stopped and stared, reading it over and over. He hadn't seen it before.

The decal had to be Kaylie's touch. Mercy wouldn't have chosen something so sentimental.

His lips quirked in a half smile.

*Damn, I miss my stubborn, clever woman.*

A piercing pain radiated in his chest, and he briefly shut his eyes against the grief.

*She's alive. I know it. I'd feel it if she wasn't . . .*

Standing absolutely still, he waited, hoping for some sound or sight from the universe to indicate he was right.

Nothing.

The house was silent. Its plain white walls and simple furnishings waiting for her return.

Like him.

*I'm being ridiculous.*

He shook himself and marched up the staircase to the loft bedroom and bath they'd designed for themselves. Mercy had bought a bed, but they had left finishing the room for last, striving to get the important rooms like the kitchen and baths functional first.

He entered the loft and caught his breath, his heart in his throat. Mercy had worked on the room without telling him. The space had been painted a relaxing blue, and tranquil watercolor art hung on the walls. A fluffy down comforter covered the bed. Last time he'd set foot in the loft, the walls had been white, and sleeping bags had been on the bed. Now the room was a harmony of creamy yellows and cool blues.

She had bought throw pillows, and a thickly padded chair sat in one corner next to an empty bookcase, patiently waiting to be filled with books.

It was homey.

*I'm not the only one hiding surprises.*

*What if we never share that bed again?*

He steeled himself against the abrupt rush of grief.

Tomorrow he'd find her and bring her home.

# THIRTY-THREE

The morning after he had informed Mercy's family that she was missing, Truman and Evan Bolton parked along a forest service road to start their search for her. Truman slammed the door to his Tahoe and swore at the surrounding snow. Bolton did the same on the passenger side. Both men had pored over maps, looking for a beginning location that was far enough away from the FBI base camp but close enough to the compound. The disaster at America's Preserve had happened six days ago. The investigation and search for Mercy and the missing teenager had been scaled down, but coverage of the incident was gaining massive steam in the media.

The ATF and FBI were being slaughtered in the court of public opinion, the nation furious at the loss of life.

It had taken a few days, but the FBI had publicly admitted that an agent had gone missing during the incident while keeping Mercy's name private. Eddie had told Truman that he had joined other agents in another search outside the compound with no results. The FBI had brought in ground-penetrating radar and found another grave on the edge of the compound. This time holding two men.

But no Mercy.

Truman was starting his own search. The glowing recommendation from Bolton had resulted in Rowan Wolff and Thor, her black German shepherd. She had parked behind them on the service road. The dog leaped out of her vehicle, buried his face in the fluffy snow, and then hurled it in the air with an upward flick of his nose. Rowan checked her pack and slid it onto her back, fastening two buckles in front. She wore a bright-orange hunter's vest over her coat. Truman and Bolton had done the same. No hunting was going on in the immediate terrain, but they weren't taking the chance of being mistaken for hiding compound members.



Rowan approached. She was tall, with intense eyes, reminding him a bit of Mercy, but that was where the resemblance stopped. Her eyes were brown, and her hair was dark blonde. According to Bolton, Rowan and Thor had carried out search and rescues all over the country. She was expensive, but he claimed she was worth it. She had worked investigations with a dozen federal government agencies and nearly a hundred different police and sheriffs' departments. Bolton said she'd also participated in a few private searches, hired by families who'd had a member lost or kidnapped after the police investigation had gone cold. One high-profile retail magnate had rewarded her with enough money to retire when Rowan found his missing daughter.

She hadn't retired. She kept going.

From what Truman had seen in the short time he'd known her, she was driven and didn't like to sit still.

Exactly the type of person he needed to find Mercy.

Thor happily darted through the snow to greet Truman and Bolton. The solid black German shepherd was gorgeous, his eyes bright and excited, his fur speckled with snow. Rowan gave a command, and the dog slid to a halt and sat a dozen feet from them, his ears perked in the direction of the men. Rowan caught up to him and scratched his ears. Truman frowned. The woman favored one leg.

"She limping?" he murmured to Bolton.

"An old injury. Always limps a tiny bit. Not sure what happened."

As long as it didn't affect her progress in the snow.

"Ready?" she asked as she approached.

Truman and Bolton put on their own packs and strapped on snowshoes. They were prepared to stay overnight but hoped it wouldn't be necessary. The plan was to veer west from their current location, approach the compound's ravine from its east side, and hopefully pick up Mercy's scent. Truman was optimistic that her scent had led the first dog into the ravine.

Rowan had agreed it was the best place to start. Their main concern was that the FBI would spot their group and make them leave before they made any progress.

"Let's go," answered Truman. They were a little less than a mile from the ravine, and he gestured for her to lead the way. Rowan had packed some articles of Mercy's in case Thor needed a refresh.

Truman crossed his fingers as they set off into the snow. The trees were dense as they started, but a half hour into their hike, they started to thin. Their direction had led them up several steep hills. Truman had never worn snowshoes before and was pleased with the results. It was overcast but not snowing. The wind constantly blew thick clouds of snow off the firs. Within an hour they reached the ravine and hadn't seen a hint of the ongoing federal investigation nearby.

"I think the compound is farther north from this point," Truman told Bolton and Rowan. He'd studied the far side of the ravine as they walked, searching for something familiar that indicated they were near the compound. The day he'd followed the first search dog, he hadn't paid close attention to what was around him. He'd had one thing on his mind—finding Mercy. The shock of bodies in a grave at the bottom of the ravine had made him even less observant of his surroundings.

"Do we want to be down in the ravine or follow this edge?" asked Rowan, studying the white landscape.

"Let's work down to the bottom. At some point we'll find where the team left off the other day."

Where they stood, the drop was too steep to descend to the bottom, so they trailed along the east edge, searching for a gentler slope, eventually making their way down. They'd had to shed the snowshoes. The snow was too shallow on the ravine's east slope and had barely covered the uneven rocky terrain; it wasn't optimal for snowshoes.

At the bottom, in the deeper white fluff, they put them on again as Thor watched, his tail wags creating a partial snow angel as he sat. Rowan finished with her snowshoes first. "Thor." The dog looked at her. "Find it," she ordered. Thor jogged off, zigzagging through the ravine.

"We're not too far away for him to search?" Truman asked.

"No. Air can carry scents for an amazing distance."

The three of them moved south along the bottom of the ravine. Thor was a black shadow against the white of the snow, trotting here and there, his ears forward, his tail happy.

"He's amazing," Truman remarked to Rowan.

"I know," she said matter-of-factly.

"Bolton says you've done several snow rescues."

"I have."

He waited to see if she'd expand on the subject, but she was silent. Glancing at her, he saw all her focus was on her dog. As it should be.

He slowed his stride and fell back beside Bolton. "What case did she and Thor work on for you?" Truman asked the detective.

"A thirty-year-old mentally challenged male lost in the forest. He'd been missing for five days, and Thor located him within a couple of hours. Barely alive. He'd been hiding from the rescuers. Wouldn't have made it if we hadn't brought in Rowan and Thor."

Frantic barking sounded ahead.

Excitement pumping through his veins, Truman eagerly looked to Rowan.

"He's alerted on something. He's found the scent, but there's nothing actually right there."

They caught up to the dog, and Rowan tossed a thick rubber ring in the air. Thor lunged and caught it, immediately darting to drop it at her feet. They repeated the exercise two more times as Truman tried to control his impatience, wanting Thor to start following the scent.

Rowan put the ring away. "Find it," she ordered again. Thor shot ahead.

"We're pretty far south of the compound. I don't think the first dog came this far," Truman said between breaths as he awkwardly jogged in the snowshoes.

"Doesn't matter to Thor," said Rowan, flashing the first smile Truman had seen.

Two hours later, Thor was still moving them south through the ravine. It was nearly noon, and they stopped for another break, even though the dog was impatient to keep going. Rowan poured water into a collapsible bowl, and he drank with loud slurps.

Truman offered her a protein bar, but she refused, saying she had her own. They ate in silence, Truman's mind darting in a half dozen directions. He was thrilled the dog had scented something and had led them a long distance. To Truman it meant Mercy had walked out on her own. If someone had hurt her, she would have been found closer to the compound. But the southern direction wasn't logical to Truman. There were no major roads south of the compound. To eventually find a major highway, she would have gone west. Even walking north would have made more sense, since Ukiah was in that direction.

*Is she injured and confused?*

*Will we find her?*

He was mentally exhausted.

But he had hope. He refused to give up hope.

A light snow had started and stopped several times as they continued. Eventually the ravine flattened out as they moved up a rise. Thor ran in wide circles, his nose in the air, and Rowan frowned.

Fear crawled up Truman's spine. "What's wrong?"

"He's trying to find the scent again."

Truman turned back into the ravine. "Did we go off course? Do we need to back up?"

"Maybe," said Rowan. "We'll see." Patience and calm were etched in her features.

Truman watched Thor. "Could he have followed a wrong scent?"

Rowan's brows came together, and she shot him a sharp look. "No."

"Maybe he needs to smell Mercy's shirt again."

The woman sighed and turned to him. "Look, Chief Daly. I know this is hard on you, but you've got to back off and let us work." Her eyes were hard. "We know what we're doing."

"You're right, I apologize," he muttered, stepping away.

Bolton slapped him on the shoulder. "We'll find her. It'll be okay," he said with encouragement in his eyes.

Truman nodded and bent over to adjust a snowshoe that was just fine.

Inside him every nerve was stretched taut, vibrating with fear and hope. He knew Bolton meant well.

But his life might never be okay again.

# THIRTY-FOUR

## *Three days earlier*

When Mercy finally woke after arriving at Nelson's cabin, the sun had gone down and the window in the cabin was black. Her hands were still cuffed to the bed. Every muscle screamed as she shifted to sit upright on the floor. Her body was stiff and sore, overworked and underfed. She tried to bend her damaged knee. The swelling was so advanced that her jeans stretched impossibly tight around the joint. She picked at the denim, wondering if it should be cut. Blinking as her focus ebbed and flowed, she rubbed her eyes against her arm to get rid of the blur, and pain shot through her head.

She held very still, scared to breathe, willing the ache to subside.

At the other end of the bed and also on the floor, Eden slept. Her relaxed face and slightly open mouth were those of a child, not a stubborn teen.

Mercy briefly closed her eyes.

*We're alive.*

*I've got to get us out of here.*

Her body was in no condition to escape. She had been lucky to make it as far as she had, and another trek was out of the question. She had no choice but to sit tight until she was sufficiently healed.

*I need to get rid of Sean.*

Scanning the room, she realized he was gone. *Did he abandon us?* Hunger and thirst engulfed her as she tugged at her cuffed hands, imagining herself and Eden slowly starving to death. She squirmed uncomfortably as another bodily need made itself known.

"Dammit."

She'd wished Sean gone, and now she wished him back.

The door swung open and cold air curled around Mercy. Sean stamped his feet, his arms full of firewood. He dropped it next to the stove and beat the snow off his hat and jacket. His gaze met hers. "It's coming down again."

She swallowed. "What time is it?"

"Dunno. I don't wear a watch and don't have a phone." He put his hands on his hips as he studied her and Eden. "Thirsty?"

"Yes." Her mouth was instantly dry.

He got her a glass of water at the sink adjacent to the stove and left the faucet dripping to help keep the pipe from freezing. "He's got a good water setup. Don't know what the source is, but it tastes okay." He held the glass to her lips, and she drank, refusing to look him in the eye.

"I need the bathroom."

Distaste crossed his face. "I figured. Wake her up, and I'll take you to the outhouse together. Try anything, and I'll shoot her in the head."

His casual tone made Mercy's skin crawl. She had no doubts he'd kill one of them.

*Eden is a hostage to keep me in line.*

Mercy would do anything to keep him from hurting the teen.

Anything.

She stretched and gently jiggled Eden with her boot. Confusion and then fear swept over Eden's face as she instantly sat up. Her petrified gaze jumped from Mercy to Sean and then back again. "He's taking us outside to the bathroom," Mercy told her.

Sean knelt, untied the teen, ordered her to remove Mercy's cuffs as he held the pistol on them, and then led them outdoors.

The path to the outhouse had been recently cleared, along with a trail around the huge covered woodpile. Sean wasn't stupid. He saw the sense in maintenance during a storm. A few minutes later they were back inside, and she was thankful for the warmth.

The cabin was an oasis from the cold but ruled by a murderer.

"How long will we be here?" Mercy blurted as he tied Eden again.

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "You got somewhere to be?"

*Yes. Home. Truman. Kaylie.*

A lonesome pang vibrated in her chest as she pictured her family. And said nothing.

He focused on Eden's knots. "We'll stay here until things cool down."

Mercy was confused. "You mean until Pete's anger with me cools down?" She couldn't believe Sean would do her any favors.

He frowned as he tugged and tested Eden's ropes. "No." He shot her a glare that made it clear he was done talking about it.

Mercy didn't care.

"Did you get in trouble with Pete? Is that why you're here?" If he was on the outs with Pete, it was unlikely he'd take her back to the compound. Unless he handed her over as a peace offering.

He snorted. "No."

She tried again. "Does Pete know you're here?"

"No."

He was calm, seemingly unconcerned that he'd walked away from his boss and the compound.

"Are you going back?" asked Mercy.

An odd expression touched his features. He stood, towering over her. "I've gone through that room," he said, pointing at the small room with the storage bins and buckets. "Nelson may have been an asshole, but he was prepared to outlast World War Three—which reminds me." He grabbed a small bottle from the table. "Advil?"

"Yes, please." Joy quickened her pulse as he shook the bottle. It sounded full.

He dumped a few tablets into his hand and placed them in her mouth, helping her drink from the glass of water again. Apparently he wasn't antimedication like the rest of Pete's crew.

"I don't see any reason to hurry back," he said, kneeling next to her. "This place is warmer than the barracks." His gaze lingered on her wet lips, and an unsettling chill settled over her. He touched the hair by her face. The sexual threat he'd made in the middle of the night days ago popped into her head.

*Consider it a favor you can repay in the future.*

The hair on Mercy's arms lifted. She met his easily readable gaze and saw he remembered too.

"There was a spark between us that night," he said, not dropping his gaze.

“Gross,” interrupted Eden, who had been listening and watching closely. “She’s not into you either, Sean.”

Fury crossed his face as his head swiveled in Eden’s direction.

“What happened between Pete and Nelson?” asked Mercy, grasping at straws to distract him and break up the tension that had blossomed in the room. “Vera told me Nelson had started America’s Preserve and then left, but she didn’t say why.”

Sean moved away and sat in a chair, leaning back and crossing his legs at his ankles, raking her with a stare that made her skin crawl.

*Just try me.*

She was injured, but her teeth and feet still worked. Well, the foot on one leg.

“Difference in leadership styles and philosophy,” he answered.

Mercy let her gaze wander over the shelves of food stores. “Let me guess. Nelson was focused on preparation and survival for the group, but Pete was more interested in protecting his interpretation of the Second Amendment and forced him out.”

He grinned. “Something like that.”

“And you?”

He shrugged, an arrogant expression on his face.

“You have a law enforcement background,” she said, throwing caution to the wind. “From where?”

His face went blank. He stood, shoved on his hat, and went outside.

“What a perv,” said Eden, slumping against the bed frame, her face hidden behind her hair. “He said all sorts of creepy things to me when you fell asleep.”

Mercy looked sharply at the teen. “Define *creepy*.”

“Sexual.”

Anger burned in her throat. “Is that why you said ‘either’ when you told him I wasn’t into him?”

“Yeah. Later he said he was just teasing.” She shuddered. “I don’t know what to believe.”

“I don’t think he expected to end up with us stuck in this cabin,” said Mercy. “I’m not sure what he thought would happen when he decided to follow us. But I think he’ll get tired of tying and untying you pretty soon. I wouldn’t be surprised if he lets you be untied as long as he’s in the cabin.”

“Why not you?”



“Because he knows the sort of training I’ve had. He’s had it too.”

“You really think he was a cop?” Eden asked skeptically.

“He was something. I can tell by the way he moves and handles his weapons. He’s had training.”

“If he was a cop, how did he end up in America’s Preserve?”

“That’s what I’d like to know too.”



The evening crawled by. Mercy dozed off and on. Sean fed both her and Eden by hand and took them to the outhouse again.

He left his rifle near the door and had placed his pistol on a shelf. Both in full sight of Mercy, taunting her.

*At some point he’ll let his guard down.*

He was in and out of the cabin a lot over the next few days. Chopping wood. Stacking wood. Shoveling snow. They could hear the crack of an ax as he chopped. He paced the main room and rooted through the bins, but often he’d abruptly stride out the door, and the ax would sound again. Sometimes he just sat and stared at her or Eden.

Mercy didn’t want to know what was going through his head.

He found some books and magazines, but neither Mercy nor Eden could hold them and turn the pages with her hands secured. Mercy begged to have one hand free, although her hurting head probably wouldn’t let her focus on a page. He refused, told her to shut up again, and continued to pace.

He was antsy.

Their days alternated between utter boredom and cold fear.

On the third day he split Mercy’s lip again when he slapped her for asking too many questions about his plans. He’d raged at the two of them to be silent, and Mercy had pushed, seeking to know where he’d draw the line. She found it. She and Eden stayed silent for the rest of the day.

He was Jekyll and Hyde. One minute giving her more Advil and the next kicking her in her sore knee for requesting a trip to the outhouse.

She missed her family. Eden did too. The teen cried often, convinced she’d never see them again, and grieved that her mother had been gone for months. At least a hundred times she’d asked Mercy if she believed they’d get away from Sean.

Mercy always said yes.

But inside she had her doubts.

Sean was fraying. The calm and control that she'd witnessed at the compound was gone, and she worried for their safety. Several times she'd caught him staring at Eden with a hungry look, setting off shrill alarms in Mercy's brain. He caught her watching him and looked away as if nothing had happened.

The focus on Eden disturbed her. Sean was no longer policed by society. It was just the three of them, and he held all the power. He could do as he pleased. His rules. No witnesses.

She and Eden both watched for opportunities. Mercy dreamed of grabbing his gun or a knife from the tiny kitchen area. When he boiled water, she saw her hands grab the pan and hurl the contents into his face. The crack of the ax outside made her itch to hold its handle.

But he was too careful.

*I need him to make one mistake. That's all.*

They recited the directions back to the compound, pounding them into their memories. Mercy hated the thought of returning, but the compound was the only place that offered shelter—that they knew of. She was surprised how much of their trek she'd forgotten. Eden remembered landmarks that Mercy couldn't recall.

There was no guarantee that they'd escape together.

And they might have to physically fight for their lives. They whispered about what they could use for weapons—the knives, his guns, a piece of firewood. Mercy lectured Eden on fear and how to set it aside, on being prepared to injure and attack. To kill.

If the opportunity arose, she feared the teenager would freeze.

Mercy gently flexed her knee and elevated it as much as possible. It had improved even with Sean's continued abuse, her jeans no longer straining around it. The headache had nearly subsided, and now her vision stayed true. But the scabs on her face had dried, and they itched, and according to Eden, the tissues around her eyes were colorful palettes that changed every day.

She would kill for a shower.

Sometimes Mercy and Eden took turns distracting each other with happy stories, keeping their voices low as they talked about their lives back home. Sean had been silent a lot, but Mercy knew he listened to their

conversations. She hoped their stories humanized the two of them, making him see that they weren't expendable. Someone who could shoot Nelson in the head could also easily choose to eliminate them.

Eden spoke of her family, relating touching accounts of Noah and her mother. The teen now believed that Noah had survived, although she often broke into tears while speaking of him. Mercy told stories of her siblings, struggling to keep her voice from cracking as she pictured their faces. She shared stories of her job and was describing Eddie's sense of humor when Sean finally spoke.

"You know your wonderful bureau has a rat," he said abruptly.

Mercy froze, knowing he didn't mean a rodent. "How do you know?"

He smiled, his hands clasped as he rested his forearms on his thighs, staring at them as usual, his eyes blazing with secrets.

Her mind raced. She had continually questioned how Pete had known her name and for whom she worked, and it suddenly made sense. Chad hadn't known her identity, so someone else had told Pete. Someone outside.

*Who?*

"Pete planned to kill you when he found out you were FBI." His voice was flat.

"Who told him?" *He almost did kill me.*

Sean shrugged. "Pete had sources."

She sucked in a breath. *How?*

He tilted his head, studying Mercy. "You haven't said a word about the federal gathering out in the sticks."

Distracted, Mercy glanced at Eden. "What gathering?"

He examined her face thoroughly. "You don't know," he finally said with wonder. "How could you not know? Pete found out they were coming the day before they arrived."

Mercy stiffened. *Who?* "I've had no contact with the outside."

A single brow shot up. "Seriously?"

"When Chad left, I was incommunicado."

"Sounds like the feds didn't give a crap about your safety. The feds set up camp within a couple miles of the compound, and you had no idea?"

Mercy blinked, hope blooming in her heart. "Who? When?" *They came to get me out?*

Annoyance flashed. "You're a really shitty agent. How in fuck's sake did you get a job with the FBI?"

“How did you get a job?” she snapped back. “Or were you fired from the police department when your boss realized you’re a loose cannon? Maybe a little too heavy with the sexual harassment?”

“Got me figured out, do you?” Fury gleamed in his eyes.

“You tell me.”

He leaned closer, his gaze sparking with rage. “Once upon a time I was with the Henderson Police Department, but I left on my own two years ago.”

“Where’s Henderson?” asked Eden, who had been listening with wide eyes.

“Outside of Las Vegas,” Mercy answered. She caught her breath. The ATF weapons heist had been in Nevada.

*Was Sean one of the thieves?*

*Fast moving, prepared, and precise* was how the survivor had described the attackers at the ATF robbery. That portrayal fit Sean.

The ATF hadn’t figured out how the attackers had known where to ambush the vehicles.

But a former Nevada police officer might still have a friend on the local force who knew that the transportation of the weapons stockpile was about to go down.

Pieces fell into place, creating audible clicks inside her head.

He held her gaze for a long second before he strode out the door again.

# THIRTY-FIVE

On the seventh day since they had escaped, Sean's temper was running hot. Mercy and Eden stayed quiet, impossibly attempting to blend into the floor and bed frame.

"This is how life should be," Sean muttered as he paced. "No TV, no cell phones, no computers. Completely self-reliant."

*Is he trying to convince himself?*

To Mercy, Sean didn't seem comfortable at all with the isolation. In the past she'd spent two weeks alone at her cabin. It had taken a day or two, but she'd learned to embrace the silence. Sean didn't seem capable of it.

"Bathroom break?" Eden quietly asked. He'd taken them out that morning, but that was several hours ago. They'd eaten a second meal, and Mercy was feeling the pressure too.

"Time to take the dogs out?" he joked.

It was a joke they'd heard too many times.

Days ago they had formed a routine for going outdoors. He would untie Eden and order her to stay seated as he unlocked Mercy's handcuffs from the bed and then fastened the cuffs behind her back. When it was her turn in the outhouse, he'd uncuff her while making Eden sit in the snow. The second Mercy's cuffs were off, he pointed his gun at Eden's head until Mercy emerged and put her hands behind her back to be locked up again.

Eden and Mercy had picked the routine apart over and over, searching for a weakness. Every scenario ended with one of them shot. Mercy refused to risk it.

This time he ran a finger across Eden's cheek after he untied her, making Mercy's stomach burn, the hungry look in his eyes nauseating her. Eden's face was full of fear. Still grinning, he unlocked Mercy's cuffs, and the key slipped from his fingers, bouncing behind one of his boots.

*Now.*

Mercy lunged at his legs, wrapping her arms around his knees, throwing her body weight into his lower half, and knocking him off balance to the floor. The gun he'd tucked into his waistband fell free and slid away a few feet.

*"Eden! Go!"* Mercy ordered.

The teen leaped to her feet and charged out the door, leaving it open as she vanished.

Sean's cursing didn't penetrate Mercy's focus. He was on his back, beating at her head and shoulders to free his legs from her locked arms.

With all her energy, she slammed an elbow into his groin, and his entire body contracted, his legs and chest coming toward each other to protect himself as she rolled away. For the briefest split second, indecision warred in Mercy's brain as the gun on the floor grabbed her attention.

*Too far away.*

She stumbled to her feet and sprinted out the open door, his guttural howls ricocheting in her skull.

She veered left, ignoring her sore knee and following the packed snow path toward the outhouse and woodpile. The land in the opposite direction was covered with pristine snow over a foot deep beyond the eaves of the cabin. If she had turned right, she would have left a crystal clear trail for him to follow, her steps too slow and her back exposed to his shot.

Her lungs burned, her ears attuned for sounds behind her as she ran.

*Eden got away.*

*That's all that matters.*

As long as the girl headed to the compound, she might be safe. But first Mercy had to stop Sean from following the teenager.

Her gaze locked on the ax stuck in the wide stump that Sean used as a chopping block. Slamming to a stop, she thrust the handle down and yanked the ax from its hold. She dashed around to the back of the woodpile, clutching the ax to her chest, her lungs pounding with exertion as she leaned against the wood, squatting slightly to keep her head out of sight.

The woodpile was enormous. Mercy estimated there were four or five cords of cut wood under the numerous tarps. Sean had constantly cleared the snow all the way around the base of the pile, leaving a path where her footsteps barely showed.

*As if he will think I went somewhere else.*

The land around the cabin was bare of trees and shrubs in every direction for fifty yards. Her only options were to hide in the outhouse or behind the woodpile or to run through the undisturbed snow for the tree line. She stared longingly at the trees to her north; it wasn't worth the risk.

*I'd get a bullet in my back.*

*Where is Eden?*

The thought screamed through her mind as she realized she hadn't seen footsteps in the snow in the direction of the compound. The teen had to be either in the outhouse or on the other side of the woodpile.

Sweat ran down Mercy's back as she peered around the corner to check the east side of the woodpile.

No Eden.

Looking west, she could see part of the outhouse. The door was closed.

*Which will Sean check first?*

"Mercy! You damned bitch!"

A shudder racked her entire body, her hands tightening on the ax handle.

The ax was no defense against his gun. As she held the blade to cover her heart, the extreme unlikeliness of her surviving the situation sank in.

If he checked the woodpile first, maybe Eden could take the time to get away. She cursed the teenager for not following their plan. She'd drilled immediate escape toward the compound into Eden's head. Eden must have panicked.

Footsteps crunched along the west end of the woodpile. As her heart tried to pound its way out of her chest, Mercy slipped around the corner to the east, wondering how long they would play cat and mouse, circling the pile.

*At least he didn't go to the outhouse first.*

"Stupid woman," Sean yelled, fury in his tone. "I should have shot you with Nelson. Left your body beside his in the snow."

His footsteps sounded closer, and Mercy turned another corner, the cabin coming into view a good thirty yards away.

*Can I get back in time and bar the door?*

His rifle had been in the corner near the sink, waiting to be used—unless it was currently in his hands. She eyed the expanse of snow between the cabin and woodpile, the well-broken path beckoning her to run.

“I was *nice* to you!” Sean shouted, disgust and disappointment filling his words.

A corner of her mind latched on to his statement. He’d threatened her, tried to blackmail her, sexually harassed her, cuffed her to a bed, and kept her captive for days. But since he hadn’t killed her, he was nice.

And now he expected her to be submissive because he was nice.

*Fuck him.*

The roar of his gun coincided with the tiniest brush of wind over her head.

She dropped to her knees, her hands protecting her head, banging the ax against her skull.

*He saw me.*

“Ha!” he shouted. “Don’t move!”

A thump and small grunt came from his direction, and she recognized the sound of someone landing from a leap. He must have climbed partway up the side of the woodpile and spotted her head. Now he was running along the east side.

The shot still ringing in her ears, she darted around another corner, staying as low as possible, her leg muscles straining from the exertion. The outhouse was in view again, its door still closed.

*How long will we circle this damned pile?*

“You haven’t done anything wrong yet, Sean,” she called out. “You can still make the best of this by letting Eden and me go.”

No answer.

His steps had gone silent, and she strained to hear, wondering if he’d changed direction. Clutching the ax to her chest again, she whipped her head around, checking both corners, north and south, expecting to see him come around one with his gun aimed at her head.

She didn’t know which way to go.

Terror tightened her chest, and she fought to breathe.

“You didn’t kill me and Eden because you knew it was wrong,” she yelled, wincing as her voice broke. “Right now all you’ve done is keep us in the cabin. Killing me would raise things to a whole other level.”

His laugh echoed through the silence. “I’ve read the negotiator’s handbook too, you know. You’re trying to convince me that my current legal consequences aren’t that bad. Did you forget there’s a *body* out front?”



What's one more death? Or two?" He laughed again, but this time it was hollow, carrying a twinge of regret.

The voice had come from the southeast corner of the pile, so she ran north. His boots pounded on the frosted ground.

Another shot boomed.

Mercy froze. That wasn't his handgun.

*"Fucking little bitch! Don't move!"*

Eden.

Mercy whirled around and spotted Eden near the corner of the cabin, Sean's rifle in her hands pointed at the south end of the woodpile. Eden didn't flinch, her legs planted, her eye lined up with her sights. She fired the rifle again. But then panic crossed her face as she lowered the rifle.

She ran.

Sean entered Mercy's view, tearing toward the teenager, his weapon in hand.

"No," Mercy muttered. "No!" Tightening her grip on the ax, she sprinted after the man.

Her lungs gasped for oxygen; her gaze locked on Sean's back. Eden had run south from the cabin, out into the clearing.

*No! She's completely exposed!*

She faltered as she understood the teen had been trying to lead him away from Mercy. Energy and fear and anger ripped through her, pumping her legs to run faster.

Sean halted in the snow, planted his feet, and formed a perfect isosceles stance, his arms and weapon pushed forward, Eden's back in his sights. His shoulders rapidly rose and sank as he panted. He fired.

Eden continued to run without missing a stride.

Mercy knew he wouldn't miss the second shot.

"No!" Mercy shrieked as she caught up and swung her ax like a bat at Sean's right side. It was like hitting a rock. The impact flew up her arms and into her shoulders as he stumbled to his left. The ax didn't penetrate his coat but probably cracked a rib or two. He caught his balance, clamped a hand to his injured side, and spun in her direction.

Fury and pain raged in his eyes, his teeth clenched, as he pivoted his weapon toward her. The open end of his barrel came into focus as Mercy swung again, her gaze locked on the gun in his hand.

Her aim was perfect, and the ax smashed into his fingers.

His weapon flew out of his grip, and Mercy lost her grasp on the ax. It spun through the air and sank in the snow.

Their gazes collided, and Sean dove at her, knocking her onto her back in the snow. The air exited her lungs as he landed on her chest.

Snow fell onto her face as she sank deep into the fluff, and he latched his hands around her neck.

Mercy fought, swinging at his face, kicking with her legs and pounding on his arms.

He was immobile.

She spit the snow out of her mouth, and more tumbled into its place. Her head turned from side to side as she tried to shake the snow out of her eyes. It was impossible; she was blind and choking under several inches of miniature ice crystals.

His hands tightened, his fingers digging into her airway and the vulnerable vessels in her neck. The snow blocking her vision grew black.

*I'm going to die.*

His face was beyond her fists and nails. She flung her arms to the side, digging, grasping for anything, trying to picture where his gun had landed. Her fingers felt nothing but fine grains of snow.

*I'm sorry, Truman.*

She dug deeper and found frozen packed ground. Her fingernails scraped the dirt, shooting agony up her arms as they ripped. Her right hand found something large and rough and round. She gripped it, seeing the irregular shape of the rock in her mind. Sucking in a desperate, ragged breath, she clutched the rock and propelled her fist out of the snow, aiming for where his head should be.

He gasped as the collision sent waves down her bones, and he released her neck. His balance rocked, and she sank her strength into rolling to one side, flinging him off her body and into the snow.

Mercy scrambled onto her hands and knees toward where her ax had landed. Her fingers found the wood handle as she felt him grab the back of her coat. She let him pull her upright, both her hands now gripping the ax. Moving up to one foot, she spun with all her weight and knocked him off balance again.

She swung blindly with her ax. He shouted, and the sound of metal meeting teeth told her she'd struck home. He landed on his hands and knees and then clasped one hand to his bloody mouth.

Standing behind him, Mercy raised the ax over her head, her gaze locked on the back of his skull.

*He'll die.*

*Good.*

She paused as he spit blood and moaned.

Fierce barking sounded to her right, and she turned to see a black wolf rushing her, its jaw wide open, its pointed teeth white in its dark mouth.

*"Stop!"*

Ten feet away, the black wolf slammed to a stop. The beast growled, low and threatening.

*It's a dog.*

Mercy lifted her gaze, her ax still raised, searching for who'd shouted at the dog.

*"Mercy!"*

# THIRTY-SIX

Truman and Bolton were silently trudging after Rowan through the snowy wilderness when a gunshot sounded, echoing across the bleak sky.

At the noise, they stopped and stared at each other.

A second gunshot boomed.

The shots were close by.

“Dammit,” said Rowan. “Thor!” Far ahead, the black dog froze against the white of the snow, his head swerving in the direction of his handler. “Here!” Thor raced in their direction, snow flying behind him.

“Which direction did it come from?” Bolton murmured, turning in a circle. “That way?” He pointed.

“That’s what I thought,” answered Truman, now that his heart had resumed beating.

*Mercy?*

He removed his gloves and unholstered his weapon as Bolton did the same.

“I won’t have my dog getting shot,” Rowan stated as Thor arrived and sat at her feet. She eyed their weapons, and her hands twitched. Truman knew she was armed. He’d spotted the familiar bulge at her ribs as she put on her orange vest.

But she left it at her side.

“Let’s go,” Truman ordered. He led off in the direction he believed the shot had come from. He jogged in the snowshoes, adrenaline keeping him moving, weaving among the thin trees. Behind him Bolton panted, and Rowan murmured to her dog.

*We’re close.*

A third shot sounded.

Truman ran harder.

Most people ran away from gunfire; he always ran toward it.

The sparse cover of the trees ended, and a wide expanse of snow spread before them. Far up ahead two people were fighting.

Truman sprinted up the gentle slope, his weapon ready, Bolton and Rowan on his heels.

Rowan said something, and Thor took off like a bullet.

The fighting woman hit the man in the mouth with her ax.

*Mercy.*

Truman knew her shape; he knew her movements. It was Mercy.

The man was on his knees, a hand to his bleeding face. Mercy raised the ax over her head, and Truman's heart stopped again.

*She's going to split his head open.*

She paused, the ax wavering in the air.

Thor caught her attention, and she turned to protect herself from the black attacker.

"*Stop!*" shouted Rowan. Thor halted.

"*Mercy!*" The name burst out of Truman, directly from his heart.

She looked past the dog. Truman was too far away to make eye contact, but an instant connection lit up his brain like a firework. In his mind his fingertips felt her skin, and his nose smelled her scent. As he ran closer, horror clogged his throat at the sight of the bruises and scabs on her face.

But their eyes locked.

She lowered the ax as if its weight had suddenly tripled, and took a hesitant step in his direction. "Truman?"

His name wavered in the air.

The bloodied man on his knees gathered himself to knock her down. Truman halted and pushed his weapon forward, his arms shaking with exertion. "*Behind—*"

Mercy was already spinning back toward her attacker, the tip of the ax handle in one hand. Her momentum swung the blunt end of the ax into his temple and he dropped. Mercy stood over him, the ax ready again. He didn't move.

"*Asshole.*" Mercy's curse floated across the snow.

"I like her," muttered Rowan. "*Heeere!*" she ordered Thor. The dog shot across the snow.

Truman slowed to a walk, his energy evaporated, but nothing would stop him now.

She was alive.

His fiancée turned her head, keeping one eye on the man in the snow while watching the three of them approach. She swayed on her feet.

Her face was black, blue, green, and a hideous shade of yellow. Scabs crusted her lips and nose. Her black hair was a stringy, tangled mess.

She was beautiful.

He strode directly to her and wrapped her in his arms. She shook and quietly sobbed, her face buried in his coat. He was barely aware of Bolton cuffing the man in the snow and pulling him into a seated position.

The stress, anxiety, worry, and despair of the past several days melted away, and his head throbbed at the release.

He had her. She was back. And he wasn't going to let her go again.

His eyes squeezed tight, his lashes growing damp.

"Stop right there!" Rowan snapped, making Truman jump and lift his head. Beside her, Thor growled, and Bolton raised his weapon.

Rowan had spoken to a small approaching figure. A girl.

Mercy spun around. "Eden! It's safe. Come here, honey."

With a hesitant look at a glaring Rowan, the girl approached. The missing teenager, Truman realized as the girl fell into Mercy's arms the same way she had fallen into his.

Mercy's green eyes met his. "Eden helped me escape. We need to locate her mother."

"Her mother is already waiting for her," Truman said, unable to look away. "I didn't know if I'd find you." His voice cracked.

"That makes two of us," she said softly. "But it doesn't matter now." She leaned into Truman, still holding the girl, who was sobbing frantically.

"Everything is good," Mercy whispered. "Everything."

# THIRTY-SEVEN

Mercy hung on Eddie's every word, and Truman gripped her hand as they sat in his living room, exhausted from her rescue yesterday. Truman had brought Mercy back to his home in Eagle's Nest after a visit to the ER. The doctor had pronounced her fine but a little beat-up. Exactly what she'd informed Truman on the drive home from the woods, but he'd insisted on hearing it from someone else. She'd been x-rayed and poked and prodded while drinking a hot caramel macchiato and eating a Big Mac. Her stomach had churned at the rich food, but her tongue and brain had been in heaven.

The food had helped more than the painkillers.

"Sean spilled everything," Eddie told them as he sipped from a cup of coffee, his usual jovial face fully serious. "It took all of two minutes before he told us that Neal Gorman had betrayed Tim O'Shea and Mercy to Pete Hodges."

"What?" Mercy was in shock. "But Neal . . . he . . ." She shook her head, unable to reconcile the actions with the ATF agent who had helped her prep for the assignment. "That can't be right."

Eddie grimaced. "We arrested him this morning. We didn't communicate our suspicions to the ATF, worried that the leak went deeper than just Gorman."

"That asshole," grumbled Truman. "Gorman stood with us every minute as we waited through negotiations and then watched the operation blow up."

"Right?" said Eddie. "You should have seen his face when we showed up at his office this morning. He knew the minute we walked in. I thought he was going to piss his pants."

"What about Carleen?" Mercy asked as the female agent's kind brown eyes popped up in her memory.

“Agent Aguirre is clean, according to Gorman,” said Eddie. “It appears this was all on him. Somehow Gorman discovered who had committed the ATF robbery—”

“And murders,” added Mercy.

“Eight months ago. Instead of taking the information to his boss, Gorman kept it close, using it to blackmail Pete into giving him several of the stolen weapons.”

“But why did Gorman want weapons?” Truman asked.

“He sold them. Since he worked for the ATF, he knew who would pay top dollar.”

“Money,” Mercy said with disgust. “It always comes down to money.”

“I think Gorman’s ego took over. Sean said he frequently communicated with Pete.”

“Is that when Gorman told Pete about Chad—I mean Tim—and me?” Mercy’s voice cracked on the agent’s name. His death would always haunt her.

“Sort of.” Eddie took a deep breath. “At some point Gorman decided he wanted glory at the ATF. He started to feed Pete information about crucial servers that were being used at the ATF’s Yakima satellite branch.”

“Servers that didn’t exist,” Truman pointed out.

“Correct. But once the men of America’s Preserve blew up the office, Gorman would turn them in and bask in the triumph for quickly solving a domestic terrorism case.”

“Wait a minute,” said Mercy. “Pete would have immediately fingered Gorman as a leak.”

“Gorman didn’t say it outright, but I think he planned for Pete to have a very short life span after the explosion.”

“But Sean knew someone from a federal agency was feeding Pete information.”

Eddie grinned. “Well, I can tell you Neal Gorman fully believes Pete hadn’t told anyone he had help, but I wonder how many other people knew. Anyway, Pete grew hesitant about the server plan, worrying that it could be traced to them. Gorman started to sweat that his plan would fall apart before it was executed, so he gave Pete information about the spies in his compound, hoping Pete would take care of Tim and Mercy.”

“Sean also knew a federal operation was being set up outside the compound. Gorman must have warned Pete,” Mercy said quietly. “I don’t



think Pete trusted anyone—even his closest men. What a horrible way to live.”

“I suspect Pete’s confidence in Gorman was bolstered when he got your names.” Anger vibrated in Truman’s tone.

Mercy’s limbs went cold. Pete could have made brutal examples out of her and Tim O’Shea in front of his people. Instead he’d kept Tim’s death quiet. Mercy wondered if Pete had worried he might have to answer for their deaths one day and didn’t want a compound full of witnesses.

“Why did Pete have Tim’s body dumped near Eagle’s Nest?” Truman asked. “According to what Bolton told me this morning, the first John Doe was the son of the older couple who owned the property where he was found. The couple had suspected the remains could be their son but were too scared of recrimination from Pete to report America’s Preserve to the police. Exactly what Pete wanted. Why did Pete change that with Tim?”

Eddie paused and held Truman’s gaze. “According to Sean, you were the target. Pete believed you knew about Mercy’s assignment. Tim was a message to you.”

“Well, that didn’t fucking work,” Mercy spat out. “Shows how much he knows about Truman. At least Tim’s wife wasn’t the one to find his body.”

*Poor Ollie.*

Another teen popped into Mercy’s head. She’d witnessed the tearful reunion of Eden and her mother, and then cried herself when she saw Noah, looking alert and healthy for the first time since she’d known him. She’d hugged the boy as his mother thanked her for saving his life. Eden wept as she and Mercy parted, promising to keep in touch. Both children held a special place in her heart.

“What happened to Noah’s father, Jason?” she asked.

“He’s got a huge stack of charges to face, including Tim’s murder.”

“His son nearly died from his inaction,” Mercy pointed out.

“The district attorney is on top of that one too,” Eddie told her. “Oh—the pregnant lady had a baby girl. I was told to deliver the message to you.”

“Cindy.” Mercy mentally crossed off another concern on her list. “Those poor people,” she said slowly, thinking of the other women in the compound. “How will they return to a regular life? No homes, no jobs.” She thought of Beckett and the little bag of supplies he’d given her. Truman had told her the large man had died from gunshot wounds.

Mercy had a dozen conflicting emotions about that.

Her emotions had been on a wild ride for the last twenty-four hours. Overnight she'd clung to Truman and woken up a half dozen times with visions of Sean's leering gaze or Pete's fists and boots close to her face.

She felt a squeeze on her hand and turned to see Truman studying her in concern.

"I'm fine." She sucked in a breath. "I'm going to be fine," she corrected herself.

He nodded. "I know you will be."

*I just need time.*

# THIRTY-EIGHT

## *Three months later*

It was their wedding day.

Truman couldn't stand still and swayed from foot to foot.

Ollie elbowed him. "You gonna faint?" asked the teen, his eyes concerned.

"No." Truman studied the young man in his new suit. The first suit Ollie had ever owned. "You look good, Ollie."

Instead of ducking his head, Ollie grinned, straightened his shoulders, and looked Truman in the eye. "I know." He dusted an invisible speck from his shoulder with a cocky flick of his fingers.

He'd come a long way from the shy teenager Truman had met in the woods.

Ollie leaned forward and winked at Kaylie on the other side of the minister.

He, Ollie, and Kaylie stood at one end of the great room in the showplace home of Christian Lake, Mercy's longtime friend. On their left an entire wall of windows offered magazine-worthy views of a gigantic deck and the snowy lake. The glass reached the soaring ceiling and its rustic beams. Outdoors it was dark, a light snow falling, but inside, the giant room was gently lit with delicate string lights, candles, and a warm fire in the huge fireplace. Polished wood accents gleamed everywhere—everywhere that wasn't decorated for Christmas. Cedar garlands arced across the walls and fireplace. A tree decorated in red, gold, and white nearly touched the sky-high ceiling.

The home and decor were stunning, but Truman barely noticed. Instead he studied face after face before him, marveling at how his life had changed since he'd moved to Eagle's Nest. His parents sat in the front row along with his sister and her husband. Behind them was his other family—his men. Ben and his wife, looking as proud as if Truman were their own son. Samuel and Sandy had their heads together, whispering and smiling with eyes only for each other. Truman expected another wedding announcement soon. Royce and his young family. Lucas and his grandmother Ina—who was like a second mother to Truman.

On the other side of the aisle was Mercy's family—now Truman's. Her brother Owen, his wife, and their two children. Pearl, her husband, and their children. And then there was Rose, glowing and lovely. Nick sat beside her, one of Rose's hands in his, and baby Henry on his lap staring nonstop at the lights on the Christmas tree.

Mercy's mother, Deborah, sat alone in the first row, an empty white chair next to her.

"Are you ready for this, Truman?" Kaylie whispered, a sly look in her eye. Her red nose stud glittered, matching her dark-red dress. Her hair was in long, dark, loose curls, her resemblance to Mercy stronger than ever.

"Of course," he mouthed soundlessly, noticing that some of Dulce's white cat hairs had stuck to the waistband of Kaylie's dress.

Love surged in his heart for their little patchwork family. Pets, teenagers, and all. He and Mercy had agreed that only Kaylie and Ollie would stand with them during the wedding. Not as attendants, but as part of their family of four.

The soft Christmas music faded away, and the slow instrumental opening to Etta James's "At Last" began to play. The small congregation stood and turned to look behind them.

Truman's pulse sped up, and his gaze locked on the opening at the other end of the room.

He couldn't breathe.



*At last, my love has come along.*

"That's our cue, Mercy." Her father took her hand and tucked it in his arm. She didn't move. Instead she studied his face, committing it to

memory, another page in the recollections of her wedding day. The day after she'd returned, her father had humbly asked her forgiveness and asked to escort her at the wedding. It had filled the gaping hole in her heart.

Karl's fingers didn't shake as he smiled at her with the love that she'd missed for fifteen years.

Today her heart was full. Overflowingly full.

"Let's do this," she whispered. She raised her white sheath gown a few inches from her feet and lifted her chin. The dress was simple and elegant, made of a luminous silk that she'd fallen in love with the first time she saw it. No sequins, no lace, no ribbons. Her choice was styled off the shoulder and had close-fitting silk sleeves all the way to her wrists and was followed by a small sweep train. It was as light as air on her skin.

They stepped into the giant room, and the music gently swelled in the background.

*I found a dream that I could speak to.*

Every eye in the room was on her, but she saw only Truman. He looked so serious in his dark suit, staring at her as if stunned she'd shown up. Then his face slowly broke into a wide smile. Mercy brushed her lashes. Her damp eyes and the light of the candles had created a star effect, making her see nearly invisible silver strands, leading her down the aisle to Truman.

The faces of her friends and family caught her attention as she passed. The people she loved to work with. Jeff and Eddie and Darby. Britta stood next to Evan Bolton, her face solemn, Zara sitting quietly at her feet. Christian blew her a kiss, and beside him sat Salome, his half sister who'd told Mercy that fate dictated she belonged with Truman. Salome's dark gaze glowed, her hand clasped in that of Morrigan, her daughter, whose eyes were wide in childish delight.

Mercy breathed deep, the room smelling of cedar and fresh flowers.

*And here we are in heaven.*

She finally stood before Truman, unable to look away, not noticing as her father transferred her hand into Truman's and left to sit next to her mother. A sniff pulled her attention, and she saw tears streaming down Kaylie's cheeks. Mercy let loose Truman's hand and hugged the girl. "I love you," she whispered into Kaylie's ear.

"I'm sorry—I'm just so happy," Kaylie replied, squeezing Mercy with a death grip. "He's here, you know."

“I do know.” Mercy felt it too. Levi’s presence was in the room, hovering around Kaylie, and Mercy’s heart ached at the time she’d lost with her brother. With a last squeeze, Mercy returned to Truman and took his hand, not surprised to see wet tracks on his face too.

“Ready?” he asked, gripping her fingers.

“Absolutely.”

*For you are mine at last.*



Truman had thought he would be prepared. But he wasn’t.

His first sight of Mercy in that dress had made his lungs seize. He’d always thought she was beautiful. It didn’t matter if she wore jeans or running gear. But today, in the elegant white gown with her hair loose, it’d nearly done him in.

What he felt for her wasn’t rational; it lived and breathed in his blood and deep in his flesh.

Now he gripped both her hands, almost afraid to let go in fear the day might dissolve away. A foolish thought—but real to him. Three months ago she’d vanished, and he was fortunate to have her back.

He didn’t hear the minister. He had eyes only for the woman beside him. Ollie had to prod him when it was his time to speak.

“I never imagined there would be someone on earth created perfectly for me,” he said softly. “I stop breathing every time you walk in the room.”

Her mouth opened the slightest bit, her green gaze locked on his.

No one else was present.

He felt his happiness in his chest, his bones, his blood, everywhere.

“My heart beats for you,” he told her. “And forever only you.”

“Truman.” Mercy briefly closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “You are my person. You are as necessary to me as air. As water. As food. There is no one I’d rather sleep beside. No one I’d rather wake beside. No one I’d rather have my last breath beside.”

Her face blurred, and he wiped his eyes.

“My heart is in your hands for safekeeping,” she told him.

This stubborn woman, who was unable to lean on anyone, had just given him her trust.

He would honor it forever.

# THIRTY-NINE

After the ceremony Mercy leaned against the rail of the home's giant deck, staring at the moon as it reflected off the lake below. Behind her, heaters gently blasted, struggling to warm the outdoor area. She didn't feel the cold. Truman's arm was around her shoulders, and Pearl had insisted on sewing Mercy a "wedding coat." A thick floor-length white coat with a faux-fur collar and cuffs. It was perfect for standing outdoors in the snow with her husband.

*Husband.*

The word was foreign. It would take getting used to, but she wasn't worried.

The two of them stood alone, the rest of the guests eating cake and drinking champagne. Mercy had noticed that Britta was policing the doors to the deck, giving the newlyweds time to catch their breath and have a quiet moment.

She leaned into him.

*Forever.*

The word echoed in her bones, warming her soul.

Ollie and Kaylie stepped outside, Ollie carrying a wrapped present the size and shape of a large wall painting.

"How did you get by Britta?" asked Truman.

"I told her you needed to open our wedding present. Now," replied Ollie as Kaylie nodded.

Truman took the large but lightweight present and held it between himself and Mercy. "Take off the paper," he urged her.

Mercy looked at Ollie. "Who bought this?"

"We did," said Kaylie. "Ollie came to me with the idea a few months ago, and I helped design it."

Mercy ripped off the paper. It was a large canvas full of words in all different fonts and shapes, but in the middle in huge letters it said MERCY & TRUMAN with their wedding date right below. Mercy's gaze flew over the rest of the words. Ollie's and Kaylie's names jumped out at her along with those of the pets, Dulce, Simon, and Shep. All their family members' names were on the canvas, along with those of their spouses and children. Even baby Henry's. Interspersed among the names were words that meant something personal to her or Truman. *Love. Family. Laughter. Peace. Dream. Believe.*

"We thought you could hang it in the cabin," Ollie told her.

"I love it," said Mercy, holding back tears. She looked at the teenagers. "It's amazing. It's perfect."

The canvas was a lovely representation of the formation of their unexpected lives together. Fifteen months ago she had believed she knew her future: a solo but secure path of work and preparation. Instead she'd taken an uncharacteristic gamble on a handsome police chief and discovered her fate. She'd never look back.

She met Truman's gaze. "What do you think?"

His eyes burned with emotion that heated her blood. "I think we'll keep it forever."

*Forever.*



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I can't believe this is the last Mercy book. I hope you've enjoyed her ups and downs over the six books. I suspect she or Truman might show up in a future book as a secondary character, because I find it hard to leave characters behind for good. I love dropping old characters into new stories as a surprise, and my readers tell me they love it too.

I can't rave enough about my publishing team at Montlake. Anh, Hai-Yen, Galen, Mikyla, Gabby, Colleen, Adria, and so many more people work hard to get my books into the hands of readers. My success is because of them. I hope my editor, Charlotte Herscher, never leaves. She's edited my books since my debut novel and has taught me many, many things about crafting a good story. My agent, Meg Ruley, is full of energy, smiles, ambition, and drive. Thank you for being in my corner.

My girls wait patiently when I beg for another minute to finish my train of thought at the keyboard when they need answers to important questions. Or not so important. Most of the time my reply is "That's a question for Google."

I'm blessed to have great kids; they are why I write.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Photo © 2016 Rebekah Jule Photography*

Kendra Elliot has landed on the *Wall Street Journal* bestseller list multiple times and is the award-winning author of the Bone Secrets and Callahan & McLane series as well as the Mercy Kilpatrick novels. Kendra is a three-time winner of the Daphne du Maurier Award, an International Thriller Writers finalist, and an RT Award finalist. She has always been a voracious reader, cutting her teeth on classic female heroines such as Nancy Drew, Trixie Belden, and Laura Ingalls. She was born and raised, and still lives, in the rainy Pacific Northwest with her family, but she looks forward to the day she can live in flip-flops. Visit her at [www.kendraelliot.com](http://www.kendraelliot.com).

# zlibrary

*Your gateway to knowledge and culture. Accessible for everyone.*



[z-library.se](http://z-library.se)

[singlelogin.re](http://singlelogin.re)

[go-to-zlibrary.se](http://go-to-zlibrary.se)

[single-login.ru](http://single-login.ru)



[Official Telegram channel](#)



[Z-Access](#)



<https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Z-Library>